

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unfinished Business: The Private Sector and Gender Equality

Transforming Corporate Commitments into Equality for All Women and Girls

Gender equality remains the unfinished business of our time—and the private sector is indispensable in closing the gap. Companies are among the largest economic actors in the world, shaping the lives of billions through their roles as employers, producers, innovators and investors. They can entrench inequalities when they fail to act—or become decisive agents of change when they embed gender equality across workplaces, marketplaces and communities.

Gender equality is a human rights obligation and a business imperative

International treaties, International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights affirm that States must protect women's rights and companies must respect them. At the same time, the business case for gender equality is well established. Gender equal leadership improves decision-making; gender-equal firms attract talent and outperform financially; inclusive products and services expand markets. Closing gender gaps in pay, care and digital access could add trillions to global gross domestic product (GDP). **Achieving gender parity could inject 342 trillion into the global economy by 2050.**

By working together, urgently, we can close gender gaps

In many places, gender gaps remain between legal obligations and lived realities, leaving women and girls without full protection of their rights. Gender equality is among the world's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but progress on it remains largely off track. States, the private sector, the United Nations and multilateral organizations can work together with partners to accelerate the pace and

achieve transformative changes, prioritizing key areas such as:

Poverty: In 2025, an estimated 9.2% of women and girls live in extreme poverty compared to 8.6% of men and boys. **Companies should provide decent work and living wages and expand opportunities for women.**

Employment: Globally, labour force participation by prime-aged women (25–54 years) was 64.5% in 2024, compared to 92.2% for men. **Companies should aim for gender parity in the workforce and recruit women into roles where they are underrepresented.**

Pay: The ILO estimates the gender wage gap at 20%; women earn 80% of what men do. **Companies should ensure equal pay for equal work.**

Unpaid care and domestic work: Excessive and unequal care responsibilities keep 708 million women outside the labour force globally. **Companies should adopt gender-responsive and family-friendly workplace policies.**

Sexual violence and harassment at work: An ILO survey of over 74,000 people in 121 countries and territories found that 8.2% of women in employment had experienced sexual violence and harassment over their working life, compared to 5.0% of men. **Companies should adopt zero-tolerance policies, prevent harassment and extend protections through robust grievance mechanisms, including in supply chains.**

Leadership: Globally, women occupy 30% of managerial positions. At this pace, it will take nearly a century to achieve gender parity in management. **Companies should strive for gender parity in leadership and enhance their promotion pipelines.**

Access to markets and supply chains: Women entrepreneurs are notably absent from private sector supply chains. **Companies should build gender-responsive supply chains and expand procurement from women-owned businesses.**

Gender digital gap: Globally, 70% of men use the Internet compared to 65% of women. Women's employment is more exposed to generative artificial intelligence (AI), at 27.6% compared to 21.1% of men's employment. **Companies should help to close digital gaps by investing in women's connectivity, skills and equitable access to technology.**

Corporate advances are real but uneven

Companies are making meaningful contributions to gender equality, from advancing pay transparency and implementing family-friendly policies to sourcing from women-owned enterprises. Gains are most evident where regulation compels disclosure, such as through pay gap reporting and board diversity quotas. Yet aggregate progress is modest and too many issues remain invisible: actual pay disparities and promotion rates, workplace safety records, the extent of care policies and supply chain practices. Public commitments are rising—11,500 companies have signed the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs)—but disclosure and outcomes lag. Voluntary action alone has not been enough to achieve substantial changes.

States set the stage for rapid change

Where States legislate and enforce corporate action, performance and disclosure improve. Equal pay laws, quotas and due diligence mandates are some examples. Yet only 42% of States have reported involving the private sector in national gender equality coordination, missing opportunities to align corporate contributions with public priorities. Further, legal reforms remain fragile, often undermined by weak enforcement, underfunded inspection systems or political pushback. Without coherent policy frameworks, fiscal alignment and sustained oversight, corporate compliance and ambition will likely remain shallow.

Data drive accountability for equality

Progress cannot be measured or enforced without robust data. Corporate gender disclosure has expanded but remains fragmented. The 2025 Financing for Development

Conference called for consistent, comparable and mandatory sustainability disclosure standards. Gender equality indicators must be embedded in recognized reporting standards and emerging global corporate sustainability frameworks, backed by independent assurance and investor demand.

Partnerships accelerate progress

No single actor can close gender gaps alone. Multistakeholder partnerships among governments, companies, investors, civil society and the United Nations are not add-ons but platforms for transformative change.

A call to action

It's time to close the gap between commitment and actual outcomes. UN Women new report *Unfinished Business: Private Sector and Gender Equality (2025)* calls for action by:

- 1. States:** Create and enforce enabling environments that guarantee gender equality and women's rights and align business incentives with equality goals. Institutionalize private sector participation in national gender equality coordination mechanisms to drive alignment.
- 2. Private sector:** Embed gender equality and women's rights in core business strategies, across workplaces, marketplaces, supply chains and communities. As a baseline, do no harm, and move from voluntary pledges to measurable outcomes.
- 3. For global standard-setters, regulators and investors:** Close accountability gaps by embedding harmonized, sex-disaggregated, intersectional indicators into environmental, social and governance (ESG) and financial reporting frameworks. Make independent assurance the norm and link finance and market access to credible gender equality outcomes.
- 4. All actors:** Scale up what works through partnerships and programmes linking mandates, finance, expertise and women's leadership to drive systemic change.

Scan the QR code to read the full report.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/09/unfinished-business-private-sector-and-gender-equality>

