

IMPACT REPORT 2022



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FOREWORD



In 2022, the world witnessed a dramatic erosion of the rights and freedoms of women and girls, including in Afghanistan, Iran, Ukraine, the US, and many other nations. It was a striking reminder of the precarity of hard-fought progress, and one that underscored the importance and value of lasting legal reform in unlocking the potential of generations of women and girls.

For more than a decade, my predecessor Yasmeen Hassan harnessed the power of legal reform to advance a bold vision and a vital body of work to improve millions of lives in every corner of the world. It was with immense gratitude for her leadership and perseverance that I took up the torch as Equality Now's Global Executive Director at the end of 2022.

My arrival coincided with a new phase in the organization's growth and development, with the launch of an ambitious new strategy for 'Future Proofing Equality.' All of our work has since been guided by this strategy, underpinned by our three strategic objectives:

- **Globalize:** To adapt our approach so that we can continue to respond to new threats and find better solutions to entrenched issues.
- **Galvanize:** To create a stronger and more sustainable women's rights movement by increasing our engagement with activists, decision-makers, and funders.
- **Lead:** To strengthen our global infrastructure so that we can meet increasing demands for our work as One Equality Now.

In 2022, we continued to call out discriminatory laws and set better precedents through strategic litigation (see Brisa's Story on p30), while stepping up our focus on collaboration by bringing diverse partners together around common causes, amplifying grassroots efforts and giving those most profoundly affected by inequality a more powerful collective voice.

Changing social norms, upending harmful systems, and holding governments accountable requires persistence, collective power, and long-term investments.

As I lead Equality Now into the next phase of its journey, I am committed to embracing the unique value of every part of the wider gender equality ecosystem – starting with the women and girls at its heart.

If we are to meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goal of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030, it is those who live with the daily consequences of gender discrimination to whom we must first listen; and it is they who must determine the policies and legal frameworks we use to eradicate violence, to eliminate exploitation, and to end practices that inhibit the autonomy and agency of all women and gender minorities.

I hope you will join me in celebrating our progress in 2022, while looking ahead with renewed hope and determination as we continue to strive for a just and equal world – for everyone.

In solidarity,

S. Mona Sinha

S. MONA SINHA
Global Executive Director,
Equality Now

INTRODUCTION

Every day, women and girls around the world face violence and discrimination.

1 in 3 women will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, regardless of age or background, and almost every country in the world has laws that treat women and girls as second-class citizens. Sexual exploitation, violence, harmful cultural practices and systemic inequalities violate their human rights and prevent them from reaching their potential.

This inequality is bad for everyone, not just for women and girls. Conversely, research shows that when women and girls are treated fairly, there is less societal conflict and more economic stability. At Equality Now, we believe that legal equality is critical for achieving gender equality and creating a better world for everyone.

Our vision

We envisage a world in which human rights are fully protected and where everyone can enjoy equal treatment under the law, regardless of their gender.

We combine legal expertise with strategic advocacy and constructive collaboration, to achieve legal and systemic change across four key areas:

- **Achieving Legal Equality**
- **Ending Sexual Violence**
- **Ending Sexual Exploitation**
- **Ending Harmful Practices**

OUR IMPACT

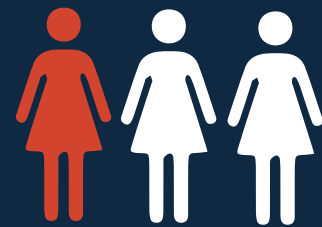
Our impact in 2022

We worked in collaboration with **147 partners** across **34 countries** and launched **16 key publications**.

We made a total of **22 submissions** to UN treaty bodies or Universal Periodic Review (UPR) committees, **19** of which have been considered to date. Of these, **13** resulted in **more than 50% of our recommendations** being adopted by review committees during concluding sessions.

We contributed directly to changing **12** discriminatory laws and policies around the world, including in Kenya, Liberia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Bolivia, Nepal, Cuba, Benin, and the US.

More than half (**55%**) of the discriminatory laws around which we've campaigned since 1999 have been fully or partially reformed.



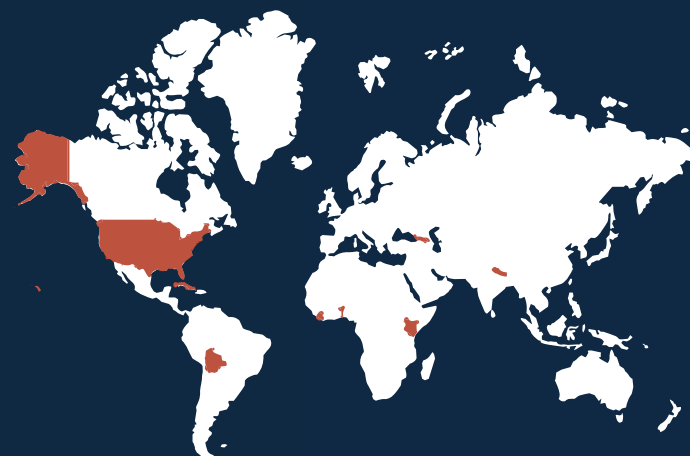
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Only **12** out of **190**
ECONOMIES
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in 2022



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to date (June 2023)



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ACHIEVING LEGAL EQUALITY

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

We believe that legal equality is critical to achieving gender equality, yet almost every country in the world has laws that treat people differently on the basis of sex.

The global context

- **85%** of UN Member States in the world have constitutions that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex and/or gender. The United States is not one of them.
- Only **12 out of 190** economies had achieved legal equality in 2022, with a typical economy granting women **just 75%** of the rights that are enjoyed by men.¹

Our impact in 2022

In 2022, we continued to encourage all governments to end legal discrimination on the basis of sex, including through our Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law. We strengthened coalitions and seeded new movements to advocate for better laws, while the application of our expertise in international law led to systemic legal change on the ground.

Key legal and policy changes:

- Cuba, where nearly a third of girls are married before the age of 18, **approved a very progressive new family code** that eliminates exceptions to the minimum age of marriage—a change with the potential to **benefit nearly 290,000 girls** in the country who were formerly at risk of being married as children.
- Benin **reformed its nationality law** to allow both men and women to transmit their nationality unconditionally to their children.
- Liberia **reformed a discriminatory law** that prevented unmarried mothers from passing on their nationality to children born outside the country.



ACHIEVING LEGAL EQUALITY

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS



Other positive developments:

Generation Equality (UN Women) recognized our contribution to “transformational change” in the **MENA** region through the Hurra coalition partners’ campaigns on family law reform.

In the **USA**, the House of Representatives recognized the validity of the Equality Rights Amendment (ERA) following the ratifications by the necessary number of states by passing the deadline elimination bill. As a member of the ERA Coalition and through our ongoing involvement in a related court case, we filed a joint amicus brief with organizations from around the world at the beginning of 2022, and continued to raise awareness through our I Need the ERA campaign, speaking engagements, and support of VoteEquality’s grassroots bus tour to **North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia** to achieve more state ratifications.

In the **Bahamas**, following the identification in our Words & Deeds advocacy report of a law that explicitly allows marital rape and offers perpetrators impunity, a new bill is now pending to amend the relevant provision—including by adding a definition of consent.

Likewise, **Sri Lanka** developed a Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act reform package, which would give equal rights to women and is now pending in parliament, while India’s top court ruled that “intimate partner violence is a reality and can take the form of rape”. We hope this will lead to marital rape being outlawed and will continue to highlight it, including to UN treaty bodies.

Partners and young women in our Power of Women (YW4A) project in **Kenya, South Sudan, Palestine** and **Egypt** have gained critical skills in legal advocacy and leverage of international law, and are leading advocacy campaigns in their communities and countries.

At a regional level, we saw ratification by The **Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)** of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), leaving just 12 counties still to ratify. Positive indications have been given by government representatives of **Morocco** and **Egypt** of steps toward ratification, while South Sudanese government officials continue to engage in related discussions.

In response to the murder of Mahsa Amini for not “properly” wearing the hijab, we led and coordinated a joint oral statement, on the case and reports of sexual violence committed against protestors of her death at the Human Rights Council, in support of a resolution and the need for a UN independent fact-finding mission. We continued to highlight the need for reform of Iran’s discriminatory laws and the UN Human Rights Committee reflected this in their List of Issues for Iran in advance of their dialogue with them scheduled for late 2023.

Across the **Middle East and North Africa (MENA)** region, our campaigning work has led to a marked reduction in the taboo on discussion around reformation of religious family laws. In **North Africa**, Moroccan activists are seeking to further the Mudawwana (the family law of 2004), identifying gaps in it and seeking to make it more aligned with CEDAW. In **Egypt**, there have been calls for the reform of family law and criticism of existing draft laws that are not up to international standards. In **Lebanon**, where religious sectarianism is very strong, leading NGOs are campaigning for the reform and replacement of religious family laws.

ACHIEVING LEGAL EQUALITY

IN FOCUS

MENA

STRENGTHENING LEGAL ADVOCACY IN MENA THROUGH THE HURRA COALITION

The term *Al Hurra*, meaning “free woman” in Arabic, encapsulates the ethos of the Hurra Coalition, a network of **15 partners** working in **3 sub regional groups** across **10 countries** in the **Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region**, brought together by Equality Now to advocate for reforms around child marriage, custody law and the financial rights of women. Throughout 2022, we worked hard to grow and consolidate the Hurra Coalition, driven by our firm belief in the value of regional networking and mutual collaboration to build solidarity.

We brought together coalition members in person from across nations and regions, to increase the efficacy of their campaigns through peer-to-peer learning. This enabled a successful collaboration to develop between our partners in **Morocco** and **Tunisia**, both of whom were working on national campaigns around domestic violence and divorce law.

By demonstrating to policy-makers the successful application of progressive laws, the Moroccan partner was able to put the issue of custody by divorced mothers onto the national agenda.

We delivered training to build the competence and the capacity of our coalition partners, including Main Libres, a Hurra Coalition member from Morocco, who used knowledge and skills gained from the training to inform plans for its 16 Days of Activism activity programme.

Other coalition partners have applied our training content to inform the development and implementation of youth programs in universities and rural areas in **Lebanon, Jordan**, and **Palestine**, including our Lebanese partner LECORVAW, who worked directly with young survivors of sexual violence to develop and deliver awareness sessions for school girls in **Tripoli, Northern Lebanon**, in the face of significant resistance from school administrators.

We strengthened the advocacy efforts of our individual partners by offering them a collective voice with which to campaign on larger issues, such as the link between child marriage and climate change—an issue raised by one of our partners as a delegate at **COP 27 in Egypt**. We also facilitated crisis support through the coalition, including in response to attacks by religious leaders on our Palestinian partner, to whom other coalition members offered international platforms “safe from the physical attacks of conservative elements in Palestine.”

“Through the Hurra Coalition, Equality Now has given women’s rights organizations from across the MENA region a powerful opportunity to be part of a collective, strategic movement to address discrimination and injustice against women and girls. The network has gone from strength to strength in 2022, developing into an effective advocacy group with a diverse membership that spans countries, religions, ages, and cultural backgrounds.”

*Dima Dabbous,
Equality Now Regional
Representative, MENA*



ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Sexual violence is a form of gender-based violence that can only be eliminated by tackling the root causes of sexism.

The global context

Across their lifetime, **1 in 3** women, around **736 million**, are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner.²

Our impact in 2022

In 2022, we continued to challenge the laws, policies and attitudes that render sexual violence 'acceptable' and which stigmatize victims and survivors around the world. We continued our strategic litigation of a rape case in Bolivia, which in January 2023 culminated in a **landmark ruling that set a legal precedent** with the potential to change rape laws throughout the Americas, ensuring that more survivors are able to access justice and that more perpetrators are held to account (see Brisa's Story on p30).

Key legal and policy changes:

- In **Kyrgyzstan**, a new Human Rights action plan was presented, which includes undertakings to amend the definition of rape and ensure mandatory prosecutions.
- The Adult Survivor Act was passed into **New York state law** in the USA.
- In **Mexico**, our recommendations and guidelines for drafting laws based on consent were adopted into a federal Bill, which was presented in the Senate's Judicial and Legislative Studies Commissions. We continue to defend this bill and to encourage legislators in Mexico City and **Oaxaca State** to draft similar state-level bills.
- In **Nepal**, our partnership work with the Forum for Women Law and Development led to the amendment of the country's sexual violence laws, including an explicit direction in the preamble of the Bill for the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs to undertake comprehensive reforms to sexual violence laws (see 'In focus' on p16-17).
- Following our involvement in a high-profile rape case in **Bolivia**, the Inter-American Court on Human Rights adopted our recommendations for adopting 'lack of consent' as the central proof in crimes of sexual violence, eliminating the discriminatory criminal offense of estupro and creating comprehensive protocols to better investigate, protect and support child and adolescent victims of sexual violence.
- In the **USA** the Violence Against Women Act was reauthorized, amending the federal statutory rape law exception for (child) marriage.



ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS



Other positive developments:

Following specialization trainings delivered by Equality Now and partners to investigators, prosecutors, judges and lawyers in **Georgia** (based on the manual developed in partnership with UN Women and Council of Europe), the number of prosecutions for sexual violence cases in the country increased by **76% (from 143 to 252 cases)**, with an increase in prosecution of previously overlooked cases – including those involving coercion and a lack of consent – meaning that approximately **100 women have directly benefited** from the development and application of our work in 2022 alone. The number of convictions for sexual violence also increased by **44%**.

In **Sierra Leone**, our work with local partners has led to an increase in the progression of cases to court from the Family Support Unit, with investigations now being conducted according to law and with guidance from the State Counsels in **Bo** and **Kenema** through regular case review meetings. Time taken to investigate cases has also been halved from up to **14 days to 7 days**.

In **Kenya**, the change in county governments enabled us to gain new allies and deepen our existing relationships, with a view to scaling up action toward prevention and response.

In the **Maldives**, working alongside our local partners we made significant progress in engaging with government stakeholders with a view to addressing sexual violence, improving access to justice for survivors, and holding perpetrators to account.

In **Uzbekistan**, where national legislation on sexual violence falls below international human rights standards, we began working with a local partner on a three-year project to furnish civil society organisations with tools that will enable them, as rights holders, to make informed strategic actions to bring about change in laws and the criminal justice system.

ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

IN FOCUS

NEPAL

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO JUSTICE FOR RAPE SURVIVORS IN NEPAL

Nepal has the shortest statute of limitations in **South Asia**, with victims of sexual violence given just one year to report a crime. In May 2022, a 24-year-old Nepalese model posted a video on TikTok, in which she disclosed that she had been repeatedly raped when she was 16, but that Nepal's short statute of limitations were now preventing her from accessing justice. Shortly afterwards, the Human Rights Committee highlighted the issue in its review of a case involving the torture, rape, and murder of a 16-year-old Nepalese girl, noting that Nepal's short statute of limitations "is not commensurate with the gravity of such crime."

Working closely with our local partner, the Forum for Women Law and Development (FWLD), we organized a meeting with the Nepalese government to urge it to amend its statute of limitations to comply with its international human rights obligations, as the extremely short period for reporting rape under Nepal's law violates international human rights standards. During the discussion, which was chaired by the President of the Women and Social Committee of the House of Representatives, FWLD presented its recommendations for reforms to sexual violence laws, including the total elimination of the statute of limitations.

In response, parliamentarians filed a Resolution motion at the lower house demanding that Nepal scraps the statute of limitations in rape cases. Following ongoing pressure from FWLD and Equality Now, in July 2022 Nepal's National Assembly ratified amendments to the law, so that adult survivors of rape can file a report within two years of the incident occurring, while those raped as minors are able to file a case within three years of them turning 18.



"This amendment to Nepal's sexual violence laws ensures that more survivors will now be able to access justice, and more perpetrators will be held to account for their crimes. As such, it is a positive first step towards the comprehensive legal reform that is required in Nepal. We will continue to work closely with our local partners to urge law-makers to fully adopt the resolution motion, which calls for the complete removal of the statute so that every survivor of sexual violence in Nepal is able to access justice, whenever they come forward."

*Julie Thekkudan,
Equality Now South Asia Consultant*

ENDING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Sexual exploitation is when someone abuses or attempts to abuse another person's vulnerability or their own position of power or trust for sexual purposes.

Sex trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal enterprise in the world, with women and girls being disproportionately affected.

International law and the laws of 158 countries criminalize sex trafficking, but the sex trade that fuels its demand is still widely legally and socially acceptable.

Many countries have laws that criminalize, decriminalize, or legalize the sex trade in harmful ways; punishing victims or promoting their exploitation by giving traffickers, pimps, brothel owners, and sex buyers a safer environment in which to operate.

In 2022, we continued to leverage our expertise and partnerships to highlight sexual exploitation as a gendered, global, and multi-jurisdictional problem. In response to the recent unacceptable global rise in online sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEA), which has been facilitated by the unchecked and largely unregulated expansion of the digital sector around the world, we stepped up our advocacy around digital rights.

Key legal and policy changes:

In **Kenya**, our work, and that of our partners, contributed to the harmonization and reconciliation between the Children Act and the Counter Trafficking in Persons Act of provisions related to trafficking of children, benefiting **up to 20,000 victims** of child sex trafficking in the country.

Also in Kenya, our work contributed to the adoption of a National Plan of Action to Tackle Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (2022 – 2026), a flagship policy addressing technology-enabled child sexual abuse.



ENDING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Other positive developments:

Through ongoing engagement by our campaign teams in **Kenya** with the Generation Equality Forum, we promoted a greater understanding of the legal and policy framework for online sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEA) in Kenya. We also increased awareness of sexual exploitation and the challenges faced by survivors in accessing justice in **Mombasa** and **Naivasha** through our engagement with court user committees.

Under our 'Building Bridges' campaign, we continued to highlight and advocate for national governments to address the vulnerabilities that lead to sex trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women and girls, and highlighting how the gendered nature of sex trafficking requires a different approach to labor trafficking.

In **Kenya** and **Malawi**, we supported our local partners' calls for their governments to implement anti-trafficking and sexual offense laws in line with international standards and ensure access to justice for survivors/victims.

We contributed to international discussions on human trafficking, including by hosting an event with survivors from **Romania, Kenya** and the **UK** to assess the implementation of the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols hosted by UNODC.

We drew global attention to OSEA and the need for international law and policy reform. We engaged with a diverse range of state and non-state actors across civil society, governments and the UN, at international events including the High-Level Political Forum, CSW, UNGA, IGF, the Summit of the Americas on Digital Transformation, and the Skoll Forum.

We joined the Equal Rights Trust Advisory Board on AI Discrimination and the OAS Digital Transformation CSO Working Group, providing recommendations on improving regional and national responses to OSEA and calling for **American** governments to support the adoption of a universal framework to address the challenges women and girls face in the digital realm.

We also engaged the UN Secretary General's Envoy on Technology on the need to include women's voices and issues in the development of the proposed UN Global Digital Compact.

In the UK, we engaged with policymakers and other government actors to address online gender-based violence in the proposed Online Safety Bill. We supported the efforts of local women's rights groups and networks, co-developing a joint statement and recommendations to the UK government on how to improve the Bill to address the growing challenge of OSEA.



ENDING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION



PROMOTING SAFETY, FREEDOM, AND DIGNITY IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

In 2022, we secured a significant role in the digital rights space through our strategic partnership with **Women Leading in AI** and the launch of the Alliance for **Universal Digital Rights (AUDRi)**. Through AUDRi, we are collaborating with a wide range of partners to understand the opportunities and challenges presented by digital technologies and networks to women, girls, and other people from discriminated-against groups, so that everyone can enjoy equal rights and freedoms – however they exist and connect in the digital world.

To inform our advocacy through AUDRi, we used evidence from our consultations with organizations including Amnesty International, the Danish Institute for Human Rights, the Web Foundation, and POLLICY to formulate the following nine universal digital rights standards, each underpinned by an intersectional feminist, anti-discrimination analysis:



Universal and equal rights



Digital access for all



Linguistic and cultural diversity



Personal safety and data privacy



Freedom of expression and association



Universal standards and regulation



Digital self-determination



Secure, stable and resilient networks



Good digital governance

ENDING HARMFUL PRACTICES

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Harmful practices are forms of violence or ritual discrimination, primarily committed against girls and women, that have become culturally normalized, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage.

The global context

Of the **92 countries** where female genital mutilation is practiced, **51 countries** have specifically prohibited the practise under their national laws.

Each year, **12 million girls** worldwide are married before the age of 18.

Our impact in 2022

In 2022, we made significant strides towards ending female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage around the world, including by supporting one of the first prosecutions for FGM in **Sierra Leone** and the passage of an FGM policy for **Narok County** in **Kenya**. We also strengthened the advocacy efforts of grassroots activists in various countries and raised awareness among policy makers, the UN, law enforcement officials and the general public.

Key legal and policy changes:

- Our work in Narok County in Kenya, where FGM has historically been practised at many times the national rate, contributed to the adoption by the Narok County government of a ground-breaking Anti-FGM policy that will increase protection for thousands of the most at-risk girls, including more than **10,000 girls** born in the region each year.
- Traditional leaders in Liberia passed a **three-year temporary ban on FGM**.
- Following ongoing advocacy by Equality Now and our partners, the Human Rights Council passed a resolution focusing on the theme of cross-border FGM.



ENDING HARMFUL PRACTICES

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Other positive developments:

Following a submission by Equality Now to the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** during the CEDAW Committee review, the UAE government – which had initially denied the existence of FGM within the country – moved to acknowledging the practice; and the CEDAW Committee issued strong recommendations (for the first time ever) to the UAE on passing a law against FGM and the need for action.

In partnership with UNFPA, we published a report assessing the Use of the Multi-Sectoral Approach to Ending Gender-Based Violence and Female Genital Mutilation in Africa. During the 73rd Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), we presented the findings to ACHPR Commissioners, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, and a range of journalists and civil society actors.

Building on the launch of the **Kenyan** version of our Effective Reporting on FGM toolkit for journalists, which recognizes the key role of the media and the power of responsible reporting on ending the harmful practise of FGM, we developed and published African and global versions of the toolkit, which have been made available in English, French and Arabic.

Along with our partners, we encouraged governments to hold religious leaders accountable for propagation of FGM, including by protesting the visit to the UK of the religious head of the **Bohra community** who openly supports FGM, and protesting the re-instatement in the Maldives of a cleric who had earlier been removed from his university teaching post for his open encouragement of FGM.

We held a Regional Conference in **Istanbul** in partnership with Musawah, bringing together civil society organizations and activists from **MENA** and **South & South-East Asia**. The child marriage section focused on building delegates' knowledge on regional and international human rights laws on the practise, and highlighting the Islamic jurisprudence to oppose it.

We also developed a brief on Marital Status laws and submitted evidence to various UN bodies, highlighting issues relating to child and forced marriage in specific countries.



ENDING HARMFUL PRACTICES

IN FOCUS

CHANGING MINDS AND CHANGING LAWS IN SIERRA LEONE

SIERRA LEONE

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a significant problem in Sierra Leone, where **83%** of women and girls aged 15 to 49 have been subjected to the practice. In February 2022, following the tragic death of 21-year-old Maseray Sei as a result of FGM, we mobilized our global network in calling for the Sierra Leone government to criminalize this harmful practice.

Along with the Forum for Harmful Practices (FAHP), we drafted and delivered to the **Sierra Leone Parliament** an open letter, signed by **over 130 organizations** from **34 countries**, calling for the government to ban FGM, to put in place adequate measures to protect against and eliminate FGM, and to give survivors and the families of victims a means to access justice. In response, the Speaker of Parliament issued a ground-breaking public statement on FGM, acknowledging that “the time has come for our country to evaluate its cultural practices.”

We then undertook a high-profile advocacy mission to Sierra Leone, meeting with key state agencies and government stakeholders to encourage them to take action to end FGM and securing widespread media coverage about the issue, prompting national discussion. Our advocacy contributed to the UN Special Rapporteurs on Violence against Women, Extrajudicial Executions and Health issuing a communication calling for Sierra Leone to pass stronger measures to prevent and address FGM.

We are now working with our partners in **Sierra Leone** to support the amendment of the Child Rights Act to prohibit FGM for girls aged under 18. Meanwhile, we continue to seek justice for Maseray Sei, supporting our local partner WAVES SL in bringing one of the country’s few FGM-related prosecutions in history against the cutter involved in her death.



“It can be difficult to advocate for progressive legal reform in places where traditions are so deeply entrenched – it is thanks to the commitment of our partners and the support of every person who signed our open letter that we have got to this stage. We will continue to reach out to the government of Sierra Leone to advocate for a law prohibiting FGM to be put in place.”

*Divya Srinivasan,
Equality Now Global Lead,
End Harmful Practices*

BRISA'S STORY

"I have dedicated my life to advocating for survivors of sexual violence and reforming the legal system so that it holds perpetrators accountable rather than revictimizing survivors."

Brisa De Angulo Losada

For Equality Now, strategic litigation is an important tool with the potential to secure justice for millions of victims of sexual violence, exploitation, and discrimination.

The wheels of international justice move slowly – so when we joined Brisa De Angulo in her fight for justice in 2014, we knew it would take a long time. But we also knew that the case was vitally important, and that its impact would go far beyond Brisa and her family.

In January 2023, after years of tireless effort by Brisa and her legal team, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) made a landmark ruling in her favor, improving access to justice for millions of child and adolescent victims of sexual violence in Bolivia and beyond.

The Case

Brisa De Angulo was raped repeatedly by an adult relative starting when she was fifteen. She endured three trials but received no justice in the Bolivian courts. Brisa trained as a neuropsychologist and a lawyer, and with the diehard support of her parents, used every legal avenue available to challenge the judicial system that denied her justice.

Brisa's experience of the criminal justice system is typical of the struggle adolescent survivors of sexual violence face across Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America. Bolivia has the highest rates of sexual violence in Latin America, with **70% of Bolivian women** experiencing physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime, a third before the age of 18. But for sexual assaults on children, there is only a **2% rate of conviction**. This means that only **69 cases of rape** (or estupro³) against children and adolescents, out of a total of more than **3,600 cases** each year⁴, result in conviction. The scope for improvement is huge.

Before 2014, Brisa's only option was to run her case by moving from one pro bono lawyer to another.

When Equality Now became involved, it was crucial that we committed to long term involvement and to providing more than just legal expertise. We knew that alongside the critical work bringing the case to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACtHR), an incredible amount of dedication would be required to support Brisa through the process.

In the decade that we worked on Brisa's case we co-produced and published numerous studies and reports that were submitted to the IACtHR. We organized an expert group that was instrumental in supporting the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (SRVAW) and other partners to create a global model law on consent, and provided technical legal support to the follow-up mechanism for the Belem Do Para Convention (MESECVI) on the concept of consent in cases of gender-based violence against women.

When Brisa's case was eventually heard by the IACtHR in 2022, it was the first to be heard involving human rights violations by a State of an adolescent victim of incestuous rape.

³ The crime of "estupro" involves the rape of an adolescent girl through deception or deceit.

⁴ According to statistics published by the Coordinadora de la Mujer

BRISA'S STORY

The Ruling

The IACtHR ruled that the State of Bolivia violated Brisa's rights and subjected her to cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment from judicial personnel. The Court set out a requirement for the State to publicly acknowledge its culpability and to enact numerous legal and implementation changes to act as "non-repetition" measures, including:

- **Implementation of a consent-based definition of sexual violence crimes**
- **Acknowledgement of incestuous sexual violence in the criminal law**
- **Redefinition of the lesser crime of 'estupro' as rape**
- **Elimination of other practices that prevent access to justice**

The Court also ordered a comprehensive list of investigative, medicolegal, and care protocols to better protect and support child and adolescent victims of sexual violence, supplemented by training for justice personnel.

It also asked the State to incorporate compulsory sex education in Bolivian schools, alongside a public awareness-raising and sensitization campaign to confront and challenge the normalization and trivialization of incest in Bolivia, and to help minors to identify and report crimes involving sexual violence.

"This groundbreaking ruling is the first time that the Court has delivered a judgement that has the potential to deliver true access to justice for women and girls in Bolivia and across the region, through good laws, effective implementation, practice, and accountability, the challenging of negative stereotypes, and improved understanding of sexual violence."

*Bárbara Jiménez-Santiago,
Equality Now Latin
America & Caribbean
Regional
Representative*

The Impact

Because cases at the IACtHR interpret the American Convention and other regional conventions, the standards established in this case will impact not just Brisa, but all the cases in Bolivia, and other states of the Americas as well.

Advocates in other countries can use the ruling to push their own governments to change discriminatory laws and practices – meaning that, properly implemented, this ruling will address some of the root causes of inequalities and create transformational, sustainable change for millions of women and girls.

For over two decades Brisa's voice was stifled by a discriminatory system supported by a cultural acceptance of rape, incest, and sexual violence against adolescent girls. Brisa and her supporters have successfully challenged a system and a culture that tried to silence her from the moment she reported her rapist.

Power is rooted in who we listen to: in bringing this case and speaking on behalf of child and adolescent victims everywhere, Brisa has shifted the balance of power away from the men who commit sexual violence and toward the girls and women who endure and survive it. Thanks to Brisa's incredible courage and tenacity, no girl should ever again encounter the decades of struggle for justice in **Bolivia** that she faced.



LOOKING FORWARD

When we talk about global equality, we imagine a world in which everyone enjoys equal rights, freedoms, and respect, regardless of their gender and of the ways in which they may celebrate their intersectional identities. Our work at Equality Now has always been based on the principle that equality begins with the law: if we change the law, the rest will follow. But we recognize that there is a difference between legal equality and lived equality.

In examining how the law translates to everyday life, it is clear that meaningful, lived equality also comes through culture change.

This often requires us to have difficult conversations across divisive lines; to respectfully navigate the complexities of tradition, religion, and family and to understand that whoever we are and wherever we are speaking from, we each have the power to connect with and impact others.

We know that those who are in the closest proximity to problems are often the ones who are best placed to solve them.

Yet it is the very people who are disproportionately harmed by gender inequality whose voices are most marginalized. Changing this means listening to the women, girls, and activists whose lives have been most profoundly impacted by inequality.

In 2023, we will continue to strive to lift up voices on the ground—whether in campaigning and calling for progressive change, or in generating and shaping creative solutions.

We will also continue to work closely with partners around the world, advocating for the remarkable power of coalitions for inspiring and creating meaningful, sustainable change.

With 2023 being the 20th anniversary of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), we will champion the approach taken by the Solidarity for African Women's Rights Coalition (SOAWR).

In our role as Secretariat of this pioneering network, we have worked with activists from over **80 national, regional and international civil society organizations** to shape and ratify the Protocol and to hold governments accountable for its implementation, using a progressive model based on the feminist principles of shared leadership and action around shared goals.

We will also leverage the **100-year anniversary of the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment** (which at the time of writing has still not been incorporated into the US Constitution, despite being ratified by the requisite number of states) to inspire support for women's rights and constitutional equality from a broader and more diverse audience.

All of this begins with listening and learning. For us at Equality Now; for global leaders and decision-makers; for you in whatever capacity you are able to act. Because wherever and whoever you are, there is room for you to step in and engage.

The movement for gender equality is bigger than any one person, or any one organization, or even any one sector. If we all start by listening and learning from each other, we can begin to connect the dots.

We achieved extraordinary things in 2022, but our work is far from done. We hope you will join us on the next phase of our journey toward a more just and equal world—for everyone.



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*Started in 2023

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✉ info@equalitynow.org

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