

Women on the Street: Demanding Peace, Justice, and Recognition

SDG 16 promotes peace, justice, and strong institutions. Many targets of this goal link directly to recent women-led protests. Although women continue to be denied access to key decision-making roles, essential services, and justice, these protests show their determination to be heard and respected.

In many recent protests, women have taken to the streets to demand better laws, an end to corruption and bribery, the protection of fundamental freedoms, and a significant reduction in all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere. These demands are also the very [targets of SDG 16](#) – targets that are concerned with a peaceful and sustainable future for all, where inclusion and recognition matters.

Women in Protest

This year, there have been several women-led protests and protests with high-participation from women, including protests this month in Turkey against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's [decision](#) to withdraw from the [Istanbul Convention](#) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. And on International Women's Day, women in Mexico protested again – a [continuation](#) from the protests in 2020 – against Mexico's exceptionally high rates of gender-based violence and government inaction. In India, women took leading roles in the [farmers' protests](#), which began in 2020 and continued into 2021, to demand the repeal of agricultural laws that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government passed in September 2020. And in [Russia](#), in February this year, women formed human chains in support of Russian female political prisoners. Also, in an ongoing protest in [Lebanon](#) that began in 2019, women protesters have led a campaign regarding “political reforms, oil and gas governance, the financial crisis, environmental concerns, and pathways for a unified personal status law”.

Many more protests have also taken place just a few months before in 2020, where, in [Belarus](#), women led protests against a corrupt government and vote tampering, and in the same month, women protested against abortion laws in [Poland](#). Several of these protests have been met with a disproportionate response of force, violence, and arrests, and most of them

have not yet had a clear impact in regard to the protestors' demands. In other protests that took place in 2019 – for example, in [Sudan](#), where women participated in and led a pro-democracy movement and in Spain, where a “feminist emergency” protest took place after a series of rape cases and domestic violence attacks resulted in [the deaths of 19 women in one summer](#) – the protestors' efforts have resulted in key law and policy measures that are currently in the process of being implemented.

Meeting Demands: An Ongoing Situation

In Sudan, after the long-time leader, Omar al-Bashir, was ousted in a military coup in 2019, the military targeted pro-democracy protestors in Khartoum in brutal attacks in June the same year, which resulted in many [protestors being killed and women being raped](#). Eventually, however, negotiations between opposition groups and military leaders led to the formation of a transitional government in August 2019. By January 2021, peace mediators underscored the need to be committed to the [participation of women in the Legislative Council by no less than 40%](#), which has been included in [Article 23 \(3\)](#) of the Draft Constitutional Declaration. The competencies of the Legislative Council include enacting laws and legislation and holding the Cabinet accountable. Therefore, women's bolstered representation in the Legislative Council, although still not equal to men's, means that they will have more access to key decision-making roles. This will allow them to have more say in seeking reform and justice for gender-specific issues and it will give them more freedom to create a more sustainable society that recognises their contributions in all aspects of life, including public life.

After a string of rape trials took place in Spain in recent years, with some of the trials ending in a lesser charge of sexual abuse rather than rape, there have been growing calls to reform the criminal law around sexual offences. The 2019 “feminist emergency” protests in Spain resulted in the government approving a draft bill to change the penal code [to classify all non-consensual sex as rape](#). As these protests show, from a feminist perspective, simply promoting the rule of law is not necessarily in itself enough; ensuring equal access to justice for all must, in some cases, involve redefining and reforming existing laws. Institutions can only be truly strengthened if they are inclusive and representative of the people they serve.

In other countries, results from the protests have been slower to appear or so far non-existent. In Mexico, the protests against gender-based violence and government inaction escalated in the most recent protests on International Women's Day, and as Tania Reneaum Panszi,

executive director at Amnesty International Mexico, [notes](#), although the “authorities at various levels of government have stigmatized women's protests, characterizing them as ‘violent’ [...], these protests are a call for women's right to live a life free from violence”. This statement highlights the uphill struggle women are facing to seek justice and fair treatment as well as the long-term goals they demand: sustained levels of peace, security, and prosperity.

In India, farmers, many of whom are women, are [demanding](#) that three agricultural laws that were passed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government in September 2020 are repealed. These laws deregulate the sale of crops and put small landholders at risk of losing their business and land to big corporations. In January 2021, there were attempts to [persuade the women](#) at these protests to go home, but they stood their ground. Several of the women took to the stages to make themselves more visible and refused to be silenced, and others simply used their presence at the protests as a tool to be recognised and respected for their work. According to [Oxfam India](#) in November 2018, around 60–80% of food in India is produced by rural women and 85% of rural women are engaged in agriculture, yet only around 13% own land. As Jasbir Kaur Nat, a member of the Punjab Kisan Union, [states](#) “Women are not seen as farmers. Their labour is immense but invisible.” These protests have already begun to change this. And, on top of this, they highlight the point that women in many, if not most, places in the world must continue their demand to be visible in all aspects of their lives, alongside their demand for wider or more specific political and social changes.

Women work hard to make themselves both seen and heard and to develop societies that notice and respect their contribution. Even with so little access to decision-making processes, women continue to work hard to promote peaceful and inclusive, and therefore sustainable, societies – the very targets of SDG 16.

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