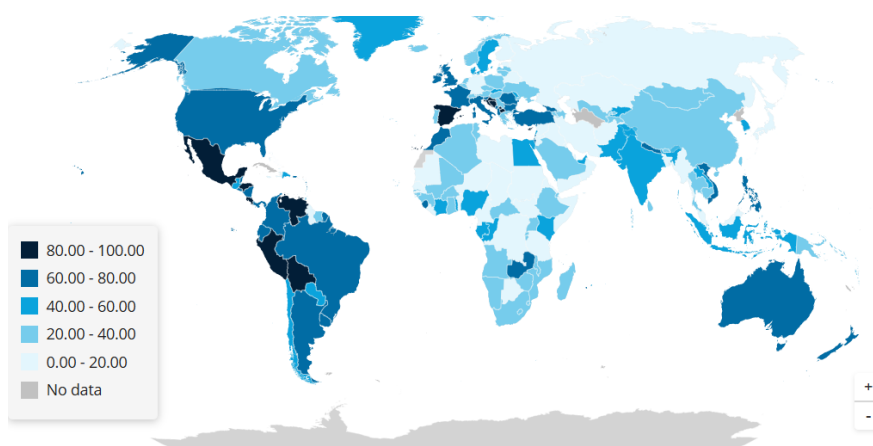


Legislation to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Women and Girls

Strong legal frameworks are critical for responding to cases of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and can contribute to violence prevention. *Women Business and the Law 2026* data show substantial worldwide gaps in laws addressing violence against women and girls.



WBL index legal frameworks scores measure the existence of legislation addressing child marriage, domestic violence, sexual harassment and femicide. Higher scores indicate stronger legal frameworks.

Why strengthen legal frameworks?

VAWG is a human rights violation—states have a duty to act. International law recognizes violence against women and girls (VAWG) as a form of discrimination and a violation of fundamental human rights. In its General Recommendations No. 19 and No. 35, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ([CEDAW](#)) Committee affirmed that states have an obligation to prevent, investigate, punish, and provide remedies for gender-based violence against women.

Strong legal protections can reduce VAWG. Comprehensive legal reforms that combine survivor protections, specialized services, and stronger institutional responses have caused measurable declines in violence against women, while also contributing over time to greater public condemnation of domestic violence and shifts in social norms.ⁱ Minimum age of marriage laws, particularly when paired with birth and marriage registration systems, can also reduce child marriage, especially among younger adolescents.ⁱⁱ Women's legal autonomy also matters. Reforms improving women's rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property ownership have led to lower rates of violence in countries including Spain, Rwanda, Egypt, and the United States.ⁱⁱⁱ

Violence against women is an economic issue. The economic costs of VAWG include constraints on women's access to education and labor market opportunities, reduced productivity, increased healthcare and social protection burdens, and negative impacts on the human capital of the next generation.^{iv}

Key actions to strengthen legal frameworks

Align legal frameworks with international standards. States should ensure that laws addressing VAWG are aligned with international human rights standards and consistent with their international legal commitments. International and regional legal frameworks provide guidance on core protections, survivor-centered approaches, accountability mechanisms, and states' obligations to prevent, investigate, punish, and remedy violence against women. These include [CEDAW](#), the 1994 [Belém do Pará](#), the 2003 [Maputo Protocol](#), and the 2011 [Istanbul Convention](#).

Pair legal reform with supportive institutions and enforcement frameworks. Effective enforcement is critical to ensure that legal protections are accessible in practice, violations are sanctioned, and survivors can seek justice safely and effectively. For child marriage, femicide, or sexual violence, legislation alone fails to have consistent impact where enforcement failures and institutional weaknesses persist.^v To be effective, laws addressing VAWG must clearly define prohibited conduct, provide enforceable remedies, and be supported by institutions, procedures, monitoring and accountability systems, and dedicated budgets for prevention, protection, and response that translate legal protections into practice. Governments should also invest in institutional capacity, including civil service personnel who can enforce women's legal autonomy, and specially trained police, prosecutors, judges, and health service providers equipped to respond effectively and sensitively to cases of violence against women.

- 1. Child marriage legislation** should establish 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage for both girls and boys, without exceptions. Legal frameworks should include remedies such as the voidability or annulment of underage marriages. Laws are most effective when paired with prevention measures. Strong evidence indicates that support for girls' access to and retention in education reduces rates of child marriage.^{vi}
- 2. Domestic violence legislation** should comprehensively address physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse and provide survivors with accessible protection measures and proportionate criminal sanctions. Laws are most effective when paired with survivor-centered procedures, clearly designated institutional responsibilities, and guaranteed access to services such as shelters, hotlines, legal aid, and psychosocial support.
- 3. Sexual harassment legislation** should clearly define prohibited conduct and apply across multiple settings, including workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces and transport, and online environments. Laws should provide accessible complaint and redress mechanisms, including confidentiality protections, protections against retaliation, and civil remedies. Comprehensive frameworks should also establish clear employer and institutional obligations.
- 4. Femicide legislation** should explicitly recognize femicide as the gender-related killing of women and girls, including killings by intimate partners and linked to prior patterns of violence. Legal frameworks should treat femicide as a distinct criminal offense or aggravating circumstance and establish investigation and prosecution procedures, include safeguards protecting surviving family members from intimidation, and ensure access to legal aid and support services.

Use global data sources to identify gaps in VAWG prevention frameworks. These include the [Women Business and the Law database](#), as well as the forthcoming Ending VAWG (EVAWG) Index soon to be launched by UN Women, Economist Impact, and Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI).

Further resources

ⁱ Costa et al. 2024; Ferraz and Schiavon 2022; Schneider and Piazza 2022; Mendoza 2024; Amin et al. 2021.

ⁱⁱ Gninafon 2024; Wilson 2022; Garcia-Hombrados 2022; McGavock 2021; Rokicki 2021. By increasing the age of marriage, these laws can also result in lower levels of IPV during adulthood for affected women (Gninafon 2024).

ⁱⁱⁱ Sanin 2025; Vardani 2025; Bhukta et al. 2024; Corradini and Buccione 2023; Anderson 2021; Fernandez-Kranz et al. 2021; Harari 2019; Amaral et al. 2017; Brassiolo 2016; Stevenson and Wolfers 2006. While there is strong support for the links between women's legal autonomy and reductions in VAWG, research shows that the reforms do not universally or automatically reduce VAWG (Bobonis et al 2025; Pisanelli 2024; Garcia-Ramos 2021; Hoehn-Velasco et al. 2020; Anderson and Genicot 2015).

^{iv} GBD Collaborators 2026; Ajayi et al. 2026; Anderberg et al. 2025; Adams-Praschl et al. 2024; Folke and Rickne 2022; Ouedraogo and Stenzel 2021; Hegewisch et al. 2021; Vyas et al. 2021; EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality) 2021; European Parliament 2021; Mitra et al. 2020.

^v See, for example Gutiérrez-Romero 2025.

^{vi} Giacobino et al. 2024; Deschênes and Hotte 2024; Yu et al. 2024; Sara and Priyanka 2023; Deschênes and Hotte 2023; Duflo et al. 2021; Weitzman 2018; Kirdar et al. 2018; Behrman et al. 2017.

***Full references available upon request.**

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