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Operationalizing Gender Equality Commitments Across Human Rights Treaties: Achieving the SDGs Post-2030 Agenda

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[*] The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

This paper focuses on the post-2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda while arguing for recentring economic rights towards achieving gender equality and gender justice, and provides ten recommendations for operationalizing gender equality commitments through expanding our conceptualization of women's economic rights. My central argument is women and girls belong in every dimension of society and wherever they are, policies should enhance and protect their right to a good life. The *Sustainable Development Report 2026* states: "Based on current rates of progress, none of the 17 SDGs will be achieved by 2030."[1] UN Women's concept note also acknowledges that only 35 per cent of the SDG targets are on track, and none of the 18 SDG 5 indicators will be met by 2030.[2] The *Sustainable Development Report 2026* admits regression on women's rights. Yet, the report does not include gender equality as one of the six transformations requiring long-term investments in the post 2030 agenda.[3] Greater investments are required in pursuing gender equality because SDG 5 is pivotal to women's well-being and attaining intersecting SDGS.

I recommend working towards gender equality and gender justice through expanding our view of economic policies affecting women's economic rights. I deliberately argue for pursuing the human rights of women and girls and the ideals of social justice through economic rights because there is a pervasive disconnect in thinking expansively about combatting gender inequality through economic rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Maputo Protocol and the Convention of Belém do Pará all support economic rights of women and girls. Yet, women's economic rights receive less attention than their civic, political, social and cultural rights.

Women and girls experience inequalities in all dimensions of socio-economic life. Yet, many of the strategies that address ending gender inequalities are not reflected in countries' contemporary economic, industrial and financial policies, and they are not scrutinised to reveal these glaring deficiencies. Instead, recommendations populate civic legislation and social policies. Many countries do not utilise CEDAW's provisions to inform economic policies that protect women's economic rights.

The World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014 focused on sustainable development as foundational to advancing gender equality across the social, economic and environmental pillars.[4] However, feminists have paid insufficient attention to what the economic pillar should

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[1] Sachs, J. D., G. Lafortune, G. Fuller et al. 2026. *Implementing Sustainable Development: 2030 and Beyond. Sustainable Development Report 2026*. Dublin: Dublin University Press. Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2026/sustainable-development-report-2026.pdf.

[2] UN Women. 2026. *Expert Group Meeting on Gender Equality, the Empowerment of All Women and Girls and Their Human Rights Across the Sustainable Development Goals: Assessing Progress towards the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Concept note*. New York: UN Women. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women/csw71-2027/preparations/expert-group-meeting.

[3] Sachs, J. D., G. Lafortune, G. Fuller et al. 2026. *Implementing Sustainable Development: 2030 and Beyond. Sustainable Development Report 2026*. Dublin: Dublin University Press. Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2026/sustainable-development-report-2026.pdf.

[4] UN Women. 2014. *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Gender Equality and Sustainable Development*. New York: UN Women. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2014/10/world-survey-2014.

include to advance gender equality. UN Women's concept note provides thematic priorities of violence against women and girls, sexual and reproductive health and rights, the care economy, social protection and environmental sustainability.[5]

We continue to approach women's economic activities and contributions as if these exist only in the care economy and informal sectors. The care and informal economies are vital sectors that cannot be marginalized. However, feminists should never define women's economic activities as occurring only in these sectors even as we recognise that women's contributions in these sectors link household networks, public institutions and markets. Women participate everywhere, in formal and informal economies, and women and girls deserve greater access to and protections within all economic sectors.

All economic sectors should be scrutinised for gender biases and exclusionary practices. Accountability measures cannot only be applied to the care and informal economies. Economic policies targeting financial sectors, industrial development, shipping, transport, renewable energy, artificial intelligence and digital technologies should reflect provisions of the CEDAW, and the wide-ranging recommendations of UN Women to advance gender equality.

CEDAW's reach is global. One hundred and eighty-nine United Nations Member States have ratified or acceded to it. CEDAW's Articles contain prescriptive measures to guide state parties to enhance women and girls' economic rights. All CEDAW's articles, especially articles 10, 11, 13 and 16, can influence existing economic policies to tackle gender inequalities in economic and social relations.

Towards operationalizing gender equality commitments, countries should reconceptualise gender equality issues as strategic, foundational, cross-cutting pillars of economic and social development rather than as secondary, supportive social concerns. Countries should:

(i) Invest continuously in gender equality as the seventh transformational, strategic pillar for the post-2030 agenda.

(ii) Harness political will combined with allocating resources and constructing policies to reconceptualize women's as active agents of the three pillars of economic growth; labour, capital and productivity. Cease viewing women primarily as consumers of state welfare transfers. Women are economic and social actors, and their economic potential remains unrealized for themselves and their countries.

(iii) Operationalize the provisions of CEDAW to unlock the undervalued potential of women to accelerate sustainable growth and development through greater investment in women and girls. Women's labour power is undervalued, underutilised and undersupported in all economic activities**.** While women average 50.8 per cent of the population in African

[5] UN Women. 2026. *Expert Group Meeting on Gender Equality, the Empowerment of All Women and Girls and Their Human Rights Across the Sustainable Development Goals: Assessing Progress towards the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Concept note*. New York: UN Women. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women/csw71-2027/preparations/expert-group-meeting.

Union countries, their labour force participation rates are sub-optimal with an average of 52.5 per cent in 51 countries.[6]

(iv) Utilise an expansive human rights framework that makes women's economic rights wherever they are located, central rather than peripheral.

(v) Recognise that economic violence multiplies women's vulnerabilities**.** Poor conditions of work, restricted labour force participation, inaccessible specialised skills training, unequal pay for work of equal value are forms of economic violence and contradict SDGs 4, 5, 8 and all human rights values.

(vi) Target women as subjects of development who are entitled to the resources of States. Policies on industrial growth, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, digital technologies are silent on the impact on, and economic agency of women (World Bank April 2026).[7]

(vii) Strengthen supportive legislative frameworks for women and employment and remove countervailing legislative and cultural barriers.

(viii) Ensure women receive digital, technological and analytical skills. Expand education in digital literacy, STEM education, artificial intelligence, financial literacy.

(ix) Increase women's leadership across industries, science, technologies, renewable and traditional energy.

(x) Expand childcare, provide free or heavily subsidized day care and early childhood education facilities. These provide children with a solid educational foundation, prepare future work forces of engaged citizens, and free women to realise their highest potential including greater economic participation and leisure activities.

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[6] TheGlobalEconomy. 2026. "Female Labor Force Participation – Country Rankings." Available at: https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/female_labor_force_participation/africa/.

[7] World Bank. 2026. *Africa Economic Update: Making Industrial Policy Work in Africa*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank. Available at: https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099851104082612405.