

# IMPACT REPORT 2023



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## 2023 HIGHLIGHT

### Celebrating twenty years of the Maputo Protocol

In 2023 we celebrated the 20th Anniversary of the Maputo Protocol, a key legal instrument for the promotion and protection of women's rights in Africa alongside civil society, government representatives, judiciary, and representatives of the African Union, including producing a memoir that analyzed and celebrated the progress of the first 20 countries that ratified or acceded to the Protocol.

**“Empowering women is not just a choice, it’s the driving force behind a nation’s progress. In recognizing women as agents of change, we unlock the true potential of our society, paving the way for inclusive development and equality.”**

- His Excellency, Mr Hakainde Hichilema, President of Zambia

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# FOREWORD

**At Equality Now, we are guided by a simple yet profound belief: that every woman and girl deserves to live a life free from violence and discrimination, and in a world where we all have the opportunity to thrive economically, socially, and politically.**

It's a belief that has fueled our work for over three decades, driving us to challenge injustice, advocate for legal and policy reforms, and amplify the voices of those who have been marginalized and silenced.

As I look at the current state of the world – rising levels of conflict within and between nations, bitterly fought elections in the world's largest democracies, and ongoing humanitarian fallout from a devastating pandemic and a global climate emergency – I see coming into ever sharper focus the faultline that is pulling society apart: gender inequality.

Globally, pervasive systematic and structural inequality leaves women and girls everywhere at higher risk of becoming victims of sexual violence and exploitation, and disproportionately more likely to be harmed by regressive cultural norms and practices such as child marriage. Meanwhile, laws that discriminate on the basis of sex and/or gender continue to violate the human rights of women and girls, while feeding conflict and violence, and limiting access by half of the world's population to education, employment, and property ownership.

It is clear that legal equality for women and girls is the foundation of a just, sustainable and prosperous future for everyone. That is why – as this report demonstrates – Equality Now is committed to achieving enduring equality through our unique combination of legal expertise, targeted advocacy, collaboration across our global network, and strategic resourcing.

## During 2023:

- We improved access to justice for 39.2 million women and girls worldwide, by using our exemplary **legal skill and acumen** to help change 14 laws in 12 countries.
- We significantly developed our **global reach and influence**, while also remaining deeply rooted within the places and communities we serve.
- We worked as an active member of 29 **international and regional coalitions**, alongside over 3,000 other individuals and organizations around the world.
- We continued to galvanize the global women's rights movement by **resourcing and supporting** the work of our partners in every part of the world.

The examples highlighted in the pages of this report represent just a fraction of the impact we have achieved during 2023. We know that change is not only possible – it's happening.

As we look ahead, we will continue to be guided by our vision despite all the challenges we face; we will continue to deliver justice through some of the most pioneering, progressive and far-reaching legal challenges of our time; and we will continue to work with activists and survivors to amplify marginalized voices across the political, economic, and cultural spheres.

**In 2023 alone we improved access to justice for 39.2 million women**

Of course, none of this would be possible without the unflinching commitment of the many supporters and partners who continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with us at Equality Now, along with the hundreds of government representatives, policymakers, legal professionals and activists whose tireless dedication is helping us to transform the lives of women and girls everywhere. I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank each and every one of you for your support as we turn our shared vision into a lived reality for millions of people.

Together, we are stronger. Together, we can ensure that every woman and girl is able to live a life free from violence and discrimination, both today and tomorrow. Together, we can create a better, fairer, future – for everyone.

Thank you.

*S. Mona Sinha*

**S. MONA SINHA**  
Global Executive Director,  
Equality Now



## Our Theory of Change works across four pathways: Legal, Advocacy, Collaboration, and Resourcing.

Together these bring about a more just world for women and girls. Here's how we used them in 2023:



### LEGAL

Facilitating legal, thus systemic, change that addresses violence and discrimination against all women and girls around the world:



### ADVOCACY

Advocating for the development and implementation of progressive laws and jurisprudence in alignment with international law and standards, and fostering environments that respect women and girls through feminist, human rights, and evidence-based advocacy:

# 2023 IN NUMBERS

We helped to change **14 laws** in **12 countries**, spanning **4 continents**, and improving **access to justice** for **39.2 million** women and girls worldwide.



We continued to use the processes of the law to advocate for change for women and girls, including by making a total of **38 submissions** to UN treaty bodies, the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, regional bodies, UN special rapporteurs, and courts calling for change.



We successfully concluded **3 strategic litigation cases** and continued to work on a further **12 cases** globally, which are still ongoing.

**24 submissions** have resulted in **1 or more** of our recommendations being adopted by UN treaty bodies or the Human Rights Council's UPR review in their concluding observations. **3** have **contributed to a subsequent change in the law** (in Bahrain, and the US states of Washington and Michigan).

With our global **personnel of 71** working across **22 countries**, we advocated for the improvement of the rights of women and girls in **82 countries**.



We held governments and human rights bodies to account during countless meetings, and in **52 official meetings** we significantly shifted the dial in addition to a further **28 high level meetings** with key decision-makers and change-makers, engaging governments, human rights bodies, parliamentarians, global bodies, traditional leaders, and justice professionals on a vast range of topics.



We made **99 public advocacy appearances** for the rights of women and girls everywhere, across a range of global platforms and channels including conferences, panels, congressional receptions, and webinars.



## COLLABORATION

Working in partnership with a broad and diverse range of actors to increase our mutual understanding, reach, and impact with respect to ensuring the rights of all women and girls, to promote strategic collaboration and the pooling of expertise, and be held accountable for our interventions:



We stepped up and held leadership roles in **19 of these coalitions across every continent**, including the ERA Coalition in the US, the Hurra Coalition in MENA, the Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) Coalition, the Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law, and the Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRi).

We formed **188 strategic partnerships** across the globe, providing significant technical, financial or other support in **124 partnerships**, and ensuring we continually marry our legal expertise with local expertise.

We pooled our knowledge and expertise with a diverse range of actors as an active member of **29 coalitions** alongside over **3,000 other individuals and organizations** around the world.

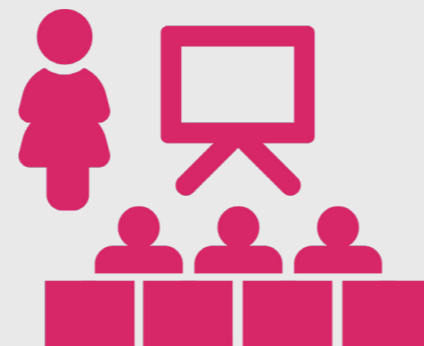


We produced, launched, and disseminated **21 publications**, including a groundbreaking piece of research exploring the intersection of sexual violence and disability in Kyrgyzstan across law, policy, and practice. The research forms the basis of our work to increase access to justice for survivors with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan and across the Eurasia region.



## RESOURCING

Engaging the global community in galvanizing the resources necessary to stand up against the powerful systems that repress women and girls, and sustain the fight for legal and systematic equality:



We galvanized the movement by sharing our feminist legal expertise during **76 trainings and workshops** covering all of the regions that we work in, including training for adolescents, survivor activists, the police, judges, journalists, civil society organizations, and women's rights organizations.

We also brought much needed financial resources to **60 organizations, subgranting \$778,000 globally**, as well as funding and sharing the cost of activities, to support the work of a huge range of women's rights organizations that we are working with to create change across the world.



# ACHIEVING LEGAL EQUALITY



**Laws that discriminate on the basis of sex or gender prevent women and girls from reaching their full potential, creating ongoing cycles of poverty and harm to everyone.**

In 2023, only 14 countries around the world had achieved full legal equality.<sup>1</sup> With recent estimates from the UN suggesting that it would take nearly 300 years to achieve global legal gender equality at the current pace of progress, Equality Now's efforts to challenge and change sex-discriminatory laws – as well as campaigning for constitutional equality through the Equal Rights Amendment in the US – remain as critical as ever. Throughout 2023, our work contributed to a number of key legal and policy changes and other developments.

<sup>1</sup> According to the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law 2023 data, released in March 2023.

## KEY LEGAL AND POLICY CHANGES

**In the UAE**, a federal decree came into effect changing inheritance laws for non-Muslim citizens and residents, entitling them to half of the estate upon the death of their spouse, with no distinction between male and female heirs. This change will bring greater financial security to the **900,000<sup>2</sup> non-Muslim women living in the UAE** on the death of their spouse.

**In Nepal**, certain provisions of the Citizenship Act were amended, including those denying a Nepali daughter (of a Nepali woman and a foreign or unknown father) married to a foreign spouse the same ability as a Nepali son to apply for citizenship. These changes will afford more of **Nepal's 15.9 million women and girls** citizenship rights in line with the male population.

<sup>2</sup> See World Bank 2022 population and sexual violence statistics, and Pew Research 2020 statistics.  
<sup>3</sup> As per combined World Bank 2022 female population statistics for South Sudan and Botswana.

**South Sudan and Botswana** became the 44th and 45th members of the African Union out of 55 to ratify the Maputo Protocol, following ongoing support and advocacy by Equality Now as co-founder and Secretariat to the SOAWR coalition, extending the potential for increased legal protection against violence and legal inequality by a further **6.9 million<sup>3</sup> women and girls in Africa**.

## OTHER POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

- Six new member organizations<sup>4</sup> joined the **Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law**, of which we are the Secretariat. Our campaign team also hosted a briefing with the UN CEDAW Committee on Article 16 and a well-received session on family law, on the main agenda of the Women Deliver conference in Kigali, Rwanda, with a speaker from the UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls. Subsequently, the UN Working Group sent a communication to Sri Lanka to encourage the adoption of a progressive Muslim family law bill in response to a conservative pushback. The bill is still pending but many of the progressive provisions have been added back in.



- After four years of support, in September 2023 we launched the **Hurra Coalition** at an event in Qatar. As Secretariat to the coalition, Equality Now provides coordination support for 15 member organizations from nine Arab states, and manages subgrants to seven organizations in six countries. We also provide training and technical expertise for legal and media advocacy campaigns, and support independent collaboration between our partners and youth activists.



- As a member of the **SOAWR Coalition**, we

<sup>4</sup> ACT Alliance, the Indian Muslim Women's Movement, PA Human Rights Movement Bir Duino (Kyrgyzstan), Legal Aid Society (Pakistan), Women for Equality and Justice (South Sudan), and Global Fund for Widows.

began supporting South Sudan to review its laws following its long-awaited ratification of the Maputo Protocol earlier in the year.



- We were approached by the **World Bank's Women, Business and the Law** team to formalize our partnership, and were invited by the World Bank's Legal Vice Presidency to speak at their annual flagship conference during Law, Justice and Development Week 2023.



- In anticipation of the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2025, we released a new six-part podcast, **We Change the Rules**, hosted by BBC journalist Samira Ahmed and featuring influential guest speakers such as Gloria Steinem, the former Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, and former head of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, as well as other leading experts.



- We saw 128 law students from 16 countries take part in the 2023 **Africa Gender Equality Moot Court Competition**. This event, which featured professional judges, scholars and women's rights advocates from 21 countries, aimed to encourage law students to explore legal careers around women's rights, focusing specifically on the Maputo Protocol in Africa.



Hurra Coalition members from across the Middle East and North Africa at the launch event in Qatar in September 2023



**Divya Srinivasan, Equality Now's Global Lead on Ending Harmful Practices outside the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva.**

# IN FOCUS

## Developing our global reach through the UN

laws has the power to disrupt systems and bring about change towards achieving legal equality. This requires coordinated efforts by activists, legal professionals, and decision-makers at the national, regional, and international levels – it's not something that any of us can do alone.

During 2023, we worked with regional and national partners in every part of the world to advocate for change, including by making a total of 38 submissions to UN treaty bodies, the Universal Periodic Review, regional bodies, UN special rapporteurs, and courts. To date 24 of these submissions have resulted in one or more of our recommendations being adopted by review committees during their concluding sessions.

This includes, for example, a joint submission to the UN Human Rights Committee about the dire situation regarding women's and girls' civil and political rights in Iran, which we made (along with the Centre for Supporters of Human Rights and Femena) on the eve of the first anniversary of Mahsa Amini's tragic death in custody after her arrest by Iran's 'morality police'.

Following this submission, we supported a representative from the Centre for Supporters of Human Rights to make an oral statement during the UN Human Rights Committee's formal briefing session in Geneva, reiterating our request that significant concerns be raised with the Iranian state. As a result, the Human Rights Committee adopted several of our recommendations, including calling on Iran to: repeal sex-discriminatory laws (specifically mentioning the law on the dress code and morality police); investigate and provide remedies for the human rights violations following the 2022 protests in the country; raise Iran's minimum age of marriage to 18 years for girls and boys; and strengthen local efforts to eradicate FGM.

Together with our partners – the ERA Coalition,

Unchained at Last, the US End FGM/C Network, and the Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRI) – we also made a joint submission to the UN Human Rights Committee for the same session in October 2023 where it considered the United States' Fifth Periodic Report. We supported the ERA Coalition to participate in the Committee's session in Geneva to make oral statements at their formal briefings with civil society before the dialogue with the US Government.

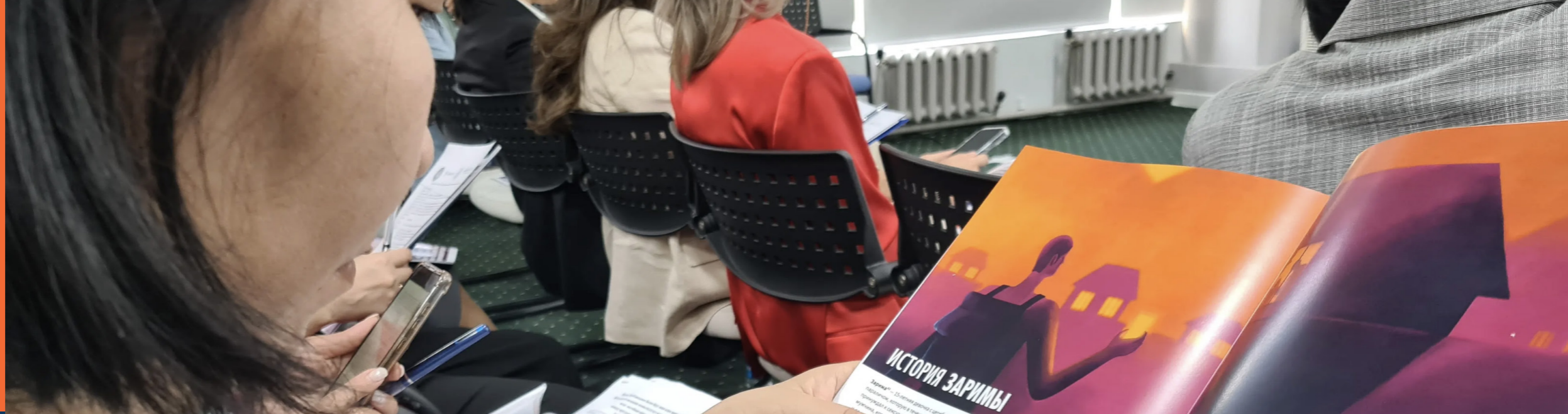
The Human Rights Committee's concluding observations, reflecting several of Equality Now's joint recommendations, called upon the US Government to: "guarantee protections against sex- and gender-based discrimination in its Constitution, including through initiatives such as the Equal Rights Amendment" and ratification of CEDAW; enact state laws against FGM and effectively implement the Stop FGM Act; and adopt measures at all levels to prohibit marriage under the age of 18.

Meanwhile, we continued to advocate for sex discriminatory law reform through our ongoing participation in the UN Women Equality in Law Advisory Committee. This enabled us to build valuable relationships and open up new opportunities for influencing – for example, both our Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law and the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights being featured in an event at the UN General Assembly on "Accelerating Action Toward Equality in Law for Women and Girls by 2030", which was attended by 400 people.





# ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE



**Sexual violence, including all forms of rape and sexual abuse committed within or outside of domestic settings, impacts millions of people around the world every day.**

While anyone can be a victim of sexual violence, structural misogyny and systematic inequality mean that women and girls are much more likely to experience sexual violence than men. During 2023, we continued to advocate for the implementation of better legal protections for those who we know are most at risk of sexual violence, while encouraging governments everywhere to improve access to both support and justice for survivors.

## KEY LEGAL AND POLICY CHANGES

Following advocacy from Equality Now with local NGOs, **Uzbekistan** increased legal protections for victims of sexual violence. As part of broader reforms to improve access for women and children to their rights, this legislation recognises and responds to the needs of the estimated 5.3 million<sup>5</sup> women in Uzbekistan who will face sexual violence in their lifetime.

In **Bahrain**, following years of advocacy and multiple joint submissions to the UN by Equality Now and our partners against “marry your rapist” discriminatory laws, the government agreed to cancel a provision allowing rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims, increasing protection against sexual violence for 168,000<sup>6</sup> women and girls in Bahrain.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the work of Equality Now and our partners led to a legal amendment preventing the termination of rape cases due to reconciliation of the parties, better protecting the 1.1 million<sup>7</sup> Kyrgyz women and girls who are at risk of experiencing sexual violence.

In **Kenya**, the government in Kwale County passed into law a comprehensive Sexual and Gender-based Violence bill, offering much greater protection to the estimated 99,000<sup>8</sup> Kwale women and girls that will face sexual or gender-based violence in their lifetime.

Following an invitation from the county government, Equality Now provided technical support in the development of the law and formed part of the drafting team for the law, which adopted the multi-sectoral approach (MSA) of collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and the public to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence. Kisumu County has subsequently invited Equality Now to support the development of their own SGBV laws.

Also in **Kenya**, our joint advocacy with local partners has led directly to improved access to justice for survivors of sexual violence, including through the establishment of specialized SGBV courts in Meru County and Busia (Port Victoria).

<sup>5</sup> Impact figures for each country based on relevant World Bank 2022 female population statistics and WHO Global 2021 statistics indicating that 30% of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partners violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

# OTHER POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

- In 2023, the positive impact of the previous year's landmark judgment by the Inter-American Court in the Brisa de Angulo case in **Bolivia**, which Equality Now worked on for over 15 years, continued to resonate. In mandating legal reforms, training for law enforcement, and concrete measures to prevent violence and hold perpetrators accountable, this progressive judgment set a powerful precedent, not only in Bolivia but throughout the wider region. We have already provided technical advice on four bills seeking reform following the judgment.
- In **Mexico**, we continue to provide technical assistance to stakeholders at the state level on draft bills proposing a consent-based definition of rape, while in **Argentina** our advocacy efforts have contributed to significantly increased collaboration between children's and feminist organizations, and helped secure a commitment by justice operators in Tucumán to address the risk factors for sexual violence and to improve access to justice for survivors.



- In **Kyrgyzstan**, following positive reception of our report on the intersection between gender, disability and sexual violence in the country, the government is preparing to collaborate on new recommendations on access to justice for women and girls with disabilities.



- In **Georgia**, advocacy by Equality Now and our partners has led to more judges interpreting sexual violence laws using international human rights standards, including by focusing on the lack of consent and considering more situations where victims are coerced or vulnerable.



- In **Sierra Leone**, our efforts to promote the MSA approach in the Bo and Kenema districts have led to an increase in both reporting and prosecution of sexual offenses, along with a significant reduction in the time taken to finalize investigations (from 14 to 7 days)



# IN FOCUS

## Promoting access to justice in South Asia

Building a bigger voice to address the much-neglected issue of sexual violence is critical not just in amplifying calls for change, but also in bringing together and strengthening advocacy in a shrinking civil society space, so network development was a key focus for us during 2023.

Regional alliances are developing and taking shape around the world, including in South Asia, with the South Asian Movement for Accessing Justice (SAMAJ). The development of SAMAJ came out of joint work between Equality Now and Dignity Alliance International on the report *Sexual Violence In South Asia: Legal And Other Barriers To Justice For Survivors*.

The network aims to address sexual violence against women and girls in South Asia by identifying and challenging gaps in existing laws and practices; improving access to services and support for survivors; promoting access to justice for marginalized groups; advocating for greater government accountability; and establishing and sustaining an inclusive and multi-sectoral movement to end sexual violence across the wider region.

Organizations representing Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives are already in the network and it is envisaged that membership will be expanded across the region, including member representatives from more marginalized areas and communities.

The network is already working on joint papers to share knowledge, good practice, and suggestions for change on issues of mutual concern and it will define a more detailed programme of work when it meets in person to officially launch SAMAJ in June 2024.



# ENDING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION



**Intersecting forms of systematic and structural discrimination mean that globally, it is women and girls who are most at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation.**

Throughout 2023, Equality Now continued to combine international advocacy with regional and national campaigns to ensure that governments address the socio-cultural and gendered drivers of sexual exploitation through enactment and implementation of legislative and policy measures, including within the digital realm.

## KEY LEGAL AND POLICY CHANGES

In the **UK** the Online Safety Act was finally brought into law, the final contents and wording of which were influenced by the advocacy efforts of Equality Now and many other organizations. Although not perfect, the Act includes explicit protections for the 6.8 million<sup>9</sup> women and girls (and rising!) in the UK who are likely to experience online abuse every year, such as provisions that criminalize tech-facilitated gender-based violence and mandate the provision of guidance by the designated national regulator.

In **South Africa**, our joint submission with the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women to the South African Department of Justice contributed to the halting, until after the next general elections, of a proposed prostitution law that would have fully decriminalized prostitution.

<sup>9</sup> Impact figures for each country based on relevant World Bank 2022 female population statistics and WHO Global 2021 statistics indicating that 30% of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partners violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.

## OTHER POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

- Through our **Global Building Bridges** campaign, we continued to provide valuable thought leadership through specialist legal and policy analysis on the gendered nature of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. The level of trust in our expertise and knowledge among stakeholders at different levels was evidenced throughout the year by the growing number of speaking requests and invitations we received to contribute to other organizations' advocacy.



- In **Europe**, our collective mobilization with partners resulted in some progress in the European Parliament on the subject of prostitution, such as the inclusion of several articles guaranteeing exit programs for women in prostitution and an agreement not to use the term “forced prostitution” in the final text of the European Parliament’s resolution on the regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women’s rights. We also contributed to calls to review the Anti-Trafficking Directive, so that it has stronger provisions to address the demand that drives sex trafficking.



- In 2023, the convening role of our **Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRi)** was fully established and its advocacy began to yield positive results, with a growing number of CSOs and UN agencies now following AUDRi’s strategy for advocating for a feminist-informed Global Digital Compact (GDC). Through events at CSW, Women Deliver, RightsCon, and one-to-one engagements, we secured strategic relationships with several governments, including Germany, Denmark, the US, Australia, Sweden, and Iceland; while Brazil committed to be the first AUDRi government champion.



- We continued to support the development of new laws relating to technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including as a critical partner of the Organization of American States **OAS/MESECVI** process to develop a model law informed by the expertise of CSOs and experience of survivors.

# IN FOCUS

## Collaboration in Kenya and Africa

During 2023, we continued working with local partners in Kenya and Malawi to hold governments in these countries accountable for their international and regional obligations.

In **Kenya**, alongside two local partners, Trace Kenya and LifeBloom, we continued working to strengthen legal protections, improve the implementation of laws, and enhance community understanding of the underlying causes of sexual exploitation, while supporting adolescent survivors to understand their rights and champion them in their own communities.

We continued to work in partnership with the International Association of Women Judges (Kenya Chapter) to research and produce a new Bench Book on sex trafficking, which is designed to support Kenyan judicial officers (for example, judges, magistrates, prosecutors, advocates, and probation officers) to better understand the law and dynamics of trafficking for sexual exploitation, and recognise survivors as victims, not perpetrators, of a crime.

We also secured an opportunity for Equality Now to collaborate on the reform of the Counter Trafficking in Persons Act, by providing survivor-informed recommendations to the Attorney General via the National Counter Trafficking in Persons Unit's Advisory Group.

In **Malawi**, after five years of effort with our partner, People Serving Girls at Risk (PSGR), we finally made significant progress on the case of 'Maggie' who we are supporting to access justice following her experience of being sex trafficked as a minor and then failed and further traumatized in the justice system.

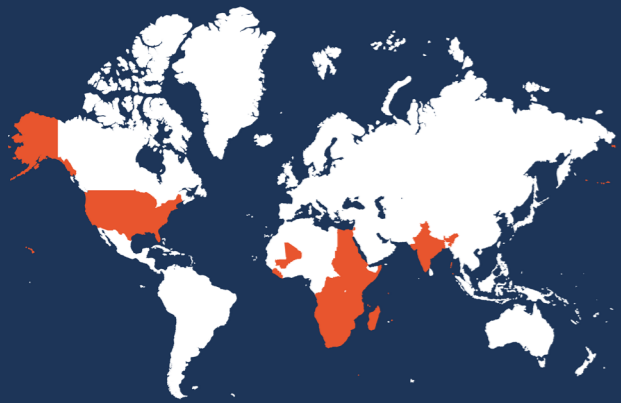
Maggie's case demonstrates numerous failures by the State, and it is clear that the justice system in Malawi is failing to fulfill its statutory and international law obligations, including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Following months of protracted dialogue with the Malawi government over the admissibility of our communication to the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), we finally participated in a hearing by the ACERWC that led to a request by the Malawian government for an amicable settlement of the matter.

Although we had not anticipated the amicable settlement route, given that it provides room to call for the implementation of the terms rather than a set of recommendations from the Committee (and combined with the fact Malawi has previously upheld its commitments in other cases under similar circumstances), our partner and we agreed to accept the request.

Our participation in this case has not only improved Maggie's chances of securing justice; it has also provided Equality Now with valuable insights into the rules and procedures of the Committee, increasing our likelihood of further positive engagement around other matters.



# ENDING HARMFUL PRACTICES



Safe Hands for Girls, Alhagie Manka

**Harmful practices are usually deeply rooted in culture, religion, or tradition, affording them a prevalence that affects women and girls in every part of the world.**

Despite the UN calling for the worldwide elimination of all harmful practices by 2030, many countries still lack adequate laws and policies to protect women and girls. In 2023, Equality Now strengthened its global collaboration efforts to push for all states to enact and implement effective laws and to be held accountable to their international obligations.

## KEY LEGAL AND POLICY CHANGES

In the **US**, our work in Washington State (including submitting written testimony to Senate and House Committees and galvanizing public support online) contributed to efforts led by the Washington Coalition to End FGM/C, which resulted in the enactment of anti-FGM legislation. This reduces the total number of US states without prohibition to nine, and protects the estimated 25,000<sup>10</sup> women and girls in the state who are at risk from FGM.

Also in the **US**, our campaigning against child marriage, and support to partners, including Unchained at Last, contributed to the states of Connecticut and Michigan joining the growing body of states and nations that have enacted the UNCRC commitment to raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 for all without exceptions, protecting an anticipated 265<sup>11</sup> girls each year from the dangers and harms of child marriage.

In **Zambia**, in what was a momentous stride towards safeguarding children's rights, the government passed the Marriage (Amendment) Act of 2023, unequivocally setting marriageable age at 18 for all without exception. In a country with an estimated 1.7 million<sup>12</sup> child brides, this law will be a critical tool in ongoing efforts to eradicate this harmful practice.

In **Liberia**, our collaboration with the UN Women Regional Goodwill Ambassador on Ending FGM to convene and advocate with traditional leaders led to a ground-breaking declaration being issued by the National Council of Chiefs and Elders to ban FGM in the country. We're hopeful that this declaration acts as a fillip for Liberian Parliament to take action on pending bills and pass a law specifically prohibiting FGM.

<sup>10</sup> Impact number based on Population Reference Bureau 2013 statistics (U.S. women and girls potentially at risk for FGM/C in Washington State).

<sup>11</sup> Impact number based on Unchained at Last progress map (number of minors wed per state in 2000-2021) and Frontline 2017 statistics (87% of minors married in 40 US states were girls).

<sup>12</sup> Figure based on UNICEF 2018 statistics.

## OTHER POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

- Globally, our campaigns against child marriage, combined with efforts by our local and regional partners around the world, contributed to the **UN Human Rights Council** adopting a strong resolution to address and end the practice of forced marriage. Following the continued strengthening of our advocacy toward addressing FGM as a global issue, we saw an increase in awareness of FGM among global actors, while the ongoing impact of our 2020 report **FGM/C: A Call for a Global Response**, published with the US End FGM/C Network and the End FGM European Network, continued to resonate.



- In partnership with UNFPA, we launched our **Regional and National Advocacy program to Accelerate Ending Child Marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa** to advocate for the implementation of a strong multi-sectoral approach to addressing child marriage in the ESA region, including domestication and implementation of the SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage. Over the year, we reached over 100 parliamentarians, highlighted child marriage in the region at the AU regional mechanisms, brought together over 60 CSOs to share learnings and contributed to national advocacy in Malawi and Uganda (as well as in Zambia, where our efforts helped secure a momentous move by the national government to increase the minimum age of marriage to 18 without exception).



- In **Kenya**, our ongoing engagement with the county governments to improve the implementation of laws and policies on FGM and child marriage led to the formation of anti-FGM Steering Committees and an increase in funding for the Gender Department in Kajiado.



- In **India**, we brought together CSOs to strategise on next steps for our anti-FGM campaign and to collect survivor stories from the Sunni Muslim community in Kerala (where the practice is not well-documented). We also hosted a side event at the Asia Pacific Population Conference to advocate for FGM to be taken up as a priority human rights issue across Asia.



- In **Kenya**, we partnered with the State Department for Gender and UN Women to advance Kenya's commitment under the Generation Equality Forum platform to end GBV in the country by 2026. Progress made to date includes an increase in state funding to end FGM, the revision of terms of contract to reflect the roles of state actors in addressing GBV, and the setting up of 12 specialized SGBV courts. With Kenya being a co-chair of the UN GEFGBV action coalition, such developments are critical to inform global progress.



- In **Liberia**, we mobilized civil society to conduct a joint review and legal analysis to inform the development of robust anti-FGM laws, while also engaging the Women Legislative Caucus at the Liberian Senate, along with the Vice-President of Liberia and the Minister for Gender, to support the development of a comprehensive enforcement mechanism.





# IN FOCUS

## Ending child marriage in the US

Child marriage is a human rights violation that legitimizes abuse and predominantly affects girls, yet it still remains fully or partially legal in 38 states in the US. We work alongside a wide range of partners in the US, as part of the National Coalition Against Child Marriage, to advocate that the minimum age for marriage be set at 18, with no exceptions.

In 2023, this campaign made significant progress, with state-level laws passed against child marriage in both Connecticut and Michigan. The contributions made by Equality Now have been instrumental in this outcome, including our provision of testimony and our amplification of our partner, Unchained at Last's work through digital and media channels.

Unchained at Last, which was set up by forced marriage survivor Fraidy Reiss, is the only organization in the US dedicated to providing direct support and advocating for legal change on this issue. We are supporting Unchained at Last to secure the passage of federal legislation and policy to end child marriage by connecting them with other national groups and coalitions, and by contributing our expert knowledge on international human rights law.

The value that our expertise brought to the campaign was clearly demonstrated in 2023 with the adoption by the UN Human Rights Committee of recommendations made by Equality Now as part of a joint submission regarding the lack of progress the US has made in addressing its ongoing violations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The Human Rights Committee echoed our concern that the vast majority of US states continue to legally permit child marriage, and called on the US "to adopt measures at all levels to prohibit marriage below the age of 18 years." Looking forward

In 2024, we will step up our work to use the law to bring about systemic change that ends discrimination against women and girls, strengthening our relationships with national and regional decision-makers and equipping our local partners to advocate for progressive legal and economic reform in every part of the world.

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Photo courtesy of [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org)



**Bárbara Jiménez Santiago, Regional Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean, at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York.**

# LOOKING FORWARD

In 2024, we will step up our work to use the law to bring about systemic change that ends discrimination against women and girls, strengthening our relationships with national and regional decision-makers and equipping our local partners to advocate for progressive legal and economic reform in every part of the world.

## ACHIEVING LEGAL EQUALITY

We will ensure that legal equality remains high on the global agenda, including by preparing for the 6th edition of our landmark Words & Deeds report, which analyses progress towards women's and girls' equality in marital, economic, personal status, and sexual violence law.

We will continue to build a visible and vocal global presence of the Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law, and actively engage with the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights to explore opportunities for a UN General Assembly resolution on equal nationality rights as follow-up to a successful Human Rights Council resolution in 2023.

We will continue to research and make joint submissions with partners to treaty bodies such as the CEDAW Committee, as well as to the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, the Commission on the Status of Women, and to UN Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups.

We also plan to organize side events at the Commission on the Status of Women to influence the drafting of the UN Global Digital Compact, and to raise issues on online sexual exploitation and abuse, family law, and the US Equal Rights Amendment.

We will continue to advocate for the ratification of the Maputo Protocol by the remaining 10 African Union member states. We will also continue to engage with the African Union human rights mechanisms, specifically the African Union Commission, the Pan African Parliament, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the AU Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa to advocate for implementation of the rights under the Maputo Protocol and to advocate for equal nationality rights in Africa.

## ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

With governments and others coming to us ever more frequently to ask for advice on laws and practices, it is clear that our expertise is being increasingly recognized and appreciated. In 2024, we will continue to elevate the issue of sexual violence and advocate for the critical importance of access to justice, while also building our evidence base to provide firmer foundations for our future work, including in Africa and MENA, and developing new tools and protocols to promote sharing of our expertise. Our particular focus will be on understanding the bias in the criminal justice system against women and girl survivors with disabilities and, together with a broad range of partners and experts, constructing protocols to address these.

We will officially launch the South Asian Movement for Accessing Justice (SAMA), engaging additional stakeholders to further explore issues of mutual concern and to define a detailed programme of advocacy.

We will invest in the strengthening of the Latin American network of legal experts on Sexual Violence and Access to Justice from Bolivia, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Brazil, Uruguay, and Guatemala, as well as the network of over 100 human rights organizations and individuals from 11 Eurasian countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan) dedicated to combating sexual violence and discrimination against women and girls.

We will continue to support the implementation in Bolivia of the landmark judgment by the Inter-American Court in the Brisa case, including by testing the judicial guidelines that we are producing with local partners under the terms of our MOU with the Gender Committee of the Judicial Branch of the Supreme Court, and by adapting these to other regional contexts.

Following our invitation from the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), we will support the Tanzanian government to comply with its international human rights obligations by ending its illegal ban on education for pregnant schoolgirls. This partnership is testament to a growing regional recognition of Equality Now as a forerunner in defending the rights of girls to education and ensuring their freedom from sexual violence.

## ENDING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

In 2024, we will consolidate and streamline our global advocacy work, integrating our Global Building Bridges campaign across three core areas of work (Be Net Positive; End Sexual Exploitation in Kenya; and Ending Sexual Exploitation in Malawi). Our analysis of the gendered and global nature of sexual exploitation and the continuum of sexual exploitation between the physical and digital spaces will be embedded across these three campaigns.

Through our Be Net Positive campaign, we will continue to advocate for a Global Digital Compact which incorporates feminist principles, while also strengthening AUDRI's ways of working; providing feminist intersectional analysis in global and regional processes and discussions around AI and emerging technologies, building survivor-informed evidence on what needs to change to address OSEA in Kenya, India and globally, and providing legal and technical support in the development of the MESECVI Model Law on technology-facilitated gender-based violence. In Kenya, we will advocate for legal changes to strengthen legislative responses to sexual exploitation (both offline and online), while also informing the approach taken by judicial officers and other court officials through the publication of a Bench Book on sex trafficking.

We will continue to support our local partners to empower girls who have experienced or are at risk of sexual exploitation. This includes bringing to conclusion Maggie's case before the ACERWC in Malawi, and subsequently supporting our local partners to ensure full implementation of the settlement agreement with the government.

## ENDING HARMFUL PRACTICES

With the most recent global data<sup>13</sup> showing a huge increase of 15% in the number of women and girls living with or at risk of FGM, the need for accelerated progress towards ending this practice globally is more pressing than ever. In 2024, our focus will be directed towards defending existing laws and preventing the rollback of women's rights in West Africa, including in The Gambia, where the first-ever conviction under anti-FGM law has sparked regressive debates and the introduction of a bill seeking to repeal the ban on FGM.

In Kenya, we plan to highlight the medicalization of FGM in Narok, advocate for the passage of amendments to the Prohibition of FGM Act, 2011, train more police and law enforcement on effective implementation of the anti-FGM law, and continue to strengthen CSO networks in Narok and Kajiado to ensure the sustainability of their advocacy efforts.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, we plan to raise awareness of the impact of child marriage and informal unions and to support advocacy for bills toward ending child marriage in Colombia and Argentina.

We also have five research projects on the agenda, including explorations of the prevalence and attitudes towards FGM within communities such as Sudanese refugees in Egypt and within the Sunni community in Kerala, India; a report on child and forced marriage in seven countries in Eurasia; research with Unchained At Last to show updated statistics on the prevalence of child marriage in the US; and a Strategic Litigation Report which will analyze learnings from key cases on FGM from across the world.

<sup>13</sup> Released by UNICEF in March 2024

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