

# The illusion of equality: Formal gains hide women's everyday realities

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The **Worldwide Independent Network of MR (WIN)**, leading global association of independent market research and polling firms, has released its latest annual Worldviews Survey. This year's survey captures the perspectives and beliefs of 45,000 individuals across 45 countries.

Ahead of this year's **International Women's Day**, WIN's latest findings shed light on **the persistent gap between perceived progress in gender equality and women's lived realities. While perceptions in formal spaces such as the workplace and politics suggest that equality has largely been achieved, women's day-to-day experiences tell a very different story, including exposure to violence, harassment, and insecurity.** The survey has tracked progress across many of these markets over 6 years, since it began in 2019, and it assesses whether equal opportunities and rights are improving worldwide.

The summary of findings is as follows:

## **Perceptions of progress in institutions contrast with women's lived experiences**

Overall, the findings suggest that perceptions of gender equality have improved globally, particularly in the workplace and politics. Two-thirds of people (66%) believe gender equality at work has been achieved to some extent, up from 59% in 2025, while 57% say the same about politics. The net index for perceived equality has also strengthened, rising from 25 in 2019 to 37 for the workplace and 20 for politics this year.

Local researchers attribute growing optimism in the workplace to visible institutional and policy developments, including anti-discrimination reforms and national initiatives aimed at improving women's access to employment. The APAC region and the Americas lead these perceptions, with around seven in ten people believing workplace equality has been achieved. However, opinion remains more divided in countries such as Japan, France, Turkey, and Peru, highlighting uneven global progress with the lower percentage of people believing equality has been achieved at work.

Much of this optimism is driven by men, as well as higher-educated and employed respondents, who consistently report more positive perceptions of gender equality across all areas.

However, women's lived experiences tell a more complex and concerning story. While in 43 out of 44 countries the percentage of women who believe equality has been achieved at home is higher than the respondents stating it has not been achieved, no remarkable improvement in perception has been observed this year compared to 2025. Côte d'Ivoire stands out in particular, where 72% of women say gender equality has not been achieved within the home.

At the same time, women's experiences of violence (17%), sexual harassment (around one in ten), and insecurity (with 45% of women reporting feeling unsafe walking alone at night vs 26% of men globally) remain persistently high. Crucially, amongst women who have experienced violence or harassment, perceptions of gender equality decline significantly across all areas of life.

This gap highlights a critical reality: while institutional progress and public optimism may be growing, true equality remains out of reach for many women, whose daily experiences continue to lag behind formal and perceived gains.

### **Increased public discourse does not translate into feelings of safety for women**

Despite growing global attention and efforts to combat violence against women, 45% of women globally report feeling unsafe at night, versus 26% of men – a gap that remains consistent in almost every country, except Pakistan, where the share is the same for both.

Moreover, one in four women aged 18 to 24 still experience violence, and 20% report sexual assault; the highest levels amongst all age groups, a pattern consistent since the WVS began in 2018.

Unsurprisingly, these experiences translate into feelings of insecurity. Over half (53%) of young women report feeling unsafe walking alone at night in their neighbourhoods (versus just 27% of men in the age group), illustrating a generation growing up in a context of heightened discourse on equality yet still facing the highest exposure to gender-based harm.

Amongst women over 65, 43% report feeling unsafe walking alone at night, compared with just 24% of men in the same age group.

The WVS findings also show that these figures have changed little since 2024, though some countries have seen increases. In Slovenia, for example, the proportion of women reporting insecurity at night rose from 17% in 2024 to 30% this year, influenced in part by media coverage of violent incidents and wider public debate. This underscores a critical insight: public discourse and awareness, while important, do not automatically translate into personal feelings of safety, even in countries that are relatively safe by international standards.

Moreover, in the Americas, a concerning 62% of women report feeling unsafe walking alone at night. Particularly in Latin America, where over half of women experience this insecurity, with Ecuador leading at 79%, followed by Mexico and Chile (75%), Brazil (70%), Colombia (65%), Argentina and Peru (64%), and Paraguay (55%). These findings highlight that insecurity in public spaces continues to act as a structural barrier to women's autonomy and mobility across the region.

### **Media visibility as a contextual factor to heightened perceptions of violence against women**

The global WIN network provides insight not only into the figures reported worldwide but also into the cultural and societal contexts behind them, helping to interpret and understand the numbers. For **International Women's Day**, WIN members from several countries examined reports of violence and sexual harassment against women, highlighting how intensified public debate and media coverage play a significant role in shaping both reporting and perceptions of these issues.

In Finland, reported sexual harassment rose from 9% in 2025 to 16% this year. Local researchers attribute this increase to sustained media investigations into sexual offences, including coverage of more than 100 suspected sexual crimes by taxi drivers following the 2018 deregulation of the sector, as well as higher levels of police reporting. They suggest that heightened public discussion may have increased awareness and lowered the threshold for recognising and naming harassment in surveys.

In the Netherlands, 55% of women report feeling unsafe walking alone at night compared to 18% of men. Analysts cite two widely publicised cases of sexual assault and murder involving young women as factors influencing the findings. These events triggered intense national debate and spurred the "Wij eisen de nacht op" (We claim the night) movement, raising awareness of women's safety in public spaces.

In Australia, the gender gap in perceived night-time insecurity is also pronounced, with 59% of women feeling unsafe vs 24% of men. Local members note the strong visibility of gender-based violence in national conversations, amplified by media coverage, advocacy movements, and the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032.

In Indonesia, public discussions around street harassment and safety in public transportation have grown more visible in recent years, shaping awareness and perceptions of risk.

These examples illustrate how media visibility and public discourse form a critical part of the context in which women’s perceptions of safety and harassment are reported, demonstrating that awareness, coverage, and advocacy can influence both recognition and reporting of gender-based harm.

**Richard Colwell, President of WIN International Association, said:**

"What we observe globally is a perception of institutional progress, particularly in workplaces and political spheres. Yet women’s lived realities tell a different story: violence, harassment, and insecurity remain persistent and, in many cases, unchanging. This underscores a critical truth: equality on paper or in policy is not enough. Without physical safety and protection from gender-based harms, true equality remains incomplete, and efforts to close the gap between perception and reality must remain urgent and sustained."

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