What a year 2020 has been. As COVID-19 has swept the globe, precious lives have been lost, inequalities laid bare, plans put on hold. Life has truly been turned upside down.

Here at Equality Now we’ve not been immune to the crisis. Like so many others, we’ve had to cancel crucial events, delay key campaigns, and make plenty of difficult decisions. But we are still here. And with the pandemic triggering a global rollback of human rights, our work is more crucial than ever. Throughout 2020, we saw women and girls around the world subjected to increased discrimination and violence: in Kenya, there was an explosion in child marriage as desperate families resorted to marrying off under-age daughters to ease expenses; in Russia, domestic violence rates shot up.

We responded by stepping up our unique combination of community mobilization, legal advocacy and partnership building, across every area of our work.

Achieving Legal Equality:
We drew attention to the urgent need for progressive family law reform through our part in the launch of the Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law, while the publication of our global advocacy report, which marks 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, has prompted governments around the world to acknowledge and change discriminatory laws.

Ending Harmful Practices:
We continued to advocate for the legal, systemic and cultural changes required to protect women and girls from harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. We listened to the lived experience of hundreds of women and girls to understand the full impact of the pandemic in the communities where these practices are routinely inflicted.

Ending Sex Trafficking:
With the pandemic leaving women and girls exponentially vulnerable to sexual exploitation, we coordinated a joint submission to the UN Secretary General, calling for prioritization of the needs of prostituted and trafficked women and girls. We also received long-awaited acknowledgement from the CEDAW Committee that a lack of appreciation of the gendered dimensions of sex trafficking is a key factor contributing to its widespread persistence.

Ending Sexual Violence:
We made significant progress towards our strategic objective to enhance legal protections and improve access to justice for survivors around the world. We published a report on caste-based sexual violence in India, including urgent recommendations for action, while our activism in Georgia led to meaningful engagement with both the government and the media regarding sexual violence, and our legal victory at the ECOWAS Court of Justice finally secured access to education for pregnant girls in Sierra Leone.

Alongside our outward-facing work, we reviewed our own policies to adapt and improve our advocacy. We developed a new policy statement on “Consent to Sex”, while sharpening up our organizational policy statements on Sexual Exploitation, FGM and Reproductive Rights.

At Equality Now, we know that women and girls everywhere have been harmed and held back by deep-rooted legal, cultural and systemic discrimination since long before COVID-19 came along. The virus didn’t create inequality—it simply turned up the volume.

We are determined to ‘build back fairer’. By taking this unique opportunity to challenge and support governments everywhere to address systematic discrimination, we will continue to use the power of the law to create enduring equality for women and girls everywhere. Thank you for all that you have done to create a gender equal world.

In solidarity,

Yasmeen Hassan
Global Executive Director
Equality Now
In numbers

- Worked in tandem with 84 partners across 45 countries
- Reached over 4.5 billion people through media and social media
- Activated our 260,000-strong digital activist base to call for change
- Positively impacted 96,514 girls through legal change

**In numbers**

- **12** Provided expert support for 12 litigation cases challenging sex discriminatory laws
- **47** Led 47 campaigns across our four thematic areas
- **4.5 billion** Reached over 4.5 billion people through media and social media
- **96,514** Positively impacted 96,514 girls through legal change
- **66** Submitted 66 expert submissions to the UN and regional bodies advocating for law and policy reform across all of our focus areas
- **6** Published 6 major reports across our thematics
- **260,000** Activated our 260,000-strong digital activist base to call for change
- **45** Worked in tandem with 84 partners across 45 countries
At Equality Now, we protect and promote the rights of women and girls by encouraging governments everywhere to ensure that their laws do not discriminate on the basis of sex.

During 2020, we worked hard to keep global attention on sex discriminatory laws, with a special focus on family and constitutional law. We continued to hold governments around the world accountable to their international obligations, by highlighting the discriminatory laws that still remain 25 years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action.

**KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2020**

**Overturning more sex discriminatory laws**

Following publication of our global advocacy report *Words & Deeds - Holding Governments Accountable in the Beijing +25 Review Process* in March 2020, governments around the world acknowledged and changed a number of sex discriminatory laws. For example, in Syria, Article 548 of the Penal Code, which provided a much lesser penalty for “honor killings” than for murder, was repealed. In Switzerland, parental leave laws were amended to provide 10 days of paid paternity leave for men, with the government also committing to undertake a general review of sex inequality in Swiss federal law.

**Highlighting the urgent need for family law reform**

The launch of our Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law drew attention to the urgent need for progressive family law reform. The campaign brings together diverse civil society leaders, UN agencies and government allies to identify, challenge and end discriminatory laws concerned with marriage, divorce, custody of children, and other laws that affect family life. Establishing this campaign is a vital first step in tackling one of the most difficult remaining hurdles in achieving true gender equality.

**Protecting the constitutional rights of women in the US**

As a member of the ERA Coalition, Equality Now has been instrumental in the ERA Coalition’s long-running campaign to secure constitutional equality for women in the US. In June 2020, we supported litigation demanding that the government finally certify and incorporate the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) into the US Constitution. This case, which is ongoing, was featured in an article in the National Law Journal and in an op-ed by Ms. Magazine. The campaign has also led to the passing by the US House of Representatives of a bill eliminating the deadline for ratification of the ERA and awaits action by the Senate.
LOOKING FORWARD

- We will continue to advocate for reform of discriminatory law in our Beijing +25 Words and Deeds report (published every five years) and through our associated campaign.

- As a founding Coordination Committee member of the Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law, we will seek to secure further funding to support international, national and regional efforts to reform family law.

- As Secretariat and member of the Solidarity for African Women’s Rights (SOAWR) Coalition, we will work to develop the next generation of advocates for the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the ‘Maputo Protocol’), with a view to encouraging the final 13 States to ratify, as well as advocating for region-wide implementation of the protocol.
Defending hard-won anti-FGM laws

We played a lead role in FGM litigation in Kenya, where a petitioner had contested the constitutionality of the Prohibition of FGM Act 2011, by coordinating submissions from partners to establish a strong, coherent position by civil society in support of the law. In March 2021, Kenya’s High Court ruled in the favour of Kenyan women and girls - that the anti-FGM law is constitutional.

Raising the age of marriage to 18 in the US

Two more US states, Pennsylvania and Minnesota, took action within a week of each other to ban child marriage, setting the age of marriage at 18, with no exceptions, and bringing the total number of US states with full bans on child marriage to four (the others are Delaware and New Jersey). These victories followed years of hard work by our partners Unchained At Last and other organizations and activists, including testimony submitted by Equality Now.

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LOOKING FORWARD

- We will continue to advocate for greater recognition of the global nature of FGM, and to support our grassroots partners in India, Russia and the US to encourage their governments to accept responsibility for addressing FGM in these countries.

- We will implement a renewed strategy on ending FGM in West Africa, with a focus on tackling cross-border FGM, and consolidating collective efforts by West African civil society organizations and women’s rights organizations to end FGM.
At Equality Now, we work to identify laws and practices that enable sex trafficking and sexual exploitation to continue with impunity, and work to change them.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the structural inequalities and systemic failures that so often lead to women and girls becoming exposed to sex trafficking and prostitution, and accelerated the emergence of online sexual exploitation. During 2020, we worked with partners around the world to advocate for an urgent response from governments everywhere to better protect women and girls and to bring those who exploit them to justice.

**KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2020**

**Establishing gendered narratives on sex trafficking and sexual exploitation**

In November 2020, CEDAW adopted a new General Recommendation on Trafficking of Women and Girls, acknowledging for the first time that widespread trafficking in women and girls persists because of a lack of appreciation of the gendered dimensions of trafficking.

The development of this General Recommendation was informed by many contributions over the past two years from Equality Now and our partners. It is a big win for all of us, providing a strong basis for our future advocacy calling on states to address the systemic inequality which leads to vulnerability of women and girls to sexual exploitation.

**Amplifying the voices of survivors during the pandemic**

In April, we coordinated the drafting and submission of a letter to the UN Secretary General, signed by over 200 organizations and 20 survivors, calling for prioritization of the needs of prostituted and trafficked women and girls, whose situation has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.
Preventing online sexual exploitation

The problem of online sexual exploitation and abuse against women and girls grew exponentially throughout 2020 as people across the world moved online during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In May, we organized a webinar bringing together gender, legal and technological experts to explore different perspectives on the issue of online sexual exploitation and abuse. In June, we called upon UN Women to champion gendered and feminist research and analysis, to better understand the ever-changing role of the internet in facilitating sexual abuse and exploitation, and to promote the identification of solutions.

Expediting justice for trafficked girls in Malawi

In Malawi, we supported a partner organization, People Serving Girls at Risk, to secure a commitment from the government to prioritize sex trafficking cases in the justice system. We also supported its engagement with the Malawi Human Rights Commission and the Department of Public Prosecution on the case of 18-year-old Maggie*, whose case against those who trafficked her for sexual exploitation as a minor in 2018 is still ongoing.

LOOKING FORWARD

- We will continue to support our local partner in Malawi to secure swift justice for trafficked girls, while also providing Maggie* with ongoing legal and psychological support through our Adolescent Girls’ Legal Defense Fund.

- We will finalise and publish a groundbreaking report on laws surrounding online sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls, including an analysis of laws in the UK, the US, Kenya, Nigeria and India, as well as international and EU regional laws.
At Equality Now, we work to end sexual violence by challenging the laws, policies and attitudes that render sexual violence ‘acceptable’ and which stigmatize the victims.

During 2020 we made significant progress towards enhancing legal protections and improving access to justice for survivors, with an ongoing focus on adolescent girls. We continued to promote the implementation of international law and human rights at the regional and national levels, while also bringing together experts and engaging productively with law-makers, media outlets and partner organizations around the world.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2020

Exploring the intersection between sexual violence and caste in India

In November 2020, in collaboration with the Swabhiman Society, we launched a report on caste-based sexual violence in India. The report describes the various barriers faced by survivors of sexual violence from the Dalit community in Haryana, and presents urgent recommendations to the Indian and Haryana State Governments for taking action to end caste-based sexual violence.

Changing attitudes to sexual violence in Georgia

Our ongoing work to combat sexual violence in Georgia has led to meaningful engagement with both the government and the national media. Following publication of our Roadblocks report, which outlined the challenges in the criminal justice system and the legislation of Georgia in addressing sexual crimes, as well as our advocacy with treaty bodies and our engagement with local stakeholders and media, we were asked by MPs in Georgia to provide a legal analysis of a consent-based definition of rape, with a view to amending the law.

Securing access to education for pregnant girls in Sierra Leone

In March 2020, following a successful case filed by Equality Now’s partner, WAVES, at the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Sierra Leone finally lifted a long-standing ban denying pregnant girls access to education. This year, for the first time since the ban was put in place, pregnant schoolgirls in Sierra Leone have been allowed to sit for their final exams – a big step in the promotion of equal rights to education for girls.

Championing the rights of survivors with disabilities

Our first ever submission to the UN Disabilities Committee, regarding sexual violence in Georgia, was subsequently highlighted on the committee’s List of Issues to the government.
LOOKING FORWARD

- We will support the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women to develop a pioneering ‘model law’ on rape.

- We will release a report on sexual violence laws and practices in the Americas, as well as launching a regional campaign to remove discrimination within the legal system against survivors of sexual violence, particularly adolescent girls.

- We will work with UN Women and the Council of Europe, in collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and General Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia, to develop a manual on the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of sexual violence crimes for the government of Georgia, with a view to replicating this in neighbouring countries.

- We will invite girls and young women from affected communities in Georgia to share their stories of child/forced marriage for a publication with recommendations on how to address the issue, with a view to influencing attitudes as well as legislation.

- We will seek justice for pregnant schoolgirls in Tanzania, through the continuation of our case filed at African Court of Human and Peoples’ Rights in November 2020.

- We will work with civil society and the government of Sierra Leone to ensure that the success of the case securing pregnant girls their right to education is followed up with sustained action.
Holding governments accountable to their legal obligations has always been a central part of the work we do at Equality Now. In this special report, we reveal how the team in our Africa office is adopting a cross-sector, multi-agency approach to turn legislative progress into fairer policies and practices for women and girls in Kenya.

Over the past 25 years, Kenya has made substantial progress in advancing gender equality, including through the introduction of more robust laws surrounding sexual violence, the criminalization of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), and the legal protection of women’s rights to education, citizenship and matrimonial property ownership.

Despite this progress, women and girls across all 47 counties in Kenya continue to face statistically high levels of violence, discrimination and inequality within all spheres of life.

With a lack of knowledge and resources historically leading to poor coordination between departments at both national and county level, along with a patriarchal culture in which the implementation of gender-progressive policy is rarely prioritized, past efforts to enforce the laws designed to protect women and girls have typically been ineffective.

Of course, this is not a problem unique to Kenya—commitment on paper is never enough. While creating a safer, fairer world for women and girls begins with legal change, achieving meaningful gender equality requires sustained cooperation both within and across government and civil society. With this in mind, Equality Now Africa has begun working alongside the Kenyan government to promote a more collaborative approach to gender equality in the country, using a pioneering model called the Multi-Sectoral Approach.

The Multi-Sectoral Approach (MSA) involves a deliberate collaboration between all relevant stakeholders—including the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government—to jointly achieve a policy outcome. First developed as a tool to implement national public health strategies and manage humanitarian emergencies such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it can facilitate coordination between agencies, optimise allocation of resources and streamline access to services.

Central to the approach is the identification of ‘duty-bearers’—the officials, departments and institutions that are responsible for upholding or fulfilling various legal rights and obligations. By training local partners to identify and access these duty-bearers, while also providing expert-led training and support to the duty-bearers themselves and coordinating regular meetings between all stakeholders, it is possible to create lasting, meaningful change.

Inspired by the promotion of the MSA in 2010 by UN Women, the team in our Africa office originally employed the approach in the context of their ongoing work as part of the Solidarity for African Women’s Rights Coalition (SOAWR), supporting governments to uphold their commitments under the African Protocol on the Rights of Women (the ‘Maputo Protocol’).

The team’s successful implementation of this approach, along with ongoing advocacy for the adoption of the approach to improve gender equality in Kenya, led to an invitation from the Kenyan government in 2020 to pilot the Intergovernmental Framework for Gender in six counties, a nationwide MSA-based plan to accelerate delivery on commitments for women’s rights.

The pilot project is being implemented over three years by Equality Now, with support from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in six Kenyan counties—Busia, Kajiado, Kisumu, Kwale, Malezuni and Narok—with a view to rolling it out more widely as part of the Kenyan government’s commitment to end gender-based violence in the country by 2026.
Education and training around cases of rape

We contracted experts to deliver specialist training to doctors, police officers, social workers, prosecutors and local administrators in handling the detection, reporting, investigation and prosecution of cases involving sexual violence. This has led to better treatment for survivors at every stage of the legal process, including:

- During investigation, police officers are organizing their office layout to ensure better privacy and, in some cases, escorting women to medical facilities.
- During prosecution, more survivors are now able to testify against perpetrators in private, reducing the risk of further traumatization.
- It is now compulsory for an investigating officer to visit the crime scene in cases of sexual violence (previously, this was optional).
- In Busia county, funds have now been allocated for a government-sponsored safe house to better protect survivors.

Encouraging collaboration

The various platforms that have been established as part of the MSA pilot project, including regular face-to-face meetings coordinated by Equality Now Africa, have facilitated information exchange among duty-bearers and other stakeholders. This has led to:

- Improved connections between police and external partners that can provide additional response services, such as specialist counseling and emergency accommodation for survivors of incest and sexual violence.
- Better protections for survivors of sexual violence during legal proceedings – for example, perpetrators have had their bail revoked after concerns for the safety of their victims were raised in MSA platform meetings.
- Enhanced communication between all parties involved in court cases – with some cases dragging on for years, in the past it has been common for crucial files to be ‘lost’ – thus preventing survivors from seeing their abusers held to account. One of our MSA platforms was instrumental in advancing a rape case involving two girls (aged seven and eight), which had previously been adjourned five times due to a ‘missing file’. As a result of discussion of this case at our MSA platform meeting, an advocate was engaged, the file was found, and justice was secured for the girls.
- More reliable channels through which to identify malpractice. Investigations following reports received through our platforms have resulted in the warning and investigation of local administrators who were interfering in rape cases, serving as a warning to others and ultimately improving the integrity of the system.

SUCCESSES SO FAR

Our approach has resulted in significant progress being made in terms of preventing and responding to gender-based violence across each of the six counties involved.
Direct intervention

We ensure that justice is upheld even in the most complex and lengthy cases. We currently have 59 cases pending in court, seven of which have been running for more than two years and many of which involve survivors who are no longer minors.

- We intervened in a case where a rape charge had been changed by the police to a charge of assault – a lesser offence carrying a significantly reduced sentence for the perpetrator. By bringing this case to the attention of the MSA platform, we ensured that the original rape charge was reinstated and the perpetrator held to account.

- During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we worked with local MSA partners to successfully locate 24 adolescent girls who had been forced into pregnancy and nine who had been forced into marriage; we subsequently rescued them, facilitated their return to school and brought relevant charges against their perpetrators.

Overcoming challenges

While the multi-sectoral approach has been transformative, it is not a panacea to all problems – in Kenya or elsewhere. The team at Equality Now Africa faced many political, cultural and logistical barriers in establishing the approach, while resourcing and monitoring its implementation remains an ongoing challenge.

Cultural drivers of sexual violence and discrimination are particularly strong in Kenya, as they are in many countries in Africa. Women are often viewed as inferior to men, with the relatively recent advancement of legal equality in social, political and economic spheres taking a long time to translate into everyday life.

There have also been varying levels of commitment from officials, along with inevitable pockets of corruption – however these issues are not universal, and are far outweighed by the commitment and motivation of the vast majority of stakeholders involved in the project.
Looking Ahead

Since the launch of the project, the team at Equality Now Africa has supported partners in each county to develop their own MSA platforms and networks — some of which are now operating independently.

The team also continues to advocate for implementation of MSA-based, gender equality-focused frameworks at a national level. Some progress has already been made — in 2020, Kenya’s National Police Service launched ‘Policare’, a centre designed to offer survivors of gender-based violence access to police officers, forensic investigators, doctors, psychologists, prosecutors, magistrates, lawyers, gender experts, and correctional personnel, all under one roof.

This is exactly the kind of result that MSA training is designed to achieve. By supporting the government and other stakeholders to take ownership of the approach, Equality Now Africa is catalysing meaningful, sustainable change with the potential to benefit Kenyan girls and women for generations to come.