

Women, Business and the Law 2020^[1]

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Excerpted from the foreword

Women, Business and the Law 2020 tracks how the law affects women at various stages in their lives, from the basics of transportation to the challenges of starting a job and getting a pension. This year's study shows that progress is being made, with all regions improving their average scores.

Still, the results are uneven — high-income countries tended to have the best scores, leaving women in many countries with only a fraction of the rights of men. That's not acceptable. Women should be as free as men to travel. They should be paid the same as men for work of equal value. They shouldn't face gender discrimination when applying for a loan or starting a business, and they should have the same rights to property and inheritance as men.

Legal rights for women are both the right thing to do and good from an economic perspective. Research shows clearly that reforms and policies that empower women boost economic growth. When women can move more freely, work outside the home and manage assets, they're more likely to join the workforce and strengthen the economy.

This year's study has been expanded to cover the last 50 years. Over that period, important progress was made in closing the gender gap, as women increasingly entered the workforce and started businesses. The gains were especially dramatic in the ability of women to start a job. Unfortunately, gender barriers persist, and laws and regulations continue to restrict women's economic decision making and employment prospects.

The study recognizes that creating good development outcomes is hard. Governments can use the Women, Business and the Law index to identify legal impediments to women's economic opportunities. The latest study tracks legal equality between men and women in 190 economies. It's important to note that Women, Business and the Law measures only the formal laws and regulations governing women's ability to work or own businesses — a country's norms and practices aren't captured by the indicators.

There's reason for optimism in this year's study. Social mores are improving, and many countries have improved the regulatory environment for women over the last two years. Among the 10 economies that advanced the most, nine are from the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Many of their efforts were focused in the areas of starting a job and working after having children. The result has been an improvement in women's ability to enter the workforce and remain in it.

Much work remains. We shouldn't be satisfied until every young girl can move through her life without facing legal barriers to her success. At the World Bank Group, we stand ready to help.

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