Seven calls for gender-equal action at the HLPF 2026



This 2026 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development meets under the theme of transformative, equitable, innovative, and coordinated action for the 2030 Agenda, with five goals under in-depth review: water and sanitation, energy, industry and innovation, sustainable cities, and global partnerships. These are the physical and institutional foundations of sustainable development, but none can be built sustainably without women and girls.

Gender equality is not one goal among others. It is a **non-negotiable condition for all of them..** SDG 5 remains off track, and that failure reaches every goal under review: women and girls bear the burden of water insecurity, energy poverty, digital exclusion, and unsafe cities. Yet they are also the scientists, mayors, ministers, entrepreneurs, and grassroots leaders delivering solutions.

This gap between commitments and delivery is visible in this year's Voluntary National Reviews. Our review of the 36 countries presenting at the Forum found that only 11 included strengthening gender equality among their pledges. The commitments already exist, from the Pact for the Future to the Sevilla Commitment; **what is missing is the political courage to follow through.**



Seven calls to the world's leaders

1 Protect and uphold women's rights as essential condition for sustainable development

Women's rights are facing organized backlash, legal rollback, and shrinking civic and financial space. Nearly **one in four countries has experienced a reversal in women's rights,** putting hard won gains at risk just as the 2030 deadline approaches.

We call on governments to protect and advance existing commitments, resist their dilution of agreed language, and ring-fencing financing for gender equality and women's rights organizations. The gains secured through Beijing, CEDAW, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda must be defended, funded, and carried forward.

2 Finance gender equality commitments and measure what is delivered

Commitments that are not funded will not be met. **Only 26% of countries have comprehensive systems to track budget allocations for gender equality**, while nearly 7 in 10 national statistics offices reported reduced funding since January 2025. The UN80 reform process must strengthen, not thin out, the gender machinery that makes delivery visible, measurable, and accountable.

We call for gender gender-responsive budgeting, transparent reporting on expenditures, stronger gender data systems, and closing the financing gap for gender equality across the SDGs.



3 Advance women's leadership from local government to global governance

Leadership remains unequal at every level of decision-making, from local and regional governments to the United Nations Secretariat. GWL Voices's findings show that representation decreases as influence increases. Women remain underrepresented in local executive leadership roles, including as mayors and governors, despite their role in water, energy and urban planning.

At the global level, the pattern is similar. Of the **organizations tracked by GWL Voices, 21 have never been led by a woman, only 7% of Permanent Representatives to the UN since 1947 have been women,** and no woman has ever been elected Secretary-General. Young women face additional barriers to entering political leadership and decision-making spaces, even as initiatives such as the C4UN Global Futures Forum call for a more inclusive, intergenerational, and representative multilateral system.

We call on governments and multilateral institutions to enforce quotas, parity targets and transparent appointment processes that move women into real decision-making power. Women's leadership must become a binding benchmark of UN reform and a test of whether multilateralism is becoming more representative and future fit.

4 Close the digital divide and put women at the center of technology policy

The digital transition cannot be equitable while women remain excluded from access, skills, safety, and governance. Across low- and middle-income countries, 810 million women still do not use mobile internet. **Women represent only 35% of STEM graduates, and remain nearly absent from AI and technology development.**



We call for affordable connectivity, digital skills, gender-responsive data systems, and AI governance that protects women's rights and safety. The commitments of the Global Digital Compact must be implemented with women at the table, so that the technologies shaping the future are designed for equality from the start.

5 Build a gender-responsive climate transition for water, energy, and cities

Climate change, water insecurity, energy poverty, and unsafe urbanization are not gender-neutral. **By 2050, climate impacts could push an additional 158 million women and girls into extreme poverty and 236 million more into food insecurity.** Yet women remain underrepresented in the spaces where climate, priorities, financing, and adaptation plans are decided. At COP30, women headed only about one in five national delegations.

We call for a gender responsive climate and environmental governance that puts women, girls, and local governments at the center of planning, financing, and implementation. Water security, clean energy and resilient cities must be designed with women's leadership, safety and needs at their core.

6 End violence against women and secure their role in building and sustaining peace

There can be no sustainable development where women and girls live under violence, conflict, and fear. Approximately **676 million women and girls live near active, deadly conflict.** Conflict-related and gender-based violence has reached severe or extreme levels in 22 of the 25 countries experiencing humanitarian crises, while women remain severely underrepresented in formal peace processes.

We call on governments and multilateral institutions to prevent and end all forms of violence against women and girls, and guarantee their equal and meaningful participation in mediation, peacebuilding, and recovery processes.

7 Make the global financial architecture work for women and for development

The SDGs cannot be delivered through a financial system that excludes women from the rooms where resources are allocated. **Developing countries face an annual SDG financing gap of over $4 trillion,** while women remain underrepresented in finance ministries, central banks, development banks, and global economic governance. Of the twelve international financial institutions tracked by GWL Voices, only four are currently led by a woman.

We call for debt relief, tax justice, gender-responsive financing, and parity in the leadership and executive boards of the institutions that decide how global resources are raised, governed, and spent. A financial architecture that claims to serve development must reflect the people it is meant to serve.



These seven calls are not new demands; they are the unfinished agenda already endorsed but not yet delivered.

In 2026, delivery and leadership must come together. The selection of the next United Nations Secretary-General is a historic opportunity to align the UN's highest office with the principles of equality it asks Member States to uphold. Sustainable development demands leadership that **reflects the perspectives, experiences, and trust of the "We the Peoples" the United Nations was created to serve.**