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## Commission on the Status of Women Background Guide 2024

Written by Ashlee Ann Rolheiser, Eedee-Bari Nuah Bawoh,  
Fatima Irfan, and Kaytlyn Marcotte



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13570 Grove Dr., Suite 294 • Maple Grove, MN 55311  
www.nmun.org • info@nmun.org • 612.353.5649

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the 2024 National Model United Nations New York Conference (NMUN•NY)! We are pleased to introduce to you our committee, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Your committee's work is facilitated by volunteer staffers. This year's committee staff are: Director Ashlee Ann Rolheiser and Assistant Director Fatima Irfan (Session 1), and Director Kaytlyn Marcotte (Session 2). Ashlee Ann Rolheiser obtains a M.A. in International Affairs and Diplomacy, and a B.Com. in Marketing. Ashlee currently works as the Philanthropy Manager for Alberta and the Northwest Territories at one of Canada's oldest and largest nonprofit organizations. Based in Germany, Fatima Irfan completed a dual-degree Bachelor's program in Computer Science and Software Development. She has been employed as an ERP-Software Developer for six years, while presently also pursuing a Master's degree in Software Engineering at the NTNU in Norway. Kaytlyn holds a B.A. in International Political Economy from the College of Idaho, presently she works as a Customer Account Manager for Idaho Milk Products, Inc. This is her fifth year on NMUN staff and her first year on NMUN•NY staff. A portion of these materials was authored by Eedee-Bari Nuah Bawoh. Eedee-Bari Nuah Bawoh is a Legal Practitioner and works with the International Bureau of Fiscal Documentation (IBFD) in Amsterdam. She is also the founder of 'Voice to the Street', an NGO for street children empowerment that has empowered over 3,000 street children in Africa. The preparation of these materials was supported by Under-Secretaries-General Eric Lowe (Session 1) and Johanna Barton (Session 2).

The topics on the agenda for this committee are:

1. Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls
2. Promoting Gender Equality in Access to Healthcare

This Background Guide serves as an introduction to the topics for this committee. However, it is not intended to replace individual research. We encourage you to explore your Member State's policies in depth and use the bibliography to further your knowledge on these topics. In preparation for the conference, each delegation should submit a Position Paper by 11:59 p.m. ET on 1 March 2023 in accordance with the guidelines in the [Position Paper Guide](#) and the [NMUN•NY Position Papers website](#).

Two resources, available to download from the NMUN website, serve as essential instruments in preparing for the Conference and as a reference during committee sessions:

- The [NMUN Delegate Preparation Guide](#), which explains each step in the delegate process, from pre-conference research to the committee debate and resolution drafting processes. Please take note of the information on plagiarism, and the prohibition on pre-written working papers and resolutions.
- The [NMUN Rules of Procedure](#), which includes the long and short form of the rules, as well as an explanatory narrative and example script of the flow of procedure.

In addition, please review the mandatory [NMUN Conduct Expectations](#) on the NMUN website. They include the conference dress code and other expectations of all attendees. We want to emphasize that any instances of sexual harassment or discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, age, or disability will not be tolerated. If you have any questions concerning your preparation for this committee, please contact the Deputy Secretaries-General at [dsg.ny@nmun.org](mailto:dsg.ny@nmun.org).

We wish you all the best in your preparations and look forward to seeing you at the Conference!

Ashlee Ann Rolheiser, Director  
Fatima Irfan, Assistant Director  
Session 1

Kaytlyn Marcotte, Director  
Session 2



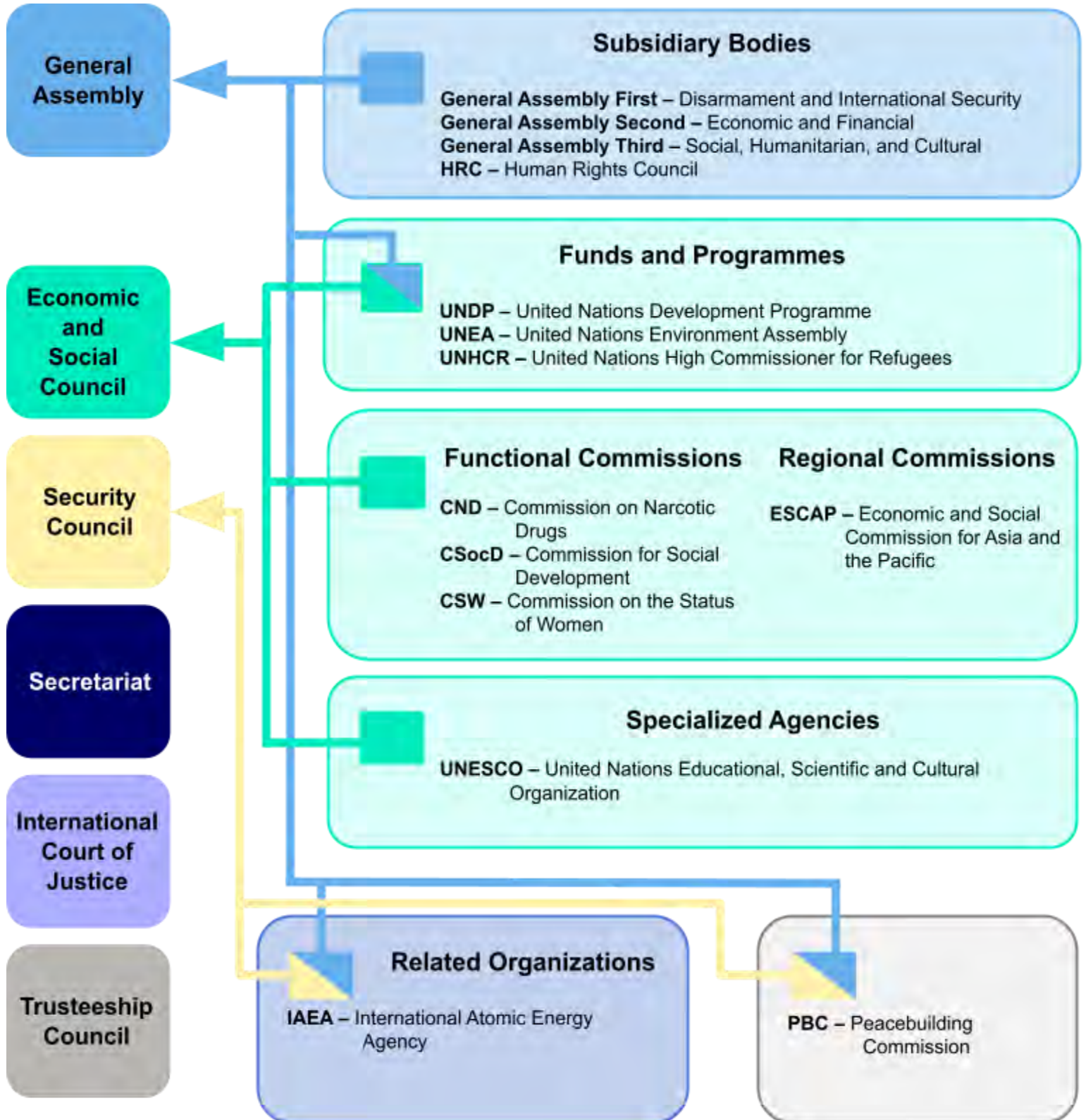
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## United Nations System at NMUN·NY

This diagram illustrates the United Nations system simulated at NMUN·NY. It shows where each committee “sits” within the system to demonstrate the reportage and relationships between entities. Examine the diagram alongside the Committee Overview to gain a clear picture of the committee’s position, purpose, and powers within the United Nations system.





## Committee Overview

### Introduction

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the principal international body of the United Nations discussing women's empowerment and gender equality.<sup>1</sup> As such, CSW is the main forum to debate the ongoing progress of the creation and implementation of international norms and standards related to the advancement of women.<sup>2</sup> CSW's work is guided by the principles of the 1979 *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, the 1993 *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, the 1995 *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (BPfA), and the outcome documents of the 23<sup>rd</sup> special session of the United Nations General Assembly, a follow-up to the BPfA titled "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century."<sup>3</sup> Each year, CSW reports to ECOSOC during the ECOSOC Management Session.<sup>4</sup>

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2030 Agenda) (2015) and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intertwined with CSW's work on gender equality and women and girls' empowerment.<sup>5</sup> While the overall work of CSW is closely aligned with SDG 5 (gender equality), women and girls' empowerment and gender equality are mainstreamed across several SDGs.<sup>6</sup>

### Mandate, Functions, and Powers

CSW provides policy guidance on gender equality and links women and girls' empowerment to sustainable development.<sup>7</sup> The original mandate of CSW, adopted in 1946, was to provide "recommendations and reports to ECOSOC on promoting women's rights in political, economic, social, and educational fields... [and] urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights."<sup>8</sup> This mandate was substantially expanded as a follow-up to the United Nations Decade of Women from 1975 to 1985 and the Third and Fourth World Conferences on Women in Nairobi in 1985, the BPfA in 1995, and the outcome documents of the 23<sup>rd</sup> special session of the General Assembly.<sup>9</sup>

While the following list is not exhaustive, CSW's mandate can be summarized as:

- CSW **will generally**: outline international norms and standards and issue policy recommendations for gender equality; adopt agreed conclusions, declarations, and resolutions on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; advise

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Commission on the Status of Women*. N.d.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *A Brief History of the Commission on the Status of Women*. N.d.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 9-15; United Nations, Fourth World Conference on Women. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. 1995*; United Nations, General Assembly. *Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (A/RES/55/71)*. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *ECOSOC Subsidiary Bodies*. N.d.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Future organization and methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women (E/RES/2022/4)*. 2022. p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *United Nations Handbook 2023-24*. 2023. pp. 158-159.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Commission on the Status of Women (Res. 11(II))*. 1946. p. 525.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *A Short History of the Commission on the Status of Women*. 2019. pp. 9-15; United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Future organization and methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women (E/RES/2022/4)*. 2022. p. 2.



intergovernmental bodies and Member States on gender mainstreaming; hold discussions on and track the progress on implementation of the BPfA.<sup>10</sup>

- **CSW will not generally:** implement or manage programs and projects on gender equality and women and girls' empowerment; support Member States, governments, and civil society in implementing programs and projects on gender equality.<sup>11</sup>

### **Governance, Funding, and Structure**

CSW consists of 45 Member States elected for four-year terms based on equitable geographical distribution.<sup>12</sup> The Chair and the four Vice-Chairs of CSW's Bureau rotate without specific geographical regulations and are elected for two-year terms.<sup>13</sup>

Each year in March, CSW holds its annual meetings to review progress on, identify challenges to, and make policies on gender equality and women and girls' empowerment.<sup>14</sup> For each annual meeting, CSW selects a priority theme related to its work, which is decided on in advance through its multi-year program of work.<sup>15</sup> As the largest gathering on gender equality and women and girls' empowerment, CSW's annual session brings together governments, civil society, and other relevant actors to achieve gender equality.<sup>16</sup> The outcome documents of CSW's annual sessions are referred to as agreed conclusions.<sup>17</sup> Funding for CSW's annual meetings and other deliverables is provided by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) through the United Nations regular budget.<sup>18</sup>

UN Women hosts the Secretariat of CSW and provides guidance on operational activities aimed at the advancement of women.<sup>19</sup> CSW and UN Women work closely together: CSW serves as the policy-making body, UN Women as the programmatic and implementation body.<sup>20</sup> UN Women supports the work of CSW substantively by providing annual documentation on critical areas of concern regarding gender equality and facilitates interaction between the commission and civil society organizations at its annual meetings.<sup>21</sup> CSW also works closely with the General Assembly and ECOSOC.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> United Nations, Commission on the Status of Women. *Report on the sixty-sixth session (26 March 2021 and 14–25 March 2022) (E/CN.6/2022/16)*. 2022; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Commission on the Status of Women*. N.d.; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*. N.d.; New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *United Nations Handbook 2023-24*. 2023. pp. 158-159.

<sup>11</sup> New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *United Nations Handbook 2023-24*. 2024; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Programme Implementation*. N.d.; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *About UN Women*. N.d.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Commission on the Status of Women*. N.d.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 158-159.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Snapshot: What is CSW?* N.d.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Proposed programme budget for 2022 (A/76/6 Sect. 17)*. 2021.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *A Short History on the Commission on the Status of Women*. 2019. pp. 8-10.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, *Programme implementation*. N.d.; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Outcomes*. N.d.

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *A Short History on the Commission on the Status of Women*. 2019. p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Proposed strategic framework for the period 2016-2017: Programme 14, Gender equality and empowerment of women (A/69/6 (Prog .14))*. 2014. p. 2.



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United Nations, General Assembly. *Proposed programme budget for 2022 (A/76/6 Sect. 17)*. 2021. Retrieved 20 October 2023 from: [https://undocs.org/en/A/76/6%20\(Sect.%2017\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/76/6%20(Sect.%2017))





# 1. Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls

## Introduction

Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls is at the heart of human rights and the basis of a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world.<sup>23</sup> The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) defines gender equality as the equal rights and opportunities of women and men and boys and girls.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the empowerment of women and girls is described as women and girls in control and having power over their own lives, through equal capabilities and access to resources and opportunities, and being able to use these capabilities and resources to make strategic choices and decisions.<sup>25</sup> Despite women and girls representing half of the world population and potential, gender inequality continues to prevent social progress, including in the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work.<sup>26</sup>

According to UN Women, rural women are key agents in achieving economic, social, and environmental change.<sup>27</sup> Women who work in the formal economy and bring home an income often also perform the majority of unpaid domestic work within their households and families in rural areas.<sup>28</sup> The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recognizes that this work often goes unnoticed in the formal economy, as a significant portion of this labor is unaccounted for and without compensation.<sup>29</sup> According to FAO, women spend on average 4.2 hours a day in unpaid work, compared to 1.9 hours for men, highlighting the gender disparities in time spent on work like cooking, cleaning, water collection, and caring for family or household members.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, rural women and girls face challenges as a result of gender-based stereotypes and discrimination, depriving them of unbiased access to equal opportunities, such as education and career opportunities.<sup>31</sup> In some countries, over 50% of girls from lower-income rural households are married before they turn 18, resulting in barriers to education and employment among other consequences.<sup>32</sup> Only 2% of rural women from low-income countries complete higher levels of education, leading to additional barriers in employment, lower-quality jobs and lower income, and decreased individual and social well-being.<sup>33</sup> There are over 2.4 billion women of working age unable to afford equal economic opportunities and over 178 countries still maintain legal benchmarks that foster unequal economic participation.<sup>34</sup> Empowering rural women and girls requires a focus on social protection and decent work, education and training, sustainable energy, healthy sanitation and clean water, eliminating violence, active inclusion of women in leadership roles, and increasing the climate resilience of women.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Gender equality and women's rights*. 2023.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Gender Equality Glossary*. 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals. *Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*. 2023.

<sup>27</sup> United Nations, WomenWatch. *The UN System: Working Together to Empower Rural Women*. 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *In agrifood systems, not everyone's experience is equal: The status of women in agrifood systems*. 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations, WomenWatch. *The UN System: Working Together to Empower Rural Women*. 2012.

<sup>32</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Learn the Facts: Rural Women and Girls*. 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> World Bank. *Nearly 2.4 Billion Women Globally Don't Have Same Economic Rights as Men*. 2022; United Nations, WomenWatch. *The UN System: Working Together to Empower Rural Women*. 2012.

<sup>35</sup> United Nations, WomenWatch. *The UN System: Working Together to Empower Rural Women*. 2012.



## **International and Regional Framework**

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) laid the foundation for achieving gender equality and empowering rural women and girls, with Article 1 emphasizing that all individuals are born “equal and free.”<sup>36</sup> Article 26 also establishes that all persons have the right to equal and adequate education.<sup>37</sup> In 1966, the General Assembly defined international human rights and the rights of women with the adoption of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.<sup>38</sup> According to these conventions, international rights include the right to adequate healthcare, access to safe and reliable food, and safe working environments.<sup>39</sup> In 1979, the General Assembly adopted the *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), sometimes referred to as an “International Bill of Rights for Women.”<sup>40</sup> Article 14 recognizes rural women’s role in the economic well-being of their families, and emphasizes that rural women should have equal rights and access to agricultural loans, technologies, and training as rural men.<sup>41</sup>

Adopted in 1995 by the Fourth World Conference on Women, the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Beijing Declaration) focuses on 12 key areas of concern, including women and the environment, women and poverty, and the human rights of women.<sup>42</sup> In 2000, the Beijing Declaration was expanded by the adoption of General Assembly resolution 23/3 on “Enhancement of international cooperation in the field of human rights,” which identifies initiatives and actions that can be taken to achieve the goals set forth in the Beijing Declaration.<sup>43</sup> These include national efforts to ensure access to education and training, as well as the creation of policies that decrease barriers particularly for rural women.<sup>44</sup>

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2030 Agenda) (2015) advanced the work of the Beijing Declaration by incorporating gender equality measures into many of the sustainable development goals (SDGs).<sup>45</sup> SDG 1 (no poverty) works to ensure equal rights to economic resources and access to basic services.<sup>46</sup> SDG 2 (zero hunger) aims to double agricultural productivity and ensure that women have access to the agricultural industry.<sup>47</sup> SDG 4 (quality education) aims to create and ensure equal access to free and equitable education for women and men, and girls and boys.<sup>48</sup> Further, SDG 5 (gender equality) aims to achieve equal economic rights and increased education on technology for all women.<sup>49</sup> In particular, target 5.4 recognizes the unpaid care and domestic work that women do, while target 5.A promotes reform to ensure equal rights to economic resources.<sup>50</sup> SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) aims to promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (A/RES/2200 (XXI))*. 1966; United Nations, General Assembly. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (A/RES/2200 (XXI))*. 1966.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (A/RES/34/180)*. 1979; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Gender Equality*. 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> United Nations, Fourth World Conference on Women. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. 1995.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Further Actions and Initiatives to Implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (A/RES/S-23/3)*. 2000.

<sup>45</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 21.



On a regional level, the African Union (AU) adopted the *AU strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2018-2028* in 2018, empowering women economically and contributing to sustainable development by ensuring that rural women and girls have equal access to quality education and control over productive resources.<sup>52</sup> The AU acknowledges that encouraging and promoting access to education for rural women and girls can increase the economic productivity across the region.<sup>53</sup> Due to traditional gender roles, economies across African states face institutional corruption, creating additional barriers for access to equitable jobs and education for women.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in its *2023 Report on Gender Equality*, the European Union (EU) emphasized that there is still progress to be made to achieve gender equality.<sup>55</sup> The report identified challenges that rural women face in Europe, including access to policies, leadership, and technologies in agriculture.<sup>56</sup> The EU additionally identified that equal access to education is a priority, particularly in the math and science sector.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted the *ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Cooperation Work Plan 2023-2027*, identifying key priorities like the implementation of sustainability methods, increased access to education, and further improving gender equality to be expanded upon under the current work plan.<sup>58</sup> The APT is committed to increasing the participation of rural women in the agriculture and technological industries.<sup>59</sup>

### **Role of the International System**

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is committed to achieving gender equality and empowerment of rural women and girls.<sup>60</sup> CSW's 62nd session in 2018 prioritized tackling the challenges related to achieving gender equality and empowering rural women and girls.<sup>61</sup> In its agreed outcomes from this session, CSW encouraged Member States to eliminate gender disparities through strengthening their efforts to support rural women farmers and promoting rural women and girls' right to education at all levels.<sup>62</sup> CSW also highlighted the mutually reinforcing relationship between the empowerment of women and girls, gender equality, and the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the 2030 Agenda.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, at its 67th session (CSW67), CSW recognized innovation, technological change, and education as mechanisms for Member States to achieve gender equality and empower rural women and girls.<sup>64</sup> Member States agreed to prioritize digital equity to bridge the growing digital divide, leverage on financing for an inclusive digital transformation, foster gender-responsive digital technology education, and promote participation of rural women and girls in full employment.<sup>65</sup>

UN Women is the principal body dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women, working with a variety of partners to assist with programs and policies that empower women and girls.<sup>66</sup> For

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<sup>52</sup> African Union. *AU Strategy for Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment 2018-2028*. 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> European Commission. *2023 Report on Gender Equality in the EU*. 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Work Plan 2023-2027*. 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld Library. *Gender and the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW): A Quick Guide*. 2023.

<sup>61</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls: 2018 Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions*. 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> International Institute for Sustainable Development. *CSW 62 Stresses Urgency of Empowering Women and Girls*. 2018.

<sup>64</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls: 2018 Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions*. 2018.

<sup>65</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls*. 2023.

<sup>66</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *About Us*. 2023.



economic empowerment, UN Women's programs include a focus on women's unpaid care work and actions to combine this with paid employment.<sup>67</sup> UN Women also promotes equality in education by focusing on school curriculums as well as equal access to education, training, and information technologies.<sup>68</sup> In Zimbabwe for example, UN Women works to empower rural women and girls by providing new equipment and training sessions on fish selling.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, FAO promotes gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls, incorporating a gender perspective in its work.<sup>70</sup> FAO works closely with countries to examine national agricultural and rural sectors from a gender lens at the policy, institutional, community, and household levels.<sup>71</sup> FAO also has Dimitra Clubs, which are groups of women, men, and youth who volunteer in rural areas of sub-Saharan African countries to promote the empowerment of rural women through community engagement and collective action in the areas of agriculture, education, health, and more.<sup>72</sup> UN Women, FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP) have partnered up on the *Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women* (JP RWEE) initiative.<sup>73</sup> This initiative engages governments to create policies and implement laws that benefit rural women and girls in trade, finance, and agriculture.<sup>74</sup> It also empowers rural women to access opportunities, build capacity in terms of land ownership, and be involved in making laws and programs that favor them.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) partners with national and local governments to ensure gender equality.<sup>76</sup> For example, as part of its *Adolescent Girls Strategy*, UNICEF invests in skills-building and focuses on learning environments to further the economic empowerment of adolescent girls to become entrepreneurs and leaders.<sup>77</sup> Following its adoption of the *UNICEF Gender Policy 2021-2030* in 2021, UNICEF is working to ensure that every girl, including rural girls, has access to digital learning solutions by developing gender-responsive policies and budgets, as well as ensuring that rural girls have access and connectivity to digital technologies and safe digital learning environments.<sup>78</sup>

Regionally, the EU works to achieve an EU free of gender-based violence, thrive in a gender-equal economy by closing gender gaps in the job market, and address gender pay, pension gap and funding actions.<sup>79</sup> In line with its *2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy*, the EU introduced the *Common Agricultural Policy* (CAP) in 2023 to fund agricultural projects led by women as well as initiatives advancing gender equality in rural areas.<sup>80</sup> The EU CAP Network enhances women's positions in farming and prioritizes the social inclusion of rural women.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the *EU Gender Action Plan* (GAP III) includes gender equality in the external policy and programming sector through gender mainstreaming and using a

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<sup>67</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Economic Empowerment*. 2023.

<sup>68</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Economic Empowerment of Women*. N.d.

<sup>69</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Rural Women*. 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Gender*. 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Dimitra Clubs: Community Engagement for Empowerment*. 2023.

<sup>73</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Rural Women*. 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. *Gender Equality*. 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. *Advancing Girls' Education and Gender Equality through Digital Learning*. 2021.

<sup>79</sup> European Commission. *Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions: A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*. 2020.

<sup>80</sup> European Union Cap Network. *Rural Women: Projects Brochure*. 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



gender-transformative right-based and intersectional approach.<sup>82</sup> GAP III strengthens social and economic rights of rural women and girls, while increasing their equal engagement and leadership.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the AU aims to provide mandatory and free quality education for girls and women from age 3-18 through market-oriented, vocational programs and income autonomy opportunities to advance the economical positions of rural women and girls.<sup>84</sup> Supplementing this, the AU works to make rural women and girls active users and influencers of the technological space by funding technology and digital inclusion programs and activities.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, non-governmental organizations (NGO) like OXFAM International support women farmers to help fight hunger, poverty, and climate change by scaling up agriculture through financing.<sup>86</sup> Also, Kiva and Friendship Bridge work to improve gender equality through financial inclusion and impact-driven partnership.<sup>87</sup> Both organizations partner to provide rural women entrepreneurs with intensive training in business development, individual microcredits loans, technical assistance, and access to new markets.<sup>88</sup>

### ***Empowering Rural Women Through Sustainable Agriculture***

Sustainable agriculture is defined as farming that “meets the needs of existing and future generations, while also ensuring profitability, environmental health, and social and economic equity.”<sup>89</sup> Sustainable agriculture aims to conserve soil on farms and promote long-term ecological balance through practices like crop rotation, effective water management, and the use of cover crops in less productive seasons.<sup>90</sup> FAO notes that 36% of women globally work in the agrifood systems industry.<sup>91</sup> According to UN Women, rural women in developing countries make up nearly 43% of the agricultural labor force; in eastern Africa, over half of farmers are women.<sup>92</sup> However, women produce 20-30% less than men farmers due to significant disadvantages and exclusions, including less access to land and machinery, more involvement in domestic duties, and being disproportionately impacted by climate change.<sup>93</sup> If women and men farmers had equal access to resources, agricultural output could be increased up to 4%, resulting in ending hunger for 100 to 150 million people.<sup>94</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic, however, further exacerbated the disparities rural women and girls face when it comes to sustainable agriculture, with 22% of women employed in off-farm jobs in the agrifoods sector losing their jobs compared to 2% of men who lost their jobs in the same sector.<sup>95</sup> The pandemic also resulted in increasing care responsibilities, with school

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<sup>82</sup> European Commission. *Gender equality and empowering women and girls*. 2023; European Commission. *Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions: A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*. 2020.

<sup>83</sup> European Commission. *Gender equality and empowering women and girls*. 2023.

<sup>84</sup> African Union. *AU Strategy for Gender Equality & Women’s Empowerment 2018-2028*. 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Oxfam International. *Oxfam and partners address gender inequality in education at 67th Commission on the Status of Women*. 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Lang. Kiva. *Kiva and Friendship Bridge: Improving gender equality through financial inclusion and impact-driven partnership*. 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> United Nations Environment Programme. *A beginner’s guide to sustainable farming*. 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Union of Concerned Scientists. *What is Sustainable Agriculture?* 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *In agrifood systems, not everyone’s experience is equal: The status of women in agrifood systems*. 2023.

<sup>92</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Facts & Figures*. 2023; reNature. *Empowering Women in Agriculture*. 2021.

<sup>93</sup> World Bank. *Breaking the ‘Grass Ceiling’: Empowering Women Farmers*. 2018; Oxfam. *Empowering women farmers to end hunger and poverty*. 2023.

<sup>94</sup> World Food Programme. *Empowering women and girls is crucial to ensure sustainable food security in the aftermath of COVID-19, say UN food agency heads on International Women’s Day*. 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *In agrifood systems, not everyone’s experience is equal: The status of women in agrifood systems*. 2023.



closures resulting in less time for agricultural activities to generate income.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, fewer rural girls may return to school, given increasing care responsibilities and hardships in accessing distance learning with school closures.<sup>97</sup> Gathering data and research on rural female agriculture workers and ensuring equal access to technology and digital financial services are among the actions that can be taken in the aftermath of the pandemic to achieve gender equality and empower rural women and girls.<sup>98</sup>

Countries are making strides to improve the empowerment of rural women in the agriculture sector through focusing on access to education and technology.<sup>99</sup> For example, Guatemala's Ministry of Agriculture partnered with FAO in 2016 to ratify their first national policy for gender equality in farming, entitled "Giving Women in Guatemala a Voice in Food Security and Nutrition."<sup>100</sup> The policy aims to abolish discrimination faced by women when accessing jobs in the agriculture sector.<sup>101</sup> As a result, a special cabinet for women was created within the ministry to provide technical assistance to women farmers.<sup>102</sup> FAO has worked with other countries, such as Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Zambia to help create policies on equal access for women to enter the agriculture sector, lobby for agriculture needs on a local and national level, and hold local ministries accountable in cases of discrimination against women in agriculture.<sup>103</sup>

Moreover, in 2022, UN Women, FAO, IFAD, and WFP expanded the JP RWEE initiative to increase its funding base and expand to other countries.<sup>104</sup> The first phase (2014-2021) achieved an 82% growth in agricultural production.<sup>105</sup> The second five-year phase will focus on projects in Niger, Nepal, Tanzania, the Pacific Islands, and Tunisia to teach rural women about existing and new technologies in agriculture, leadership, and economic skills, while partnering with local governments to advance policy changes to eliminate barriers for rural women.<sup>106</sup> The aim is for more rural women to transition from subsistence farming to independent farms of their own.<sup>107</sup> According to UN Women, rural women and girls need access to machinery and equipment, such as technologies that are labor-saving and reduce time spent on farming activities to allow women to learn new skills.<sup>108</sup> In addition, women farmers should be placed at the center of technology innovation and product design processes, decreasing barriers to education that can benefit agriculture productivity.<sup>109</sup> This allows for more rural women to have access to decision-making and leadership roles in the agriculture and production sector.<sup>110</sup>

Several countries in Africa are striving to empower rural women through sustainable agriculture.<sup>111</sup> For example in Madagascar, efforts to produce higher-yielding rice have benefited over 300 farmers, nearly

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<sup>96</sup> Koning et al. Consultative Group to Assist the Poor. *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Financial Services in the Global Response*. 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Oxfam International. *Oxfam and partners address gender inequality in education at 67th Commission on the Status of Women*. 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Giving women in Guatemala a voice in food security and nutrition*. 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> United Nations, World Food Programme. *Empowering Rural Women: Joint UN Programme's New Phase to Target Countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific*. 2022.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Technologies for Rural Women in Africa*. 2016.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Promoting Hybrid Rice to Improve National Food Security and Livelihoods – FAO-China South-South Cooperation (SSC) Project in Madagascar*. 2022.



half of which were women, by implementing more training on the types of crossbred seed and planting needed to yield more rice.<sup>112</sup> A hybrid crop is the utilization of crossbred seeds, which yields stronger and healthier seeds and crops.<sup>113</sup> At the same time, Tanzania is reducing gender inequalities through policy changes and empowering rural women and girls to enter the formal economy through the agricultural sector.<sup>114</sup> By 2030, Tanzania aims to increase the agriculture sector by 10%, and provide proper training, education, and job access to all women in the state.<sup>115</sup>

### ***Achieving Gender Equality and Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls Through Quality and Digital Education***

Digitalization is defined as adapting systems and processes to be operated with computers and the Internet, and is raising the need to be attentive to how technology can promote gender equality and empower rural women and girls.<sup>116</sup> UN Women believes that rural women and girls should create, access, and utilize digital technologies, information, and knowledge to accomplish their maximum potential in advancing sustainable development and upgrading their quality of life.<sup>117</sup> Still, rural women and girls face challenges that keep them from taking advantage of opportunities, including socio-cultural norms limiting women's economic participation and a technology gap in access, ownership, and use of technology from country to country.<sup>118</sup>

According to CSW, if rural women and girls are empowered with quality and digital education, gender equality can be achieved.<sup>119</sup> Quality education for rural women and girls can be provided in the form of formal, informal, or vocational skill acquisition to make them employable in the labor market.<sup>120</sup> During CSW67, CSW called on Member States to promote and uphold the educational rights of rural women and girls, including through supporting public education systems and infrastructure, eliminating unfair laws and practices, and ensuring universal access to education that is non-discriminatory, inclusive, and of equal quality.<sup>121</sup> Primary and secondary education should be free and compulsory, and lifelong learning opportunities for rural women and girls should be facilitated.<sup>122</sup> Quality education should encapsulate career development workshops and opportunities, scholarships, and fellowships for rural women and girls.<sup>123</sup> This will yield diversification of educational and career choices in emergent disciplines, such as science, technology, engineering, and information and communications technology.<sup>124</sup> In addition, Member States agreed to prioritize digital equity to close the gender digital divide by expanding digital learning, literacy, and facilitating access to information and communications technology for rural women and girls.<sup>125</sup> Member States also agreed to the promotion of education, vocational education, and digital entrepreneurial skills by providing affordable, sustainable, and accessible digital technologies to improve

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> United Nations Development Programme. *Bridging the gender gap: Empowering Women in the Agricultural Sector*. 2023.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls*. 2022; United Nations, Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. *Digitalization*. 2023.

<sup>117</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls*. 2023.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls: 2018 Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions*. 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.



digital skills, productivity, and employment opportunities for rural women and girls.<sup>126</sup> Enhancing access to technology for rural women and girls can serve as a means to enhance employment opportunities, boost agricultural productivity, increase income, and enhance food security.<sup>127</sup> For instance, achieving widespread and cost-effective connectivity for women and girls residing in remote rural areas, including islands, is a way to enhance access to technology.<sup>128</sup> In addition, The agreed conclusions advocate for the evolution and execution of programs and policies aiding women's entrepreneurship and increased investment in women-led and women-owned businesses and companies.<sup>129</sup>

According to UN Women, Member States can leverage technology to create decent work for rural women by embedding gender considerations in technology development.<sup>130</sup> This can be done by supporting accessible, open, and free education in the digital ecosystem, and by prioritizing the advancement of authentic public digital learning platforms.<sup>131</sup> Since 2020, UN Women has engaged and empowered women farmers using digital innovation by steering the Buy from Women (BfW) platform under the Global Flagship Programme on Climate Smart Agriculture, available in Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti, Liberia, Mali, Rwanda, Senegal and South Africa.<sup>132</sup> The BfW platform uses digital innovation to provide better access to markets, information, finance, and land for rural women farmers by ensuring that women are able to access pertinent information, such as prices, inputs, and financing.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, UNICEF partners with Microsoft to execute the Learning Passport (LP), a platform where rural women and girls can acquire continuous access to quality education.<sup>134</sup> The LP platform, currently employed in a few Member States, uses a gender equality package that covers five themes: economic empowerment and entrepreneurship; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; gender equality; prevention of gender-based violence; and, sexuality education.<sup>135</sup>

Governments are also working to empower rural women and girls through digital and quality education.<sup>136</sup> For example, the Digital Bangladesh campaign in Bangladesh has empowered over ten million rural women through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by implementing various ICT initiatives and facilitating women entrepreneurs' involvement in e-commerce and computer training.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, Azerbaijan is working closely with the United Nations Development Programme to open 17 women's resource centers to promote social and economic participation of women in rural areas.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, Oman has initiated programs in rural areas to fund projects led by women, as well as microloans to boost the number of women entrepreneurs.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Technologies for Rural Women in Africa*. 2016.

<sup>128</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls: 2018 Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions*. 2018.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>132</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Buy From Women*. 2020; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Innovation For Gender Equality*. 2019. p. 5.

<sup>133</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Innovation For Gender Equality*. 2019. p. 5.

<sup>134</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. *Advancing Girls' Education and Gender Equality through Digital Learning*. 2021.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Increased Women's, Girls' Participation in Digital Technology Crucial to Economies, Global Sustainability, Speakers Tell Commission, as Session Continues*. 2023.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *UN Women integrates digital technologies into women's economic empowerment programmes*. 2023.





## **Conclusion**

Rural women and girls are at a significant disadvantage both economically and socially.<sup>140</sup> Thanks to the collaborative efforts of CSW, UN Women, other UN bodies, and Member States, progress has been made towards the objective of achieving gender equality and empowering rural women and girls.<sup>141</sup> Still, rural women and girls continue to be a minority in progress made to date on achieving gender equality.<sup>142</sup> CSW believes that rural women and girls need to be empowered through sustainable agriculture as well as quality and digital education.<sup>143</sup> Member States have the opportunity to foster empowerment among rural women and girls and promote gender equality through the adoption of mechanisms focused on technological progress, education, and innovation.<sup>144</sup>

## **Further Research**

As delegates conduct further research and consider how to address this topic, they should consider: How can Member States successfully engage to empower rural women and girls and achieve gender equality? How can Member States collaborate to ensure that sustainable agriculture is promoted for the empowerment of rural women and girls? What stakeholders are essential for employing technology and innovation to empower rural women and girls? What programs or opportunities can Member States expand upon to achieve gender equality for rural women and girls? How can technology and education for women further advance gender equality? What other areas of advancement are needed in order to achieve gender equality for rural women and girls?

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<sup>140</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Facts & Figures*. 2023.

<sup>141</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls: 2018 Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions*. 2018.

<sup>142</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Learn the facts: Rural women and girls*. 2021.

<sup>143</sup> United Nations Development Programme. *Bridging the gender gap: Empowering Women in the Agricultural Sector*. 2023

<sup>144</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Innovation For Gender Equality*. 2019. p. 5.



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## 2. Promoting Gender Equality in Access to Healthcare

*“Gender norms, roles, and relationships make a fundamental difference to a person’s risk of contracting a disease, their ability to access health services, and how they are treated once in the health system.”<sup>145</sup>*

### **Introduction**

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was established to monitor progress on gender-specific issues and to promote women’s rights, including in the healthcare sector.<sup>146</sup> According to the World Health Organization (WHO), women and girls face greater barriers than men and boys to accessing health information, services, and education.<sup>147</sup> WHO affirms that harmful gender norms contribute to the discriminatory attitudes of health systems worldwide, often attributing to unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), gender-based violence (GBV), harmful cultural practices including female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriages, and other forced marriages.<sup>148</sup> GBV transcends geographical boundaries, affecting women globally and perpetuating detrimental health outcomes.<sup>149</sup> WHO states that, globally, one in three women have experienced GBV in their lifetimes.<sup>150</sup> Gender-responsive healthcare services play a role in addressing the specific needs and preferences of individuals based on their gender identity, acknowledging and accommodating diverse perspectives.<sup>151</sup>

WHO states that understanding intersectionality, which is the interlink between social and political categories, is crucial in formulating comprehensive and inclusive policies that leave no one behind.<sup>152</sup> WHO uses the term “gender” to describe the social roles, behaviors, and expectations that societies assign to individuals based on their perceived sex, which is distinct from biological sex and encompasses a range of identities and expressions.<sup>153</sup> Gender-based discrimination in healthcare access refers to differential treatment or unfair practices faced by individuals in accessing health services due to their gender identity or sex, leading to disparities in healthcare outcomes.<sup>154</sup> The two terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ interact with each other often, although they differ in definition.<sup>155</sup> WHO determines that ‘sex’ refers to the “biological and physiological characteristics of females, males, and intersex persons.”<sup>156</sup> The pursuit of gender equity, which involves fair treatment and equal opportunities for individuals of all genders, requires global efforts to build just and equitable healthcare systems.<sup>157</sup>

### **International and Regional Framework**

After its establishment in 1946, CSW assisted in the drafting of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979.<sup>158</sup> CEDAW reaffirms that the *Charter of the United Nations* (1945) establishes equal rights between men and women.<sup>159</sup> Article 12 of CEDAW outlines that Member States should take measures to ensure equality between men and women with regard to healthcare, further recognizing the

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<sup>145</sup> The Global Fund. *Promoting Gender Equality*. 2022. p. 2.

<sup>146</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (A/RES/34/180)*. 1979.

<sup>147</sup> World Health Organization. *Gender and health*. 2023.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> World Health Organization. *Violence against women*. 2021.

<sup>150</sup> World Health Organization. *Gender and health*. 2023.

<sup>151</sup> World Health Organization. *Ensuring gender-responsive health systems*. 2023

<sup>152</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women et al. *Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit*. 2021. p. 8.

<sup>153</sup> World Health Organization. *Gender and health*. 2023.

<sup>154</sup> World Health Organization. *Human Rights*. 2022.

<sup>155</sup> World Health Organization. *Gender and health*. 2023

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality. *Gender equity*. N.d.

<sup>158</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (A/RES/34/180)*. 1979.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.



influence of gender equality on family life and the overall wellbeing of humankind.<sup>160</sup> Implementation of CEDAW is monitored by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, a group of independent experts who observe and identify areas of improvement for Member States to fulfill the goals of CEDAW.<sup>161</sup>

Adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) outlines universally protected and guaranteed human rights.<sup>162</sup> Building upon the human rights and freedoms outlined in the UDHR, the 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) recognizes that humans can only guarantee their fundamental rights and freedoms if their economic, social, and cultural rights are also protected.<sup>163</sup> ICESCR guarantees gender equality in Article 3, stating that men and women are ensured equal economic, social, and cultural rights.<sup>164</sup> The *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* emphasizes the urgency for women's rights globally.<sup>165</sup> The Declaration states that the security, liberty, integrity, and dignity of humankind can only be guaranteed by gender equality.<sup>166</sup> The Declaration entitles women to the protection of all human rights and freedoms in all aspects of political, economic, social, cultural, and civil life, specifically highlighting the "right to the highest standard attainable of physical and mental health."<sup>167</sup>

Women's rights and gender equality were discussed at an international conference for the first time at the first World Conference on Women (1975), where women's health, specifically access to healthcare, was brought to the forefront as a fundamental component of gender equality.<sup>168</sup> Commitments were made at the 1980 and 1985 World Conferences on Women, stressing the need for equal access to healthcare services, and acknowledging the importance of involving women in health decisions.<sup>169</sup> The Fourth World Conference on Women led to the groundbreaking *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995), which addressed multiple aspects of gender equality, including access to healthcare.<sup>170</sup> It recognized the importance of women's right to health and called for action to eliminate gender-based barriers in healthcare services, promote sexual and reproductive health and rights, and address women's health issues throughout their life course.<sup>171</sup> The Beijing Declaration specifically recognizes and reaffirms that women have the right to every aspect of their health, resulting in their well-being, and is often considered to be one the most progressive global plans for advancing women's rights.<sup>172</sup> Gender equality in access to healthcare does not just include services and accessibility, but also education and gender-specific elements, such as reproductive, fertility, and sexual healthcare.<sup>173</sup>

The *Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* (Maputo Protocol) (2003) highlights the importance of improved bodily autonomy for women in

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<sup>160</sup> The International Alliance of Women et al. *CEDAW, Rural Women and Climate Change*. 2011. p. 6.

<sup>161</sup> Graduate Women International. *CEDAW*. 2022.

<sup>162</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948.

<sup>163</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (A/RES/2200 (XXI))*. 1966.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (A/RES/48/104)*. 1993. p. 1.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>168</sup> United Nations, World Conference of the International Women's Year. *Report of the World Conference of the International Women's Year*. 1975.

<sup>169</sup> United Nations, Third World Conference on Women. *Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace (A/CONF.116/28/Rev.1)*. 1985.

<sup>170</sup> United Nations, Fourth World Conference on Women. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. 1995.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. p. 4.



decisions of health and access to healthcare without male consultation or consent.<sup>174</sup> Some Member States have voiced opposition to the Maputo Protocol due to its condemnation of FGM and other cultural practices, and its recognition of access to reproductive health as a female right.<sup>175</sup> As of 2019, 49 of 55 AU Member States have signed the Maputo Protocol.<sup>176</sup> Serving as a progressive and culture-shifting document, the Maputo Protocol made commitments to ensure the right of health for women is respected, promoted, and upheld by Member States through taking appropriate measures to provide access to health services adequately and affordably.<sup>177</sup>

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2030 Agenda) outlines 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to promote universal economic, social, and environmental action.<sup>178</sup> Although SDG 5 (gender equality) specifically addresses empowerment and equality for women and girls, the preamble of the 2030 Agenda also highlights the importance of gender equality.<sup>179</sup> Promoting gender equality in access to healthcare is important not only because it addresses the alarming prevalence of violence and human rights violations faced by women, girls, and gender-diverse people, but also because it is essential to achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 3 (good health and well-being) which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, irrespective of gender.<sup>180</sup>

### **Role of the International System**

CSW has taken significant steps to promote gender equality in access to healthcare at the global scale.<sup>181</sup> CSW adopts resolutions annually that address a range of issues, including gender equality in access to healthcare, which provide guidance and recommendations to Member States on improving healthcare services for women and girls.<sup>182</sup> As outlined in the Report on the sixty-sixth session of the CSW (2022), Member States brought attention to the issue of access to health services.<sup>183</sup> CSW underscored the need to eliminate barriers and inequalities that impede access to essential healthcare such as historical and structural disparities, discriminatory laws, GBV, negative social norms, and gender stereotypes.<sup>184</sup> According to the CSW Report on the sixty-fifth session (2021), equal access to healthcare services is an important step toward empowering women and girls, as it recognizes the universal right of all individuals to attain the highest level of physical and mental well-being, free from discrimination.<sup>185</sup> The report identifies root causes of gender inequality, discrimination, stigma, and healthcare inequalities such as unequal access to public health services, which impede the lives, well-being, and participation of all women and girls.<sup>186</sup> CSW endorsed recommendations delineated in the report for ensuring equitable healthcare access across all genders, addressing the physical and mental health needs of women and girls, providing psychological and psychosocial assistance, and advancing universal reproductive and sexual health services.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> African Union. *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa*. 2003.

<sup>175</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of Uganda. *Open Letter to the Government and People of Uganda*. 2006.

<sup>176</sup> African Union. *List of countries which have Signed, Ratified/Acceded the Maputo Protocol*. 2020.

<sup>177</sup> African Union. *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa*. 2003. p. 15.

<sup>178</sup> United Nations General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 1.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

<sup>181</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *About UN Women*. N.d.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Commission on the Status of Women: Report on the sixty-sixth session (E/2022/27)*. 2022. p. 7.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>185</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Commission on the Status of Women: Report on the sixty-fifth session (E/2021/27)*. 2021. p. 8.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.





The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) serves as the secretariat of CSW, facilitating the coordination and implementation of programs in collaboration with non-governmental and civil society organizations.<sup>188</sup> UN Women, alongside Member States and public and private stakeholders, advocates for policies and programs that address gender disparities in healthcare access.<sup>189</sup> As part of its commitment to improving healthcare delivery and policy formulation, UN Women also offers capacity-building and training programs for healthcare providers and policymakers.<sup>190</sup> Recently, the progress of UN Women in addressing violence against women is exemplified by their active involvement in the UN Joint Global Programme on Essential Services.<sup>191</sup> This program aims to improve survivors' access to comprehensive essential services by establishing global standards and fostering multi-sectoral collaboration in partnership with governmental organizations.<sup>192</sup>

In its *Progress report on the 64th World Health Assembly* (2011), WHO documented a reduction in maternal mortality from 1990 until 2008, establishing a significant link between WHO and CSW's collaborative efforts towards gender equality in access to healthcare.<sup>193</sup> WHO works to identify and address ongoing global disparities in healthcare interventions for reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health.<sup>194</sup> These disparities encompass both scheduled interventions like immunization and on-demand interventions such as pneumonia treatment, skilled birth attendance, family planning, and cesarean sections.<sup>195</sup> Building upon these findings, WHO is further enhancing the health cluster's response to gender-based violence within six emergency settings, reinforcing its dedication to advancing gender equality in healthcare access.<sup>196</sup>

The *State of World Population* reports by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) offer in-depth analysis and data concerning reproductive health, encompassing aspects like safe abortion access, maternal health, and other matters linked to advancing gender equality in healthcare access.<sup>197</sup> UNFPA actively pursues this objective, as articulated in the *UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025*, by implementing measures to minimize preventable maternal mortality, address GBV, and guarantee universal access to sexual and reproductive health that includes family planning, information dissemination, and education.<sup>198</sup> UNFPA also advocates for increased endeavors to achieve bodily autonomy and equality in healthcare access, emphasizing the importance of providing quality and affordable health services to all individuals.<sup>199</sup>

As a regional health organization, the Pan American Health Organization focuses on promoting health equity, gender equality, and social determinants of health, by striving for universal access to quality maternal and reproductive health services.<sup>200</sup> Similarly, the *Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation's Gender Inclusion Guidelines* encourage the integration of gender equality into all stages of health project

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<sup>188</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *About UN Women*. N.d.

<sup>189</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Annual Report 2019-2020*. 2020.

<sup>190</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Gender Equality in Public Administration*. 2021.

<sup>191</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Essential services: Ending violence against women*. N.d.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> World Health Assembly. *Progress report on the 64th World Health Assembly (A64/26)*. 2011.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> World Health Assembly. *Progress report on the 71st World Health Assembly (A71/41)*. 2018. p. 10.

<sup>197</sup> UN Library. *State of World Population*. N.d.

<sup>198</sup> Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme et al. *United Nations Population Fund - Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (DP/FPA/2021/8)*. 2021. pp. 13, 14, 16.

<sup>199</sup> United Nations Population Fund. *State of World Population 2023*. 2023. pp. 5, 26.

<sup>200</sup> Pan American Health Organization. *Strategy for Universal Access to Health and Universal Health Coverage*. 2014.



planning, implementation, and evaluation within the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>201</sup> The guidelines emphasize the development of inclusive and accessible health services that address the unique needs of women and girls and eliminate gender-based barriers to essential healthcare, including stereotypes, social norms, and discriminatory practices.<sup>202</sup>

### **Access to Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare Services**

Every two minutes, a woman dies due to complications of pregnancy or childbirth.<sup>203</sup> In 2020, it's estimated that nearly 800 women lost their lives to preventable causes directly linked to pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>204</sup> In 2017, WHO estimated that 214 million women of reproductive age in developing Member States wanted to avoid pregnancy, but lacked access to modern contraceptive methods, which restricted their reproductive autonomy and exacerbated gender-based discrimination in healthcare.<sup>205</sup> Drawing recent data from 68 countries, the *2023 State of World Population* report reveals that around 44% of partnered women do not possess the authority to make decisions regarding healthcare, sexual matters, or contraception.<sup>206</sup> This data reveals that nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended, and many of the people carrying these pregnancies do not have bodily autonomy or individual legal authority to make choices about family planning and child spacing.<sup>207</sup> The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has stated that the right of women to make informed decisions regarding their health and reproductive choices is a fundamental human right.<sup>208</sup> Nevertheless, deeply entrenched societal norms, intergenerational pressures, cultural practices, and religious beliefs can constrain women's decision-making autonomy concerning family planning and contraceptive usage.<sup>209</sup> Women often confront resistance from family members or communities when seeking family planning services.<sup>210</sup> Recognizing the significance of reproductive decision-making, CEDAW emphasizes that women should possess the power to determine their reproductive choices, including accessing contraceptives and making the decision to continue or terminate an undesired pregnancy.<sup>211</sup> Additionally, CEDAW advocates for the elimination of obstacles obstructing access to vital services.<sup>212</sup> Furthermore, the *2023 State of World Population* highlights how sexual and reproductive health as well as gender equality are important in fostering a prosperous and sustainable future.<sup>213</sup> The 2030 Agenda reinforces this commitment in target 3.7 by emphasizing the imperative of universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services including family planning, information, education, and the integration of reproductive health within national strategies and programs.<sup>214</sup> However, despite these global aspirations, numerous challenges persist, impeding women's full exercise of their reproductive rights.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. *Gender Inclusion Guidelines*. 2017. p. 4.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. pp. 3, 10.

<sup>203</sup> United Nations Population Fund. *A woman dies every two minutes due to pregnancy or childbirth: UN agencies*. 2023.

<sup>204</sup> World Health Organization. *Maternal Mortality*. 2023.

<sup>205</sup> World Health Organization. *Contraception: Evidence brief*. 2019. pp. 1, 3.

<sup>206</sup> United Nations Population Fund. *State of World Population 2023*. 2023.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>208</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Women's Autonomy, Equality and Reproductive Health in International Human Rights: Between Recognition, Backlash and Regressive Trends*. 2017. p. 1.

<sup>209</sup> United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women. *Good Practices in Legislation on "Harmful Practices" against Women*. 2009. p. 6.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>211</sup> Shalev. *Rights to Sexual and Reproductive Health - the ICPD and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. 1998.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. 1998.

<sup>213</sup> United Nations Population Fund. *State of World Population 2023*. 2023.

<sup>214</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 16.

<sup>215</sup> Shalev. *Rights to Sexual and Reproductive Health - the ICPD and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. 1998.



Globally, there is a prevalence of restrictive laws and social stigmas surrounding contraception and abortion.<sup>216</sup> Contraception and abortion laws can greatly vary across regions and historical backgrounds.<sup>217</sup> Such barriers disproportionately affect women in vulnerable situations, limiting their access to vital reproductive healthcare services and thereby jeopardizing their overall well-being and development.<sup>218</sup> In certain countries, abortion is completely prohibited, even in cases of rape, incest, or maternal risk, leading to severe legal consequences, such as lengthy imprisonment.<sup>219</sup> Maternal health is highly affected by gender-based discrimination in the availability of reproductive healthcare services.<sup>220</sup> CEDAW highlights that maternal mortality and pregnancy-related complications remain significantly higher in regions where women face restricted access to family planning resources.<sup>221</sup> The inadequate provision of maternal health services often reflects a lack of sufficient attention to addressing women's specific needs when allocating resources.<sup>222</sup> Moreover, unsafe abortions represent a significant contributor to maternal mortality and morbidity worldwide.<sup>223</sup> The *2022 State of World Population* report underscored that unsafe abortions constitute 45% of all global abortions, rendering it a primary contributor to maternal mortality.<sup>224</sup> The report also draws attention to the issue of forced abortions in some regions, a violation of women's reproductive rights, where women are coerced or compelled to terminate pregnancies against their will, causing severe physical and psychological repercussions.<sup>225</sup> According to UNFPA, the repercussions of such practices emphasize the pressing requirement for unrestricted access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services.<sup>226</sup>

CSW has noted that advancing the well-being and safeguarding the rights of women and girls involves addressing a variety of intertwined biases and obstacles that they encounter.<sup>227</sup> Among these challenges are violence and poverty, along with ensuring that healthcare and public services are accessible and equitable.<sup>228</sup> CSW also emphasizes that a comprehensive and gender-responsive healthcare system is essential for ensuring universal accessibility of mental health, maternal and neonatal care, menstrual health, and family planning.<sup>229</sup> CSW endorses policy recommendations that suggest increasing investments in accessible public healthcare systems, essential services, health technologies, disease prevention, and nutrition education, fostering innovation, technological advancement, and digital-age education, with international community support.<sup>230</sup> The Commission also advocates for the integration of reproductive health into national strategies, emphasizing the right of women to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health free from coercion and discrimination.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> United Nations Population Fund. *State of World Population 2021*. 2021.

<sup>217</sup> Januwalla. Health and Human Rights Journal. *Human Rights Law and Abortion in El Salvador*. 2016.

<sup>218</sup> United Nations Population Fund. *State of World Population 2021*. 2021.

<sup>219</sup> Januwalla. Health and Human Rights Journal. *Human Rights Law and Abortion in El Salvador*. 2016.

<sup>220</sup> Shalev. *Rights to Sexual and Reproductive Health - the ICPD and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. 1998.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> United Nations Population Fund. *State of World Population 2022*. 2022. p. 11.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Commission on the Status of Women: Report on the sixty-sixth session (E/2022/27)*. 2022. p. 22.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Commission on the Status of Women: Report on the sixty-seventh session (E/2023/27)*. 2023. p. 13.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid. p. 19.



### **Remote and Rural Access to Healthcare**

Article 14 of CEDAW affirms that rural women should have the right to access adequate healthcare facilities, extending to “information, counseling, and services in family planning.”<sup>232</sup> Additionally, CEDAW affirms that gender equality in access to healthcare is closely interconnected with gender-specific roles, especially in rural living, where job security and employment opportunities for women are limited due to cultural norms and socioeconomic practices.<sup>233</sup> The Beijing Declaration outlines the importance of women’s economic and employment independence, which may act as a catalyst for improving gender equality in healthcare and women’s health autonomy, and further states that women in rural areas often lack equality and independence due to the structural composition of rural life.<sup>234</sup> The Beijing Declaration further underscores the urgency of addressing barriers that impede gender equality and emphasizes that access to healthcare is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of their gender.<sup>235</sup> In 2012, the Inter-Agency Task Force on Rural Women released a report in relation to the goals set out in the Millenium Development Goals, which determined that only one-third of rural women receive prenatal care, as opposed to one-half of women in urban areas.<sup>236</sup> The same report identifies that rural women often have less education and knowledge about health-related issues, exacerbating the spread of diseases and infections within communities.<sup>237</sup>

WHO defines social determinants of health (SDH) as non-medical factors impacting the systems and conditions attributed to daily life.<sup>238</sup> SDH uncover the vital influence that health inequality has between groups and classes of people, demonstrating that balancing gender equality in healthcare will have prodigious outcomes for society.<sup>239</sup> Rural and remote living conditions contribute to significant challenges for women and healthcare services.<sup>240</sup> Mobility and transportation restrictions are severe factors in receiving accessible and quality healthcare, as well as other elements, such as confidentiality, lack of access to decision-making, discriminatory attitudes of healthcare providers, and lack of training, education, and policy or protocol.<sup>241</sup>

When considering health and well-being, WHO affirms that rural women and girls are susceptible to more health-related vulnerabilities and risks and face greater barriers to accessing healthcare than men and boys due to mobility limitations or restrictions.<sup>242</sup> United Nations agencies, such as UNFPA, contribute to the improvement and monitoring of the well-being of rural women through programs, reports, and initiatives that focus on social protection and accessibility.<sup>243</sup> UNFPA helps to promote healthcare capacity and effectiveness, partnering with national and civil society organizations in order to improve health outcomes for women and girls.<sup>244</sup> UNFPA also works to mitigate the negative impacts of geographical barriers for rural women, while engaging with men and boys to encourage gender equality.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (A/RES/34/180)*. 1979.

<sup>233</sup> The International Alliance of Women. *CEDAW, Rural Women and Climate Change*. 2011. P. 6.

<sup>234</sup> United Nations, Fourth World Conference on Women. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. 1995. p. 4.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Facts & Figures*. N.d.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> World Health Organization. *Social determinants of health*. 2023.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Kosny, Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health. *The Social Determinants of Health: Equity Across the Lifespan*. 1999. p. 11.

<sup>241</sup> World Health Organization. *Gender and health*. 2023.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> United Nations Women Watch. *Rural Women*. 2012.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.



## **Conclusion**

As keystone documents for gender equality, CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration serve as foundational commitments to further the progress of women's rights as human rights.<sup>246</sup> UN Women states that "extensive discrimination against women continues to exist," as some Member States still do not adhere to the goals of CEDAW, due to constraints such as traditional cultural practices or a lack of capacity to implement gender equality initiatives.<sup>247</sup> Gender-based discrimination directly violates the principles outlined and protected in the UDHR.<sup>248</sup> Gender equality in access to healthcare ensures the welfare of the world, resulting in uninhibited global participation, protection, and opportunity for all genders.<sup>249</sup> Women and girls' rights to healthcare can be promoted, protected, and upheld through the safeguarding of bodily integrity, freedom of adequate health, and the basic right of equality.<sup>250</sup> As highlighted in many transformational global documents, women's empowerment and gender equality are fundamental for the forward momentum of humankind, the guarantee of prosperity and the well-being of all, and the protection of human rights.<sup>251</sup>

## **Further Research**

As delegates conduct further research and consider how to address this topic, they may consider the following: How does the achievement of the targets set out in SDG 5 (gender equality), along with other SDGs, further promote gender equality in access to healthcare? In what way can CSW build off of existing policy guidelines and frameworks to promote access to healthcare? What elements of CEDAW should be reviewed or revised, 45 years after its ratification? How can regional health organizations and global initiatives collaborate to contribute to advancing gender equality in healthcare access on a global scale? How can international efforts ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services?

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<sup>246</sup> Verveer et al. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. *Why Ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is Good for America's Domestic Policy*. 2021.

<sup>247</sup> United Nations, General Assembly. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (A/RES/34/180)*. 1979.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Women's autonomy, equality and reproductive health*. N.d.

<sup>251</sup> United Nations, Fourth World Conference on Women. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. 1995. p. 3.



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