Hashtag Feminism or the Illusion of Progress

Genderwashing: Despite the Surge of Organizational Feminist Posts in the Media, Women's Rights, Health, and Participation in Leadership Have Not Improved

Center on International Cooperation

New York University

Alice Viollet

Non-Resident Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation, and a former Program Officer working with the Congo Research Group team

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1. Introduction

Gender equality has gone corporate. Empowerment is trending, and institutions are fluent in the language of inclusion—but when feminism becomes a marketing strategy, what happens to real power, policy, and progress? Behind the glossy branding lies a troubling truth: institutional inaction, stalled reforms, and a persistent refusal to confront structural inequality. Despite gender equality marketing and feel-good narratives being louder than ever, the situation for women has not seen significant improvement in the past 15 years.[1] This is not genuine progress; this disconnect between visibility and substance is a form of genderwashing[2]—a superficial promotion of women's rights through marketing and virtue signaling without meaningful, long-term material changes in policies, workforce structures, or decision-making representation.

Genderwashing follows the same rhetorical pattern as "greenwashing" or "whitewashing:" it describes the practice of promoting an image of support for gender equality—for instance through public relations (PR) campaigns, social media posts, or branding—without enacting meaningful structural change. Genderwashing is about optics over action; it occurs when companies, organizations, institutions or public figures express support for women's rights or gender equality, particularly on high-profile occasions such as International Women's Day, without implementing real, substantive changes to correct gender imbalances, not even within their own structures.

2. Performative Advocacy and Who's Doing It

These efforts are often more about public relations than genuine advocacy. Corporations may boast about their commitment to gender equality through catchy slogans and high-profile campaigns, but a closer look reveals how little has changed.

For example, this was seen when Amazon celebrated Women's History Month last March with a branded initiative to "honor women,"[3] despite its senior leadership team including just five women out of 29 executives.[4] Another instance of genderwashing is when Burger King UK launched the "Women belong in the kitchen" campaign, on International Women's Day in 2021 to promote scholarships for female chefs.[5] Maybe if Restaurant Brands International (Burger King's parent company) had more than two women among its 12 corporate leaders,[6] the terrible and insensitive name of this campaign could have been vetoed.

The public sector is not exempt. A recent illustration was when the European Parliament celebrated[7] gains in women's representation after the 2019 elections yet failed to comment on a major setback for gender equality following the June 2024 elections, where the proportion of female Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) declined for the first time in its history. The lack of the European Parliament's post-election communications raises further questions about why they celebrated the increase in gender representation in the first place: was it only image management or meaningful progress towards their gender equality objectives that they wanted to highlight?

An important question arises here: when a problem is systemic in both the public and private sectors, who should lead the fight for gender equality? Should private corporations be trusted to act voluntarily, or must the state intervene through regulatory bodies? In theory, advancing gender equality should align with the interests of profit-driven businesses: diverse teams are linked to better decision-making, broader market reach, greater innovation, and thus, generate higher revenues.[8] But where voluntary action fails, and actors sustain unreasonable choices and hurt societal development, that's when the government should in theory step in. Particularly in contexts where gender inequality is deeply embedded, governments must intervene with equity-focused policies to bridge the gap for the benefit of society. After years of inaction and performative policies, it's clear that real enforcement must come from the state, through regulatory bodies, equity mandates, and policy reform. Symbolic gestures, even if well-intentioned, will never substitute for material reforms. Gender equality should not be optional or market-driven.

To distinguish between genderwashing and real progress, we can look at key systemic indicators affecting women: gender balance in corporate leadership, access to birth control, maternity leave, and women's representation in politics.

2.1 Corporate Gender Equality: The Reality Behind the Statistics

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in corporate messaging emphasizing female leadership.[9] Companies are eager to showcase their commitment to gender equality through various campaigns and initiatives. For instance, the HeForShe movement, launched by UN Women in 2014, has garnered over 2.1 million online commitments worldwide, including support from numerous corporate leaders.[10] However, a deeper look at the gender composition of the world's largest corporations reveals persistent disparities in leadership. While women make up a significant portion of the general workforce, their representation in leadership roles tells a different story. Female

representation in decision-making roles in the private sector is overall capped between around 10 percent and 30 percent.[11] The gender gap is even more pronounced in certain industries like finance, where only 19 percent of executive suite positions are held by women, and just five % occupy CEO roles.[12]

Despite years of empowerment campaigns and gender equality initiatives, progress remains painfully slow. The gap between corporate rhetoric and the reality of female leadership suggests that these initiatives are more about image-building than about meaningful change. Even companies with highly publicized diversity commitments such as Amazon and Apple have only 8-9 percent of women who hold executive or senior positions (Chief Information Officer, Chief Technology Officer or Information Technology Manager), or serve as technical team leaders.[13] And it wasn't until 2021—barely four years ago—that the first female CEO entered the Forbes 500 of the top 10 revenue-generating companies worldwide.[14] The fact that it took until 2021 to see just one woman among this ranking feels more like a defeat rather than something to celebrate. And should this even be celebrated? Is it a victory for women or for capitalism? Here lies the difficulty of defining what gender equality is. Will it be reached simply by achieving a 50/50 gender split in every statistic? While that may sound like a straightforward benchmark, it risks oversimplifying a complex issue (but also, excluding non-binary and gender-diverse individuals by reinforcing a strict binary framework). True equality isn't about enforcing identical numbers across every field, it's about ensuring that people of all genders have equitable access to opportunities, power, and resources. However, numbers still matter. And when we observe persistent and glaring imbalances, such as executive boards with 90 percent men or parliaments with minimal female representation for instance, these are obviously not accidents of merit or interest but signals of systemic exclusion.

We must also acknowledge the material realities of inequality. In capitalist societies, power and freedom are often mediated by wealth. Money buys not just comfort, but choice, security, and autonomy. If women remain underpaid, underemployed, or excluded from financial decision-making roles, then they are effectively cut off from many of the freedoms that define equality. While statistical representation isn't the end goal, it is a necessary tool to diagnose the problem and track change. Equality may not mean perfect symmetry, but it must mean freedom from systemic disadvantage. And that starts with visibility, access, and power.

2.2 Gender Equality and Reproductive Rights: Progress or Just Another Illusion?

Reproductive rights are another critical area of gender equality, yet progress in this sector remains extremely limited. While some of the world's wealthiest nations have made incremental improvements in reproductive rights, many others continue to lag far behind. A major issue is that reproductive rights are often shaped more by political ideologies and healthcare companies than by the needs of women themselves or, at the very least, by objective data on women's health. Disappointingly, according to Google Trends, the expression "reproductive rights" saw a significant surge in 2022 and 2024,[15] but it was primarily associated with discussions about these rights being rescinded, rather than being expanded.

In most countries, birth control or the morning-after pill are still classified as prescription-only medications,[16, 17] while other medications—ironically deceptive, such as sildenafil (used to treat erectile dysfunction)—are sold over the counter.[18] This disparity underscores a deeper issue of inconsistency in how women's health is treated by both healthcare systems and political leaders. Even in nations where abortion is legal, access is often restricted by waiting periods, mandatory counseling, or financial barriers, undermining women's right to choose.[19]

Over the past 15 years, there has been only a modest increase—around 15-20 percent—in the number of high-income nations offering free birth control.[20, 21, 22, 23] In emerging markets, the situation is even more critical, with rising costs and the influence of large pharmaceutical corporations prioritizing profit margins over accessibility. For instance, the global contraceptive drugs market is projected to grow from USD 18.53 billion in 2023 to USD 40.08 billion by 2033 with major players in the market like Johnson & Johnson reporting net earnings of USD 14.07 billion on annual revenue of USD 88.82 billion in 2024. [24, 25] In comparison, this represents more than twice the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country like Haïti. [26]

While pharmaceutical companies do contribute to the availability of contraceptives, their business models are primarily profit-driven, often at the expense of affordability, transparency, and public health—especially in low-income regions. One of the most notorious examples is the case of Martin Shkreli and Turing Pharmaceuticals. In 2015, the company raised the price of Daraprim, a life-saving drug used to treat parasitic infections, by over 5,000 percent, from USD 13.50 to USD 750 per pill.[27] The case exposed how pharmaceutical firms exploit monopolies on essential medications with no

regard for patient welfare or access, prioritizing short-term profits over lives. Nonprofit organizations like Medicines360 have stepped in to bridge this gap by offering lower-cost alternatives, such as a hormonal intrauterine device (IUD) priced at USD 15, compared to over USD 1,000 for similar products on the market.[28] However, such efforts face enormous challenges in scaling and competing with the vast influence and resources of pharmaceutical giants.

Even worse, some companies have not only put essential medicines out of reach, but they have also demonstrated a troubling willingness to misuse sensitive health information and neglect basic ethical standards.[29] In multiple cases, pharmaceutical corporations have compromised the well-being of their own patients, and in doing so, harmed public trust and societal health. For example, pharmaceutical company Merck faced major legal challenges over its contraceptive device NuvaRing, with numerous lawsuits alleging that the company failed to adequately warn users about serious risks such as blood clots.[30] In its pursuit of market dominance, Merck chose to sideline safety concerns, resulting in devastating outcomes for many women. More recently, Flo Health, a popular reproductive tracking smartphone application, was found to have shared sensitive user data-including pregnancy status and menstrual cycles-with third parties like Facebook and Google for advertising purposes, violating user trust and regulatory expectations.[31]

These cases reveal a pattern of systemic negligence with harmful consequences for public trust and patient safety. Given this track record, it is clear that corporations should not be trusted with something as sensitive as reproductive health, when their driving force is profit, not care, equity, or transparency. The result is a system in which the most vulnerable pay the highest price. The cumulative impact of these practices extends far beyond individual patients, weakening healthcare systems, deepening inequality, and eroding the public's trust in institutions meant to protect them.

In consequence, the global landscape is shaped with high prices and limited contraceptive options persist, making it increasingly difficult for women to access even the most basic reproductive care. The financial burden—exacerbated by restricted over-the-counter options and a troubling lack of transparency from pharmaceutical companies—forces women to navigate costly and complex healthcare systems just to obtain essential services. This disparity underscores a profound inconsistency in how different nations approach women's reproductive rights, despite widespread rhetoric claiming a commitment to gender equality. The urgent need for stronger regulatory oversight, transparency mandates, and recognition of reproductive healthcare as a public good—not a private commodity—cannot be overstated.

2.3 Maternity Leave: The Gap Between Policy, Recovery Needs, and Reality

Maternity leave further exposes the gap between rhetoric and reality. While many organizations consistently communicate their commitment to supporting working mothers, the actual policy changes have not followed. Public institutions and corporations continue to publicly praise their maternity leave benefits, creating the illusion of advancement, but the reality is less progressive.

Indeed, recent data highlights a concerning trend: while corporate communication about maternity leave policies has increased, a national US study[32] found that the percentage of companies offering maternity leave dropped from 53 percent pre-pandemic to just 35 percent in 2020—and has yet to recover. Furthermore, while 84 percent of US employers plan to modify their leave programs within the next two years to improve attraction and retention, only 20 percent of these companies intend to specifically enhance parental leave.[33] This gap between corporate messaging and meaningful change is concerning, revealing that symbolic gestures have outpaced real policy reform.

At the same time, pregnancy discrimination remains prevalent. In the United Kingdom, 12.3 percent of women surveyed reported being dismissed, made redundant, or forced out of their jobs while pregnant or shortly after returning from maternity leave, amounting to an estimated 74,000 women each year.[34] In the United States, thousands of pregnancy-related discrimination complaints are filed annually, with pregnancy accounting for 40 percent—almost half—of all gender-based firing cases in some states.[35]

In addition, despite medical research showing that women typically require at least one year to fully recover from childbirth—physical changes like the pelvic floor, for instance, may not return to their pre-pregnancy state even a decade after giving birth.[36] Yet, maternity leave policies across the world remain a fraction of that time, prioritizing what companies perceive as immediate short-term economic productivity or minimal workplace disruption over women's health, and overall business and societal growth, most countries offering leave periods that do not account for the full recovery timeline. In fact, the United States, despite being the richest country in the world, with a projected GDP of over USD 29 trillion in 2025[37] and home to more billionaires than any other nation,[38] remains shockingly the only major economy without a national parental paid leave policy. This confirms that this failure is not due to a lack of resources, but a lack of political will, leaving many women financially vulnerable during a critical period.

Even in countries with paid maternity leave, caregiving responsibilities are still disproportionately placed on women, reinforcing deep-rooted societal and sustaining gender imbalances in both the workplace and at home. According to the OECD, women across member states perform more than twice as much unpaid care work as men.[39] This includes child-rearing, elder care, and household responsibilities, which are rarely offset by corresponding workplace policies. For example, while Sweden offers 480 days of paid parental leave per child (with 90 days reserved for each parent),[40] men still only use about 31 percent of the available time,[41] reflecting persistent cultural expectations around motherhood and caregiving. As long as care work is culturally feminized and structurally unsupported, maternity leave will remain an incomplete solution.

In countries where leave policies are not designed with gender equity in mind the imbalance is often further institutionalized. In Japan, men are legally entitled to four weeks of paid parental leave, yet fewer than 10 percent actually take it, citing workplace stigma and fear of career setbacks.[42] This unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities contributes to the so-called "motherhood penalty"—a measurable decline in women's earnings and career progression after having children, compared to the relative career stability experienced by fathers.

Women's economic status also deepens this inequity. Globally, 58.1 percent of employed women work in the informal sector-jobs, in sub-Saharan Africa, that number rises to 92 percent.[43] These roles typically lack access to social protections, such as paid leave, healthcare, pensions, formal maternity protections and employment security. Consequently, women are more likely to rely on public services and state support, including child allowances and subsidized healthcare. But then, when governments implement austerity measures or reduce social spending, women are disproportionately affected. For instance, in the UK, analyses have shown that women in the lowest income brackets have lost an average of 26 percent of their income since 2010 due to reductions in welfare benefits and public services.[44] This structural vulnerability reinforces long-term financial insecurity and limits women's autonomy and decision-making power, both in the home and in the workplace.

At the same time, many countries are facing a sharp decline in birth rates, raising long-term concerns about labor shortages, economic sustainability, and aging populations. The global fertility rate[45] has more than halved since 1960, and in countries like South Korea, Japan, Italy, and Spain, birth rates are now well below replacement level. Even in the United States, the birth rate hit a historic low in 2023. These demographic shifts have prompted growing calls for "pro-natal" policies.[46] But promoting childbirth without creating the conditions for women to have and raise children with dignity, support, and economic

security is neither sustainable nor ethical. To be successful, pro-natal strategies must go beyond rhetoric and include reasonable investment in paid parental leave, accessible childcare, healthcare, and workplace equality. Without policies that enable women and families to thrive, calls to “reverse” declining birth rates will ultimately fail to address the root causes of why many people are choosing to have fewer children.

True gender equality requires more than just increased visibility of maternity leave in corporate messaging—it demands concrete policy reforms, extended paid leave that aligns with medical recovery needs, and the inclusion of paternal leave to distribute caregiving responsibilities more equitably. Until action catches up with communication, maternity leave will continue to serve as yet another example of genderwashing rather than genuine progress. Without addressing the broader economic context in which maternity policies operate, gender equality efforts will continue to fall short.

2.4 Women in Politics: Rising Rhetoric, Slow Action

Just as the private sector is adept at genderwashing, portraying women as leaders in advertising and PR while maintaining structural inequalities in the workplace, political systems too display a similar pattern. Women’s visibility in political leadership has certainly increased, but the real power—whether in the workplace or political decision-making—remains out of reach for most women. In the same way that maternity leave or equal pay policies are often symbolic gestures rather than substantive changes, political representation is still shallow. While many political bodies now boast of gender parity initiatives, the number of women in real positions of power—as heads of state, ministers, or CEOs—remains critically low.[47] Both the private sector and political institutions continue to perpetuate gender inequality through tokenism, undermining the authenticity of their commitment to gender equality.

While messages around the increase of women's political leadership have become more prominent,[48] politics remains a male-dominated field.[49] Women continue to be underrepresented in political leadership roles, with an alarmingly low number of female heads of state. More women in politics have however been shown to better outcomes. Nations like Sweden, Norway, and Finland have some of the highest levels of women’s political participation in the world,[50] and they also consistently rank at the top of global governance indices, such as the Corruption Perceptions Index[51] and the World Bank’s Governance Indicators.[52] According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report,[53] these countries tend to have better governance outcomes, which are partly attributed to the inclusive and transparent political environments fostered by the increased presence of women.

Despite the increased PR communication on female political participation,[54] the pace of meaningful change in actual political leadership is lagging. A significant part of this resistance comes from a resurgence of backlash against feminist progress,[55] with rising "anti-feminist politics" that reinforce traditional gender roles and frame advancements in women's rights as a threat to societal structures.[56] These political ideologies often blame the empowerment of women, particularly in leadership, for undermining traditional family dynamics and holding back societal progress. International organizations like UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have been at the forefront of advocating for gender equality in politics, launching initiatives, and releasing reports emphasizing the importance of increasing women's political representation. These efforts have certainly raised awareness, but the impact on the number of women in political leadership roles has been minimal. As of January 2025, women hold top state positions in only 25 countries, and globally, they occupy just 27.2 percent of parliamentary seats–only a marginal increase from previous years. In the United States, women only represent about 27 percent of Congress (both the House and Senate combined) as of 2023,[57] While there has been a notable increase, especially with the election of Kamala Harris as the first female Vice President, this is still far below parity. The European Union (EU) has also made strides in promoting gender equality, with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 and summits focused on increasing women's political representation. However, despite the increase in female members in the European Parliament, now at 40 percent, women still make up only 11 percent of heads of state and government within the EU. If we look at Asia, women represent less than a quarter of the National People's Congress (NPC) in China, which has the highest proportion of female parliamentarians in Asia.[58]

Despite these challenges, the discourse surrounding women in political leadership has never been more prominent. The messaging around gender equality has grown significantly,[59] and political bodies worldwide have made public commitments to increasing women's participation in leadership roles.[60] While the global conversation about women in politics is at an all-time high, the concrete outcomes—actual increases in female representation at the leadership level—remain insufficient. Despite the growing attention, gender equality in political leadership remains a distant and unfulfilled aspiration. The slow pace of change exposes the limits of superficial symbolic commitments. Gender quotas, mentorship programs, and funding for female candidates have all helped-but not enough. At current rates, full parity in political leadership could take nearly a century to achieve. Rhetorical commitment without institutional restructuring and enforcement mechanisms leaves power imbalances intact.

However, several countries have implemented policies that aim to bridge the gender gap in political representation, with varying degrees of success:

Tunisia enacted a groundbreaking electoral law in 2014 that mandates gender parity in both parliamentary and regional elections. This legislation ensures equal representation of men and women, making Tunisia a leader in the Arab world in terms of gender equality in politics. This law led to significant progress in increasing female participation, with women comprising 36 percent of Tunisia's parliament in recent years, a notable achievement in a region where women's political participation has historically been low.

Rwanda is often heralded as a model of gender equality in politics, with women holding over 60 percent of parliamentary seats, the highest share of any country globally. The introduction of a 30 percent gender quota in the 2003 constitution played a crucial role in ensuring this remarkable achievement, solidifying Rwanda's position as a leader in gender equality in governance.

India introduced constitutional amendments that provide a mandate for women's political participation, especially in local governance. The 73rd and 74th amendments (1992) reserve one-third of seats in local government bodies (Panchayats) for women. While women's representation at the national level still lags behind, this move has significantly empowered women at the grassroots level.

2.5 Genderwashing: The Disconnect Between Visibility and Real Power

This stark contrast between women's visibility in leadership roles and their actual influence highlights the problem of genderwashing. Companies and organizations may showcase women as leaders in advertising and PR, yet these symbolic announcements often mask the lack of real power in political or corporate decision-making. This may produce a backlash, as the superficial inclusion of women in high-profile positions can lead to public disillusionment and skepticism, especially when the underlying systems of power remain unchanged. Such tokenism not only undermines genuine efforts to achieve gender equality but also risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes that women in leadership roles are only symbolic figures without real authority or impact. While female visibility in PR messages is growing,[61] serving as a marketing tool strategically using women's representation in ads, for profit-driven purposes primarily by the corporate sector but also used by public institutions to improve their public image, gain support for gender-related policies, or advance their social agendas, the structural inequalities that prevent women from assuming

real power—whether as CEOs, politicians, or in everyday economic roles—remain largely unchanged.

To achieve true women's empowerment, societies must move beyond surface-level diversity campaigns and focus on real power-sharing, pay equity, and transparency. This means recognizing that womanhood is not a singular experience but one that is shaped by intersecting identities such as class, caste, religion, ability, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Empowerment cannot be truly achieved unless it accounts for these multiple layers of discrimination and inequality, ensuring that women from all backgrounds—whether white, Black, Indigenous, working-class, disabled, LGBTQ+, or from marginalized religious or cultural communities—are equally represented and have access to the same opportunities and rights. In politics, this means expanding gender quotas, increasing funding for female candidates, and challenging cultural norms that hinder women's full participation. In corporate sectors, it means implementing transparent hiring and policies that genuinely support women's advancement into leadership positions.

3. Bridging the Gap: Toward Real Gender Equality

From boardrooms to parliaments, from pharmacies to social media platforms, symbolic representation has often replaced structural reform. Genderwashing masks the persistence of inequality, offering visibility without power, slogans without strategy. The gaps in maternity leave policies, women's political representation, and access to reproductive health services highlight a larger issue of symbolic change versus substantive empowerment. Whether addressing the recovery needs of new mothers, ensuring equal political power, or guaranteeing reproductive autonomy, these issues require deeper systemic change. Gender equality cannot be achieved through PR campaigns or superficial changes. It requires genuine policy reforms, cultural shifts, and real power-sharing across all sectors of society. Until these gaps are bridged, the push for gender equality will remain performative at best and substantially meaningless.

This is a guest post by Alice Violle, a Non-Resident Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation, and former Program Officer working with the Congo Research Group team. All opinions and views expressed in this article solely represent the views of the author.

Endnotes

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