

Investing in Women and Girls: A Strategic Imperative for Sustainable Development

Women and Girls and Equity as the Foundation of all 17 SDG.s and Global Progress

Women are not just recipients of development; they actively contribute, design, build, and sustain it.

The advancement of women and girls is not only a human rights imperative; it is one of the greatest strategic opportunities of the twenty-first century. **Women and girls represent half of the world's population, half of its talent, and an indispensable source of leadership, innovation, resilience, and economic potential.** Their full participation is not a social aspiration to be achieved after development; it is a prerequisite for achieving development.

The case for institutional reform is both legitimate and necessary; however, efficiency, cost savings, and organizational coherence **should not outweigh the strategic importance of maintaining a strong, visible, and independent institutional voice for women and girls.** At a time of growing global backlash against gender equality, reform should reinforce, not diminish, the leadership, agency, and influence of women within the United Nations system.

This paper examines and exposes the critical role of women and girls across the major pillars of sustainable development, including health, technology and artificial intelligence, climate action, economic empowerment, governance, peace and security, and global partnerships. It argues that placing women and girls at the center of policy, investment, and decision-making is not simply the right course of action—it is one of the smartest investments the international community can make to build a more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable future.

The advancement of women and girls is not a single-issue commitment; it is a foundation for achieving sustainable development, global stability, and inclusive prosperity. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognized this reality by establishing **Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls** while **simultaneously embedding gender equality across the entire SDG framework.** Although SDG 5 provides the principal framework for advancing women's rights, the success of every Sustainable Development Goal depends upon the full participation, leadership, and contributions of women and girls.

Gender equality is therefore not a stand-alone objective; it is a cross-cutting catalyst that accelerates progress across all dimensions of sustainable development. Gender equality is directly connected to progress across multiple global priorities: A future-focused UN system must therefore recognize that gender equality is not an outcome that follows development; it is a condition for achieving development.

As the international community confronts increasingly complex and interconnected challenges, including economic uncertainty, climate change, technological transformation, global health threats, humanitarian crises, and growing geopolitical instability, **the need for inclusive leadership**

has never been greater. No nation or institution can fully realize its potential while excluding half of its human capital from shaping policies, driving innovation, and leading solutions.

The next generation of global governance must move beyond viewing women and girls primarily as beneficiaries of programs. They must be recognized as leaders, decision-makers, innovators, entrepreneurs, scientists, peacebuilders, and partners in shaping the future. Investing in women's leadership is not only an investment in equality but also in stronger economies, healthier societies, more resilient institutions, sustainable peace, and shared global prosperity.

Women and Girls at the Center of the Sustainable Development Goals

While SDG 5 explicitly focuses on gender equality, women and girls are fundamental to achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Their leadership, participation, and contributions are not confined to one goal; they are a cross-cutting force that accelerates progress across the entire 2030 Agenda. See

The Sustainable Development Goals make one reality unmistakably clear: advancing women and girls is not one development priority among many; it is the common thread that connects them all. Every global challenge, from poverty and health to climate change, peace, technology, and economic growth, is influenced by the status, participation, and leadership of women. Likewise, every investment in women and girls generates benefits that extend far beyond individuals, strengthening families, communities, institutions, and economies. Yet despite overwhelming evidence of their contribution, women continue to face systemic barriers that limit their participation, diminish their influence, and constrain global progress. Recognizing women and girls as architects of solutions rather than beneficiaries of programs requires a fundamental shift in how policies are designed, resources are allocated, and leadership is exercised. The following sections examine the critical roles women play across the world's most pressing challenges, the inequities that continue to impede their progress, and why placing women and girls at the center of global strategy, governance, and investment is essential to building a more peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable future.

Women and Girls at the Center of Global Health

Health is both a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development. The health and well-being of women and girls influence not only individual lives but also the resilience of families, communities, economies, and future generations. Investing in women's health is therefore not simply a social obligation; it is a strategic investment in human capital and national development.

Despite representing half of the world's population, women continue to experience significant inequities in healthcare access, medical research, clinical trials, and health data. Historically, many diseases affecting women have been under-researched, while diagnostic tools and treatment protocols have often been developed using predominantly male data. Closing these gaps requires a global commitment to gender-responsive health systems that recognize women's unique health needs throughout every stage of life.

The future of global health depends on integrating women's health into broader development strategies through stronger research, innovation, and international collaboration. Advances in

digital health, precision medicine, artificial intelligence, and data analytics present unprecedented opportunities to improve prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and access to care. At the same time, better collection and use of sex-disaggregated health data are essential for evidence-based policy and more equitable health outcomes. Future priorities should include:

- Promoting women's health across the entire life course.
- Expanding research focused on women's diseases and conditions.
- Strengthening gender-responsive health systems.
- Investing in digital health and equitable access to care.
- Improving gender-disaggregated health data.
- Accelerating innovation that addresses women's health challenges.

Women, Technology, and Artificial Intelligence: Building an Inclusive Digital Future

Artificial intelligence and emerging technologies are reshaping every aspect of society—from healthcare and education to finance, employment, governance, and scientific discovery. The decisions made today about how these technologies are designed, governed, and deployed will influence economic opportunity, human rights, and social equity for decades to come. Women must therefore be active architects of the digital future, not passive recipients of technological change.

Yet women remain underrepresented across many areas of science, engineering, artificial intelligence, and digital entrepreneurship. Existing gender gaps in education, workforce participation, investment, and leadership risk being replicated—and potentially amplified—through AI systems trained on incomplete or biased data. Algorithmic bias in recruitment, lending, healthcare, insurance, criminal justice, and digital platforms demonstrates that technology is never neutral; it reflects the assumptions and decisions of those who create it.

An inclusive digital future requires women to participate at every stage of the AI ecosystem—from research and design to governance, regulation, auditing, and ethical oversight. Equally important is ensuring that women and girls everywhere have access to digital skills, STEM education, and the opportunities needed to participate fully in the innovation economy. Multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the Internet Governance Forum demonstrate how governments, industry, academia, civil society, and technical communities can work together to develop responsible and inclusive approaches to digital governance. Future priorities should include:

- Expanding women's leadership in AI research and development.
- Closing gender gaps in STEM education and digital literacy.
- Promoting ethical, transparent, and inclusive AI governance.
- Improving gender-disaggregated data used in AI systems.
- Supporting women innovators, entrepreneurs, and technology leaders.
- Ensuring women help design, govern, regulate, and audit emerging technologies.

Women, Power, and Decision-Making

The advancement of women depends not only on equal opportunity but also on equal participation in decision-making. Thirty years after the Beijing Platform for Action identified women in power and decision-making as a critical area of concern, women remain underrepresented where many of the world's most consequential decisions are made. Whether in government, business, finance,

international organizations, or peace negotiations, the absence of women from leadership limits the diversity of perspectives needed to address increasingly complex global challenges.

Women's leadership is not simply a matter of representation—it is a strategic imperative. Inclusive decision-making leads to stronger institutions, more innovative solutions, improved governance, and policies that better reflect the needs of entire populations. Future global governance must move beyond measuring women's participation and focus instead on expanding women's influence, authority, and leadership at every level of decision-making. Key priorities include:

- Expanding women's representation in senior leadership and executive decision-making.
- Strengthening leadership development, mentoring, and succession planning.
- Removing structural barriers that limit women's advancement.
- Promoting equal participation in diplomacy, international organizations, and global governance.

Women in Government and Public Leadership

Women bring unique perspectives and lived experiences that strengthen public policy and improve governance. Their participation contributes to more inclusive legislation, greater public trust, stronger institutions, and policies that better address the needs of families, communities, and future generations. Yet women continue to be underrepresented in parliaments, ministerial positions, local government, the judiciary, diplomatic service, and senior civil service throughout much of the world.

Achieving gender equality in public leadership requires more than increasing representation. It requires creating leadership pathways, investing in women's political participation, and ensuring that women have equal opportunities to influence national, regional, and international decision-making. Governments that fully utilize the talents of both women and men are better positioned to respond to economic, social, technological, and humanitarian challenges. Future priorities should include:

- Increasing women's representation across all levels of government.
- Supporting women in diplomacy and international leadership.
- Strengthening leadership pipelines for future generations of women leaders.
- Promoting equal participation in public administration and judicial institutions.

Women's Economic Empowerment and Global Prosperity

Women's economic participation is one of the most powerful drivers of inclusive growth, innovation, and long-term prosperity. When women have equal access to education, employment, finance, technology, and leadership opportunities, the benefits extend far beyond individuals, strengthening businesses, communities, and national economies. Gender equality is therefore not only a social objective but also an economic imperative.

Despite significant progress, women continue to face structural barriers that limit their full economic participation. Unequal access to financing, occupational segregation, underrepresentation in leadership, discriminatory employment practices, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities continue to constrain women's economic potential. Emerging

technologies, including artificial intelligence, also present new challenges as biased algorithms increasingly influence recruitment, lending, insurance, and workforce decisions.

Governments, international organizations, and the private sector all have important roles in creating more inclusive economies. Public policy establishes the enabling environment, while responsible business practices, innovation, and strategic partnerships can accelerate women's entrepreneurship, workforce participation, leadership, and financial inclusion. Investing in women is not simply an investment in equality; it is an investment in stronger, more resilient economies capable of addressing future challenges. Future priorities should include:

- Expanding women's access to finance, markets, and entrepreneurship.
- Increasing women's representation in business leadership and corporate governance.
- Promoting inclusive workplaces and equal economic opportunity.
- Supporting women in STEM, innovation, and emerging industries.
- Eliminating bias in AI-driven employment and financial systems.
- Strengthening partnerships that advance women's economic empowerment.

Women, Peace, Security, and Global Governance

Sustainable peace cannot be achieved without the full participation and leadership of women. Experience has consistently demonstrated that when women participate meaningfully in peace processes, governance, and post-conflict recovery, agreements are more inclusive, institutions become more resilient, and communities are better positioned to achieve lasting stability. Women's leadership is therefore not only a matter of equity but also a strategic component of international peace and security.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda has transformed global understanding of the relationship between gender and security. Yet women remain significantly underrepresented in peace negotiations, mediation efforts, security institutions, diplomatic leadership, and international decision-making. As the international community confronts increasingly complex challenges, including armed conflict, humanitarian crises, cyber threats, climate insecurity, and forced displacement, women's perspectives and leadership have never been more essential.

Future global governance must ensure that women are not simply consulted but empowered to shape decisions at every level of international cooperation. Strengthening women's leadership across governments, multilateral institutions, and peacebuilding efforts will contribute to more effective, inclusive, and durable solutions to the world's most pressing challenges. Future priorities should include:

- Increasing women's participation in peace negotiations and mediation.
- Expanding women's leadership in security institutions and diplomacy.
- Strengthening implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
- Promoting women's representation across international organizations and global governance.
- Investing in women peacebuilders and community leaders.

Violence Against Women

Violence against women and girls remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations worldwide and continues to undermine progress across nearly every Sustainable Development Goal. Gender-based violence limits educational attainment, economic participation, political engagement, health outcomes, and community resilience. It is both a cause and consequence of inequality.

As technology evolves, new forms of violence have emerged, including cyber harassment, online abuse, digital stalking, and AI-generated deepfakes that disproportionately target women and girls. Conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises further increase the risk of gender-based violence, trafficking, exploitation, and harmful practices such as child marriage.

Ending violence against women requires coordinated action across governments, civil society, the private sector, and international institutions. Prevention, survivor-centered services, legal protections, education, and accountability must remain central components of national and global policy frameworks. Priority areas include:

- Preventing all forms of gender-based violence.
- Strengthening legal protections and access to justice.
- Combating trafficking and exploitation.
- Addressing technology-enabled violence and online abuse.
- Supporting survivors through comprehensive health, legal, and social services.

Women and the Media

Media and digital communications increasingly shape public perceptions of leadership, opportunity, and gender roles. The stories societies tell—and the voices they choose to amplify—influence aspirations, political participation, and public understanding of women's contributions. Balanced and accurate representation is therefore essential to advancing gender equality.

The rapid growth of digital platforms, social media, and artificial intelligence has transformed the global information landscape while creating new challenges. Gender bias in media, online harassment, misinformation, and AI-generated content can reinforce stereotypes, discourage women's participation in public life, and undermine trust. At the same time, digital platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for women to lead conversations, advocate for change, build businesses, and engage in civic life.

A future-focused global agenda should promote responsible media practices, digital literacy, ethical AI, and equal representation of women across journalism, communications, entertainment, and technology. Ensuring that women help shape the digital information ecosystem is essential to strengthening democracy, protecting human rights, and fostering inclusive societies. Future priorities include:

- Promoting balanced representation of women in media and public discourse.
- Combating online harassment, misinformation, and technology-enabled abuse.
- Increasing women's leadership in journalism, communications, and digital media.
- Supporting ethical AI and responsible digital platforms that promote inclusion rather than reinforce bias.

Women and the Care Economy

The care economy is one of the largest yet least recognized contributors to global economic and social well-being. Across every region of the world, women continue to provide the majority of unpaid care, including childcare, elder care, care for persons with disabilities, and the day-to-day management of family health and well-being. This essential work sustains households, strengthens communities, and supports national economies, yet it often remains invisible in economic measurement and public policy.

The unequal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities limits women's participation in education, employment, entrepreneurship, leadership, and public life. As populations age and healthcare demands increase, recognizing, valuing, and investing in the care economy will become increasingly important for sustainable development.

Governments, employers, and communities share responsibility for creating policies that enable women and men to balance work and caregiving responsibilities. Investments in childcare, family leave, flexible work arrangements, long-term care services, and social protection not only improve gender equality but also strengthen labor force participation, productivity, and economic resilience. Future priorities should include:

- Recognizing unpaid care work as a vital contributor to economic and social development.
- Expanding access to affordable childcare and eldercare services.
- Promoting family-friendly workplace policies.
- Integrating the care economy into national planning and sustainable development strategies.

Women and Girls in Climate Action and Environmental Resilience

Climate change represents one of the defining challenges of the twenty-first century, with far-reaching implications for health, food security, water resources, migration, economic stability, and global security. Although women and girls are often disproportionately affected by climate-related disasters and environmental degradation, they are also among the world's most effective leaders in building resilience and advancing sustainable solutions.

Across many communities, women serve as environmental stewards, agricultural producers, caregivers, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. Their knowledge and leadership are essential for strengthening climate adaptation, protecting biodiversity, improving food security, and developing innovative responses to environmental change. The United Nations climate process, including the Conferences of the Parties (COP), has increasingly recognized that gender-responsive climate policies produce more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Building climate resilience requires integrating women's perspectives into every level of environmental decision-making—from local communities to international negotiations. Investments in women-led innovation, sustainable enterprises, climate finance, and community-based adaptation strengthen not only environmental outcomes but also economic opportunity and social resilience. Future priorities should include:

- Increasing women's participation in climate leadership and environmental decision-making.

- Supporting women-led climate innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Expanding gender-responsive climate finance.
- Protecting women and girls in climate-affected communities.
- Strengthening women's leadership in sustainable resource management and environmental resilience.

Conclusion:

A Unified Vision: Women and Girls as Global Change Agents. The advancement of women and girls is not a separate pathway to development; it is the pathway to achieving development.

Across health, technology, climate, economics, and peace, the evidence points to one conclusion: The next generation of global governance must move beyond viewing women and girls primarily as beneficiaries of programs. They must be recognized as Leaders, Innovators, decisionmakers, Entrepreneurs, Scientists, peacebuilders, Partners in creating solutions, and caregivers

This requires a UN system and global partnership model that places women and girls at the center of strategy, investment, and implementation. The challenges facing the world today are interconnected. Solutions must therefore be interconnected as well.

Whether addressing health inequities, artificial intelligence, climate change, economic transformation, or peace and security, the international community cannot achieve lasting progress without the full participation and leadership of women and girls. The future of global development depends on whether women and girls are positioned not at the margins of decision-making, but at the center of shaping solutions.

A stronger global architecture for women and girls is not only a commitment to equality, but it is also an investment in the future of humanity. The evidence is clear: advancing women and girls is not a stand-alone development priority—it is fundamental to achieving sustainable development, inclusive prosperity, and lasting peace. As the international community confronts increasingly complex global challenges, it must move beyond viewing women as beneficiaries of progress and recognize them as indispensable partners in shaping solutions.

Investing in women is investing in stronger economies, healthier societies, more effective institutions, and a more resilient world. The future of sustainable development will depend on whether women and girls are fully represented where decisions are made and where the solutions to tomorrow's challenges are created.

When women and girls are empowered to lead, the world does not simply become more equal—it becomes stronger, more innovative, more resilient, and better equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

Shaila Rao Mistry, CEO and Founder, STEM Institute; President, US Womens Caucus

Appendix A

- SDG 1 – No Poverty: Women's economic empowerment is one of the most effective pathways to reducing poverty and building resilient families and communities.

- SDG 2 – Zero Hunger: Women are central to food security, nutrition, sustainable agriculture, and feeding the world's growing population.
- SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being: Investing in women's health improves outcomes for families, communities, and future generations.
- SDG 4 – Quality Education: Educating girls is one of the highest-return investments for economic growth, leadership, and social progress.
- SDG 5 – Gender Equality: Gender equality is both a fundamental human right and a catalyst that accelerates progress across all Sustainable Development Goals.
- SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation: Women are at the center of water security, sanitation, hygiene, and community health in many parts of the world.
- SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy: Expanding women's access to clean energy reduces unpaid labor, improves health, and creates new economic opportunities.
- SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth: Women's full participation in the workforce drives innovation, productivity, and inclusive economic growth.
- SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Women are essential contributors to science, technology, engineering, innovation, and the digital economy.
- SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities: Advancing women's rights and opportunities is fundamental to reducing inequalities within and among countries.
- SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities: Women's leadership creates safer, more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable communities.
- SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production: Women influence sustainable consumption, resource stewardship, and responsible production across households, businesses, and communities.
- SDG 13 – Climate Action: Women are indispensable leaders in climate adaptation, environmental resilience, and sustainable development.
- SDG 14 – Life Below Water: Women strengthen coastal economies, marine conservation, sustainable fisheries, and ocean stewardship.
- SDG 15 – Life on Land: Women play vital roles in protecting biodiversity, restoring ecosystems, advancing sustainable agriculture, and managing natural resources.
- SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: Women's participation strengthens peacebuilding, democratic governance, justice, accountability, and resilient institutions.
- SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals: Achieving sustainable development requires women as equal partners across governments, the United Nations, civil society, academia, philanthropy, the private sector.