



A state of belonging The right to equal citizenship: A decade of **global action** for gender-equal **nationality laws** (2014-2025)

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About Equality Now

Equality Now is a worldwide human rights organisation dedicated to securing the legal and systemic change needed to end discrimination against all women and girls, everywhere in the world. Since its inception in 1992, it has played a role in reforming 130 discriminatory laws globally, positively impacting the lives of hundreds of millions of women and girls, their communities and nations, both now and for generations to come.

Working with partners at national, regional and global levels, Equality Now draws on deep legal expertise and a diverse range of social, political and cultural perspectives to continue to lead the way in steering, shaping and driving the change needed to achieve enduring gender equality, to the benefit of all.



About the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights

The Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights (GCENR) mobilizes action to end gender discrimination in nationality laws (GDNL) so that citizens have the equal right to confer nationality and to acquire, change and retain their nationality. Housed at Women's Refugee Commission, GCENR executes its mission through its coalition of national and international organizations and independent activists in over twenty countries and partner UN agencies. GCENR Steering Committee members include Equality Now, Family Frontiers, Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, Nationality For All, the UN Refugee Agency, Women's Learning Partnership, and Women's Refugee Commission.

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Summary

Over the past decade, Equality Now and the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights (GCENR) have helped reposition nationality law reform as a core gender equality, statelessness prevention and development issue, contributing to 18 nationality law reforms and partial reforms between 2013 and 2024. As the only global coalition dedicated exclusively to ending gender discrimination in nationality laws, GCENR has combined national advocacy, global legal engagement, and the power of UN mechanisms to translate feminist legal priorities into enforceable international obligations and standards. This work has shaped international norms, strengthened accountability through over 50 UN treaty body and review processes, and helped establish gender-equal nationality rights as justiciable human rights law.

The report that follows sets out how GCENR achieved these outcomes through coalition building, strategic litigation, and sustained engagement from the local to the global level, and shows why GCENR's work is an indispensable tool for achieving lasting legal equality for women and their families.

Introduction

“Being undocumented due to these laws is not just a legal technicality; it is a life-altering barrier.” **Nokuthula Mamba, Youth Sustainable Development Centre, Eswatini, and GCENR member organisation**

This impact report reflects on Equality Now’s and the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights’ (GCENR) work over the past decade to eliminate gender discrimination in nationality laws.

Equal nationality rights mean that women and men have the same legal rights to acquire, change, retain and pass on their nationality to their children, spouses and across generations.

In practice, it means:

- ◆ A mother has the same right as a father to confer citizenship to her children.
- ◆ A woman can pass her nationality to her foreign spouse, just as a man can.
- ◆ A woman’s nationality status is not automatically changed or revoked due to marriage, divorce, or widowhood.
- ◆ No one is denied legal identity or rendered stateless simply because their parent is a woman.

This right is essential for accessing basic services, legal protection and full participation in society. Discrimination in nationality laws leads to statelessness, gender inequality and intergenerational harm, especially for children.

The report captures key lessons, challenges and enablers of impact drawn from interviews, coalition documentation and reform-tracking across the world, including the 18 countries¹ that have achieved legal reform, and the additional 20 countries² where meaningful influence towards change has occurred. This document focuses on contribution and learning, recognising that legal change is collective and contextual, but that GCENR’s leadership has often been catalytic.

Origins: From Words & Deeds to a global campaign

“I was a single mother fighting for my daughters’ right to citizenship in Nepal. I felt deeply isolated, overwhelmed by doubt and fear, yet driven by an unshakable need to secure justice for my children.” **Deepti Gurung, mother and co-founder of Citizenship Affected People’s Network, and GCENR member organisation**

Equality Now’s long-standing commitment to legal equality for all women and girls, evident in its *Words & Deeds* reports, helped to lay the foundation for global advocacy on nationality rights. Its 2013 advocacy report, *Campaign to End Sex Discrimination in Nationality and Citizenship Laws* (the precursor to the 2016 report and current *The State We’re In: Ending Sexism in Nationality Laws, 2022 Edition – Update for a Disrupted World*³ and *Annex of Laws*⁴) expanded this focus, documenting discriminatory nationality laws worldwide and issuing calls to action. The report’s findings were cited in the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2013 report, *Discrimination against Women in Law and in Practice*,⁵ which highlighted the harmful persistence of nationality laws that prevent women from passing their nationality to their husbands or children on an equal basis with men.

The report and calls to action catalysed collaboration between Equality Now, the Women’s Refugee Commission, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Equal Rights Trust, and the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, and led to the launch of the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights (GCENR) at the UN Human Rights Council in 2014. In its early years, the coalition quickly grew to include a wide range of national members, primarily feminist organisations based across Africa, South and Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. This coalition approach of pairing UN influence (which now also includes UN Women, UNICEF, and others) with feminist legal advocacy working across national, regional, and global levels proved pivotal. Equality Now’s decision to co-develop the GCENR and provide communications, legal research, and strategic coordination established the campaign’s credibility and gave partners a platform to unify their efforts.

Panel including: IPU UN Representative, Morocco Minister of Solidarity, Social Integration and Family, Impacted Activist, UN Women ED, Sierra Leone Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs and GCENR Campaign Manager.



Credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown

How change happens: Pathways and strategies

Turning nationality law reform into a shared cross-sector priority

“With the solidarity and strategic support that later grew through GCENR, we organised sustained protests and nationwide campaigns demanding ‘father or mother’ instead of ‘father and mother [to pass citizenship to children].” **Deepti Gurung, mother and co-founder of Citizenship Affected People’s Network, and GCENR member organisation**

Early advocacy positioned equality in nationality laws as a human right in and of itself (i.e. under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Art. 9, among others) and a ‘gateway right’, a prerequisite for women’s families’ equal access to education, healthcare, justice and freedom from violence and discrimination. This framing successfully connected nationality reform to gender equality, statelessness prevention, children’s rights and wellbeing, and the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It has allowed GCENR to engage human rights, development, and humanitarian actors, bridging communities and bringing together actors who often work in parallel rather than in concert to advance gender-equal nationality laws.

Coalition and partner engagement

GCENR’s strength lies in its leaderful and distributed leadership model. National and international NGOs, UN agencies and regional networks co-lead advocacy efforts, while Equality Now serves as a strategic anchor for global legal advocacy on nationality law discrimination, providing legal analysis, standard-setting, and further coordination across national, regional, and UN processes. The coalition’s flexible approach allows members to participate without rigid governance structures and encouraged early engagement from partners across the Middle East and North African (MENA), Asia-Pacific and Africa regions. This feminist, consensus-based model fostered a strong sense of shared ownership and later inspired the formation and structure of other Equality Now co-initiated coalitions, including the Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law and the digital rights coalition AUDRi.

“The turning point in our campaign came through a combination of coalition-building, strategic media engagement, and international solidarity.”

Deepti Gurung

“Participating in these regional platforms made it possible to exchange strategies with peers facing similar legal barriers, learn from comparative experiences, and draw on successful advocacy approaches from neighboring countries.” **Wajeeda Al Baharna, President, Bahrain Women Association, and GCENR member organisation**

Rapid action to protect gender-equal nationality rights in times of crisis

This model and its responsiveness were tested during the COVID-19 pandemic. GCENR and its partners mobilised to ensure that the needs of women and families affected by gender-discriminatory nationality laws were not overlooked in national and international emergency responses. The coalition joined and co-developed a joint civil-society statement, endorsed by more than 80 organisations, calling on governments and UN agencies to include stateless persons and those at risk of statelessness in health, relief and documentation measures.

This [rapid coordination and evidence-based advocacy](#)⁶ by GCENR prompted the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to integrate these gender and nationality considerations into its 2020 global guidance on COVID-19 and statelessness⁷. The initiative also strengthened relationships among coalition members and reinforced GCENR’s reputation as a responsive, policy-relevant actor capable of sustaining momentum even amid crisis conditions.

To date, GCENR remains the only global coalition dedicated exclusively to ending gender discrimination in nationality laws. Its steering committee includes the Women’s Refugee Commission (where GCENR is housed), Equality Now, UNHCR, the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, Nationality for All (a regional organisation based in the Asia Pacific), and Family Frontiers (a Malaysia-focused organisation), along with other partners. This diverse composition links global influence with regional and local advocacy across more than twenty countries.

Continuing to build the evidence base

“Gender-discriminatory nationality laws trap young people in generational poverty and statelessness. Children without proof of nationality struggle to enroll in school, access healthcare, and later are barred from employment and economic opportunity.” **Nokuthula Mamba, Youth Sustainable Development Centre, Eswatini, and GCENR member organisation**

Building on the foundations laid by Equality Now’s initial nationality report in 2013, UNHCR’s background notes, and early analytical work by the Women’s Refugee Commission, the GCENR has continued to document both discriminatory nationality laws and reform pathways. It has produced policy briefs that have informed UNHCR, the CEDAW treaty body, and regional bodies, systematically advocating for and tracking reforms through coalition reporting, UN submissions, and regional documentation. These efforts have created an evidence base linking legal change to improved enjoyment of rights and family unity outcomes.

Creating regional momentum through national and global advocacy

“GCENR has shown how powerful collective advocacy can be. When national campaigns and activists are supported, connected, and are leaders in their own contexts, their voices become impossible to ignore.” **Abbas Taleb, GCENR Global Coordinator**

GCENR’s strategy situates national law reform efforts within a broader regional and global advocacy context, helping to build momentum for wider regional engagement. The coalition has deliberately cultivated this momentum by linking national reform campaigns, facilitating peer exchanges, and engaging regional and intergovernmental bodies. In Africa, this approach supported successive reforms in countries such as Madagascar and Liberia, and in the Pacific, GCENR is now engaging with Kiribati following reforms in Nauru and the Solomon Islands between 2014 and 2018. Although GCENR was not directly involved at the national level, these changes in the Oceania region occurred amid growing momentum as the Global Campaign elevated the issue with governments and international actors on the global stage.

Regional advocacy, diplomacy and convenings also helped to secure key commitments, including the Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa (Protocol to the African Charter on the Right to a Nationality), again illustrating the growing momentum of GCENR's regional advocacy for gender-equal nationality rights. This sustained regional approach has increased political visibility and cross-country collaboration on nationality reform.

Using global standing to enable open reform conversations in MENA

“Our webinars, meetings and strategic alliances demonstrate how effective the partnership between GCENR and UNICEF MENARO truly was. GCENR’s leadership and strategic vision helped strengthen the UN’s understanding and advocacy on equal nationality rights in MENA. GCENR brings expertise and partnerships across the UN, governments and civil society that are vital for the policy, programming and social change required to realise women’s and children’s rights. As the SDG and rights-based materials we produced together show, equal nationality rights can unlock access to services and support the realisation of national goals for women, children, families and communities.” **Maha Muna, Former UNICEF Regional Gender Advisor, MENA Regional Bureau**

The first Conference for Arab States on *Good Practices & Regional Opportunities to Strengthen Women’s Nationality Rights*, held at the League of Arab States in October 2017, marked a seminal moment for the region. Co-led by GCENR and UNHCR, this event was the first time the League had devoted a convening to the issue of gender discrimination in nationality laws. GCENR helped shape the meeting’s agenda, participant engagement and outcome language, which directly informed the development of the *Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity*. Importantly, this conference also connected regional reform efforts to the global agenda by linking the issue to the Sustainable Development Goals, further positioning women’s nationality rights within international human rights and development frameworks. *The League of Arab States Ministerial Meeting on Belonging and Identity* in February 2018 subsequently endorsed the Arab Declaration, solidifying regional recognition of the issue.

Building on this foundation, a milestone in this regional strategy was the 2022 Middle East and North Africa Regional Conference on Advancing Gender-Equal Nationality Rights, convened by GCENR in partnership with UNHCR and UNICEF in Larnaca, Cyprus. The conference brought together more than 60 representatives from 17 Arab states, including current and former government officials, parliamentarians, civil society advocates and UN experts.

The gathering provided an unprecedented forum for constructive dialogue on one of the world’s most entrenched areas of legal inequality. Participants examined the social and economic benefits of reform, shared experiences from countries such as Morocco and Tunisia, and explored pathways to align domestic laws with CEDAW and the Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity. The meeting strengthened regional collaboration and contributed to follow-up commitments by several government and MP attendees to advance reforms in Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Somalia.

Through GCENR’s coordination, global positioning, and coalition partners’ engagement, the conference helped create safe spaces for rights-based and gender-responsive approaches in conversations often framed in technical or political terms. The event deepened regional cooperation on nationality reform and enhanced GCENR’s reputation as a trusted convener among governments, international bodies, and grassroots advocates, demonstrating how regional diplomacy can help build reform momentum even in restrictive contexts.

Reform recommendations embedded in lived experience

Integrating the voices and leadership of impacted people and activists into GCENR’s work has been highly effective. GCENR’s strategy supported the leadership of women directly affected by discriminatory laws, such as the Malaysian mothers whose stories drove constitutional reform in 2024, and the Nepali women and youth who mobilised nationwide protests. These impacted activists are not only elevated by GCENR but also work closely with GCENR to inform priorities, conduct strategic planning, and co-design and implement activities. This approach has deepened authenticity and broadened the campaign’s tone to include the urgency of human rights alongside legal technicalities.



E. SAFAROV

CHAIRPERSON

UNHCR Deputy Director of International Protection, CEDAW Member and GCENR Campaign Manager at the Global Multistakeholder Summit, December 2024

Credit: Inter-Parliamentary Union

Achievements and contributions

“Over the past decade, through the tireless efforts of our brave, innovative, and resilient coalition members, GCENR has significantly strengthened movements at the national, regional, and global levels to end gender discrimination in nationality laws once and for all. This has not only resulted in legal reforms and pledges, but shifts in national conversations on the principle of equal citizenship that are essential to realising gender equality in law and in society.” **Catherine Harrington, Campaign Manager, GCENR**

Between 2013 and 2024, Equality Now and GCENR contributed to 18 nationality law reforms and partial reforms. These include landmark advances spanning the globe and demonstrating how sustained coalition advocacy has turned a global movement into national reform and vice versa. The GCENR's core contributions can be summarised as follows.

Global leadership and strategic partnerships

GCENR has established itself as a sector leader and bridge-builder between international institutions and grassroots advocates. From its early role on the Task Force to establish the Global Alliance to End Statelessness (hosted by UNHCR) to its current positions as Advisory Committee member and co-chair (alongside UN Women) of the Working Group on Addressing Discriminatory Laws and Policies, and Advisory Committee member of UN Women's *Equality in Law for Women and Girls* initiative, GCENR has shaped the global agenda on gender-equal nationality rights. GCENR's Campaign Manager also serves as an inaugural Steering Committee member of the Global Statelessness Fund, which provides multi-year, flexible grants to more than eight national GCENR coalition members, strengthening grassroots capacity for sustained advocacy. Through these roles, GCENR has become the trusted convener and connector that UNHCR, UN Women, and UNICEF turn to for expertise and partnership on the issue of women's nationality rights, linking UN agencies, governments, and feminist organisations, and ensuring that the experiences of impacted people and communities inform global policy and resource frameworks.

Advancing the implementation of international law and global standard-setting

GCENR and Equality Now have provided expert contributions that have shaped international standards and language across global frameworks, such as CEDAW General Recommendations, treaty-body recommendations to reporting States, UN Special Rapporteur reports⁸, UNHCR, UNICEF and UN Women's statelessness strategies, and regional protocols. GCENR's advocacy contributed to key multilateral milestones that elevated nationality reform onto global and regional agendas. These include the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 32/7 (2016) on women's equal nationality rights, the Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity (2018) endorsed by the League of Arab States⁹, and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Right to a Nationality (2024).

In 2023, the UN Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 53/16, "The Right to a Nationality: Equality in Nationality Rights in Law and in Practice." Building on Resolution 32/7 (2016), it reaffirmed States' duty to eliminate sex-based discrimination in nationality laws. GCENR and Equality Now contributed expert input and advocacy during consultations with the resolution's sponsors, ensuring that gender equality and statelessness prevention remained central themes. The resolution builds on a decade of

GCENR-led advocacy, translating feminist legal priorities into global policy, and reinforces the international position that equal nationality rights are a fundamental human right and development priority.

Legal pathways and advocacy

GCENR has strategically used legal channels to secure precedent-setting change. Equality Now filed and supported amicus briefs, most notably in *Sessions v. Morales-Santana*¹⁰ (originally *Lynch v. Morales-Santana*) before the US Supreme Court (2017), which struck down some unequal citizenship transmission rules. GCENR also provided technical and legal support to national partners engaged in constitutional and policy reform, such as Malaysia's 2024 amendment granting women equal nationality rights and Nepal's 2023 Citizenship Amendment Bill, which enables hundreds of thousands of previously excluded individuals to obtain nationality.

GCENR, Equality Now and partners have contributed expertise to over 50 CEDAW, Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and Committee on the Rights of the Child State Party or target country reviews and other submissions, ensuring that gender-equal nationality rights are enforced as obligations under international law. GCENR has worked through the UPR mechanism of the Human Rights Council to encourage Member States to make recommendations to their peers, urging reform of discriminatory nationality laws, helping to maintain international pressure and accountability for legal equality. Analysis by the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion found that gender discrimination in nationality laws received the highest number of reform recommendations under the UPR process¹¹, demonstrating the effectiveness of sustained global advocacy in influencing peer-State engagement. Recommendations increased from 150 in the First Cycle to 635 in the Third Cycle, during which approximately 80% of states under review received at least one recommendation relating to nationality and statelessness¹². Further, the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls sent communications to all countries with discriminatory provisions regarding the conferral of nationality on children, based on Equality Now's 2016 report, as well as follow-up communications to Malaysia at opportune moments.

Through this combination of litigation, engagement with treaty bodies, the Human Rights Council, UN special mechanisms, and national legal assistance, the campaign helped establish gender-equal nationality rights as justiciable human rights law.

Coalition-building

GCENR's distinctive value lies in its role as a global coordination hub that links advocacy across more than twenty countries. Its distributed leadership model allows national NGOs, UN agencies, and feminist networks to co-lead advocacy efforts while Equality Now provides convening power, communications infrastructure, and strategic legal guidance. GCENR has organised a series of national and regional convenings. This includes workshops in Bahrain, Madagascar, Malaysia, and Togo, and regional meetings under the League of Arab States and SADC that brought together governments, civil society, and affected families.

The coalition also co-sponsored UN Human Rights Council side events, CSW High-Level meetings, and the 2020 UNGA High-Level Event to sustain diplomatic engagement. These gatherings brought together cabinet ministers from reforming countries such as Morocco and Sierra Leone, alongside the Executive Director of UN Women, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat, and directly impacted mothers and youth advocates, all united in endorsing the benefits of reform and calling for global action. This collaborative structure has proven both flexible and durable, enabling rapid mobilisation around reform opportunities while maintaining feminist principles of shared ownership. As the only global coalition dedicated solely to ending gender discrimination in nationality laws, GCENR continues to serve as the connective tissue between local movements and global institutions.

Recognising that lasting reform depends on new generations of advocates, GCENR launched its Global Youth Program in 2020 with an online *Training of Trainers* initiative developed in response to pandemic restrictions. Building on this foundation, the Global Youth Network was formally established in 2021 to cultivate young feminist leaders advancing gender-equal nationality rights. The network now spans more than nine countries and serves as a mentorship and peer-learning platform connecting youth with established activists, policymakers, and UN partners.

In July 2024, GCENR convened the first Global Youth Summit, "*Youth Strengthening Movements for Gender Equality in Nationality Laws*," in Istanbul, bringing together 28 advocates from 16 countries, including 12 with discriminatory nationality laws. The summit equipped participants with advocacy, storytelling, and coalition-building skills and fostered solidarity across regions. Youth participants went on to launch collaborative campaigns, develop action plans, and engage decision-makers in

follow-up advocacy, demonstrating how coordinated youth leadership can sustain reform momentum beyond the summit.

The Youth Network has become a permanent pillar of the GCENR coalition, embedding intergenerational leadership and ensuring that young advocates, especially women directly affected by discriminatory laws, shape the movement's direction and priorities.

Communications and visibility

GCENR has produced accessible advocacy outputs, including [policy animations](#)¹³, [good-practice reports](#)¹⁴, and case studies that [humanised legal change](#)¹⁵. A highlight of the campaign's global advocacy was the 2020 UN General Assembly High-Level Event, *Achieving Gender Equality in Nationality Laws*, co-hosted with the Governments of Australia, Eswatini, and Togo, and UN partners including UNDP, UNHCR, UN Women, and the Commonwealth. This event showcased national leadership, amplified affected voices, and reinforced GCENR's reputation as the global convener on nationality rights.

GCENR and Equality Now have also shaped global public discourse through sustained media engagement and commentary. Their experts and partners have been featured in *The Economist*, *The Washington Post*, *Thomson Reuters Foundation*¹⁶, and *Context News*¹⁷, among other major outlets. Coverage has highlighted national reforms and the human impact of discriminatory laws, for instance, *The Economist* on Malaysia's reform efforts¹⁸, *The Washington Post*¹⁹ on Iran's 2019 citizenship reform, and multiple Reuters features quoting GCENR representatives and impacted activists such as Deepti Gurung. These pieces, alongside numerous Op-Eds and interviews, have helped bring the issue of gender-equal nationality rights to mainstream international attention, strengthening advocacy momentum and public awareness worldwide.

Deepti Gurung, Nepal

“Despite being born and raised in Nepal, I watched my daughters grow up without legal recognition because I raised them as a single mother. They were denied citizenship as a consequence of unequal nationality rights in Nepal, and this denial shaped their daily lives. Their aspirations, career choices, sense of identity, and self-esteem were repeatedly undermined, not because of who they were, but because they were children of a mother without equal nationality rights.

I became a mother at eighteen with no support, no safety net, and unable to complete my studies. I made a promise to myself: no matter what life had taken from me, I would live with integrity, protect my children fiercely, and give them everything I could.

I believed that if I did everything right, the system would not punish my children. I worked relentlessly, obeyed the law, paid my taxes, and raised my children with love and discipline. Our lives were modest, but we had a small world of our own where my daughters could dream freely.

That belief was shattered the day my eldest daughter sat down to apply for medical studies. Her dreams ended with a form. Not because she lacked merit, but because I was her mother, not her father. At that moment, something broke inside me.

I went everywhere seeking help, carrying both desperation and dignity. When I finally spoke to the media for the first time, I hid behind a pseudonym and a silhouette, still afraid of society’s judgment. Yet the anger kept building, refusing to stay silent.

That was when I started a Facebook page called “Citizenship in the Name of the Mother.” It was an uphill and lonely battle. I left a stable job, money became uncertain, and the weight of raising two daughters felt heavier than ever. Organising was not born out of ambition; it was born out of survival.

Meeting GCENR marked a turning point I still hold close to my heart. When I spoke to Catherine Harrington, I felt safe enough to reach out my hand for help for the first time. Through GCENR, I met others from across the world who carried the same wounds. We shared our stories, we cried, we grieved, and we stood together. For the first time, I felt that our struggle was not isolated and that it was part of a global fight.

The solidarity and strategic support from GCENR supported the establishment of the Citizenship Affected People’s Network (CAPN), an organisation rooted in lived experience. What began as a campaign led by a mother from a single room evolved into a movement. We organised sustained protests and nationwide campaigns demanding “father or mother” instead of “father and mother.” This shift challenged deeply entrenched patriarchy and gained traction in public and political spaces.

As a result, Nepal did adopt the “father or mother” provision, along with specific provisions allowing single mothers to pass citizenship to their children. Since then, many children have received citizenship through their mothers, including my own daughters, and now one of my daughters is a prominent advocate for gender-equal citizenship, working in Nepal and internationally.

That shift from isolation to solidarity changed everything. What began as me standing alone in anguish has been transformed into collective strength and organised resistance. Today, I stand with conviction, knowing that deeply rooted patriarchal citizenship laws can be challenged and dismantled.”



Credit: Inter-Parliamentary Union

Government, parliamentarian and civil society delegates at the Global Multistakeholder Summit, December 2024

Impact and outcomes

GCENR's catalytic role is evident in country-level breakthroughs. In Madagascar (2016), the campaign's first national workshop led to parliamentary reform that eliminated gender discrimination in the conferral of nationality to children. Following GCENR engagement at the Human Rights Council (2016) and an ECOWAS regional workshop with government representatives, Sierra Leone (2017) enacted similar reforms. In Malaysia (2018-2024), GCENR supported partners through national forums, media engagement, and joint CEDAW submissions, culminating in a constitutional amendment. In Iran (2019), campaign advocacy helped generate global attention, leading to reforms, although since repealed, allowing 75,000 children of Iranian mothers to obtain citizenship.

Between 2014 and 2020 alone, the GCENR coordinated or contributed to 55 submissions to UN human rights bodies (CEDAW, CRC, UPR, ICCPR) and produced 13 advocacy publications and multiple campaign videos. These outputs amplified coalition visibility and provided technical support to governments and partners across more than 20 countries.

Global summits: Building political momentum for reform

In 2023 and 2024, GCENR co-organised two milestone summits that solidified the coalition's global leadership on gender-equal nationality rights.

The 2023 Global Summit on Gender Equality in Nationality Laws, held in Geneva in partnership with UNHCR, UNICEF, and UN Women, convened over 30 States and numerous UN and civil society partners. High-level representatives from Eswatini, Iraq, and Kiribati publicly committed to advancing nationality law reform, while Indonesia, Liberia, and Morocco showcased the tangible benefits of reform, and the United States and Australia highlighted the importance of gender-equal nationality rights to achieving global goals. The event reaffirmed the growing political consensus that gender-equal nationality laws are integral to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and eliminating statelessness.

Building on this success, the 2024 Global Multistakeholder Summit on Advancing Gender Equality in Nationality Laws, co-hosted with Equality Now, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, UNHCR, and UN Women, deepened this momentum. The summit brought together 48 participants, including parliamentarians, government officials, and civil society leaders, from 15 countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Participants co-developed national reform roadmaps, created peer-to-peer alliances among legislators, and established a follow-up mechanism to track implementation. Equality Now's diplomatic engagement and co-facilitation role were central to securing the summit's success, while GCENR's network-building approach ensured that outcomes translated into sustained advocacy at national and regional levels.

Together, these summits marked a pivotal shift from coalition advocacy to coordinated intergovernmental, multistakeholder action, demonstrating that a decade of groundwork has culminated in a credible, inclusive global movement capable of shaping the next phase of reforms at the national level.

A major piece of follow-up work, first presented at the 2024 summit and created for lawmakers and policymakers seeking to meet their international legal obligations and commitments, is the joint Equality Now and GCENR "model law" publication, *Proposed Select Draft Articles on Nationality Rights to Ensure Gender Equality*²⁰, launched in time for the UN High Level Political Forum in July 2025.

Challenges and constraints

“Despite the positive impact of global campaigning for equal nationality rights on women, their families and society at large, political backlash and unfounded fears around national sovereignty and security have, unfortunately, stalled or even reversed efforts in some places. Volatility in funding has not helped the cause either. We must therefore continue to address this backlash and insecurity head-on, including by partnering with funders and potential funders on this work.” **Antonia Kirkland, Equality Now**

Measuring causality and contribution

Tracing an organisation’s precise role in multi-actor processes remains complex. Attribution gaps persist, especially when reform outcomes take years to unfold and require alignment across governments, civil society, and international institutions.

Political sensitivity

Nationality remains tied to sovereignty and identity. In several MENA and South Asian contexts, governments frame reform as a security threat or an erosion of national integrity. GCENR has navigated these sensitivities through diplomatic framing that has emphasised human rights obligations, family unity, and benefits for sustainable development rather than political critique.

Funding volatility

Despite its high impact, nationality reform has been chronically underfunded. The GCENR has historically operated with limited, project-based funding and in-kind support from partners, relying on small grants and partner contributions to sustain its coordination and advocacy work. This has constrained its ability to maintain continuous country-level engagement, especially in volatile contexts.

Regression and backlash

Legal reforms are not always permanent. Some states faced subsequent political pushback, and some reforms have faced political resistance after enactment. In Iran, follow-up restrictions introduced in 2023 have limited the implementation of the 2019 reform, and in Eswatini, government hesitation has delayed pledged changes. These experiences underline the need for continuous monitoring and partner support to ensure that legal victories translate into sustained equality in practice.

Lessons learned

“Through GCENR, we learned that the fight for nationality rights is not an individual struggle, but a collective and cumulative effort built on solidarity, shared narratives, and unified advocacy before decision-makers.” **Wajeeha Al Baharna, President, Bahrain Women Association, and GCENR member organisation**

Incremental change can be transformative

Experience shows that nationality law reform can unfold in stages, with each step helping to build political momentum, legitimacy and social awareness. In countries such as Madagascar and Liberia, phased reforms (often beginning with children’s nationality rights and later extending to spousal equality) have laid important foundations for comprehensive change. For example, in Madagascar, a 2016 amendment on women’s rights to pass nationality to their children opened the door to continued government engagement, while in Liberia, sustained advocacy led from early commitments to full reform in 2022. At the same time, comprehensive reforms in countries such as Senegal, Indonesia, Kenya, and Botswana demonstrate that sweeping change is also possible when advocacy and political will align.

Across these diverse pathways, the lesson is clear: incremental change can be transformative. Each reform, whether partial or comprehensive, helps shift social norms and strengthen the principle that women and men are equal citizens under the law. These efforts often spark broader national conversations about gender equality, citizenship and governance, challenging patriarchal legal frameworks and reinforcing more democratic and accountable systems. In this way, campaigns for gender-equal nationality rights not only correct legal injustices but also catalyse wider progress toward equality and inclusion.

The right partnerships multiply impact

Collaboration with UNHCR, UN Women, the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), among others, has enabled GCENR to leverage institutional reach while retaining a feminist framing. Equality Now’s bridging role has been critical, providing feminist legal grounding in otherwise technocratic spaces and leveraging global connections to identify national-level partners.

Movement building requires storytelling of lived experience

“Youth leadership has transformed the nationality rights campaign from a legal debate into a vibrant, cross-generational development campaign. This matters for long-term reform because it builds a sustainable advocacy pipeline by engaging affected families, traditional and community leaders, and the public.”

Nokuthula Mamba, Youth Sustainable Development Centre, Eswatini, and GCENR member organisation

Impactful advocacy comes from centring lived experience. GCENR’s campaign videos, personal testimonies, and data-driven infographics have replicated this formula to significant effect.

Sustainable change needs local anchors

Legal success in Malaysia and Nepal shows that knowledge sharing, capacity-building and flexible funding for grassroots partners are essential for maintaining advocacy momentum after legal wins and until full reform and implementation are achieved.

Conclusion

“Acceptance brings a sense of security and belonging that was long denied.”

Deepti Gurung, mother and co-founder of Citizenship Affected People’s Network, and GCENR member organisation

For more than a decade, GCENR has turned an often overlooked issue into a recognised pillar of gender equality. The coalition’s contribution is evident not only in the number of laws changed but in the reshaping of global discourse around belonging, identity and citizenship. This nationality rights work also demonstrates Equality Now’s distinct value: combining feminist legal expertise, coalition diplomacy, and narrative power to achieve systemic, lasting change to the benefit of millions of women and their families worldwide.

Endnotes

- 1 These countries are: Malaysia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Madagascar, Nepal, Benin, Lesotho, Guinea, United States, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Malawi, Senegal, Austria, Vanuatu, Denmark, Suriname, Niger.
- 2 Bahamas, Morocco, Mauritania, Somalia, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kiribati, Eswatini, Togo, Iraq, Jordan, Iran, Brunei, Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates
- 3 *The state we're in: Ending sexism in nationality laws, 2022 edition - Update for a disrupted world - Equality Now.* (2025, December 9). Equality Now. <https://equalitynow.org/resource/reports/state/>
- 4 *The state we're in: Ending sexism in nationality laws, 2022 edition - Update for a disrupted world - Equality Now.* (2025, December 9). Equality Now. <https://equalitynow.org/resource/reports/state/>
- 5 A/HRC/23/50.
- 6 GCENR Covid statement <http://www.equalnationalityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/COVID-Gender-Discrimination-in-Nationality-Laws-Impact-GCENR-Statement.pdf>
- 7 <https://www.refworld.org/policy/polrec/unhcr/2020/en/111940>.
- 8 <https://www.equalnationalityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/GCENR-Joint-Submission-VAWG-Nationality-Laws-Migration-Statelessness.pdf>.
- 9 This was endorsed by member states in 2024.
- 10 Brief of Equality Now et al, as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondent, *Lynch v. Morales-Santana* [later *Sessions v. Morales-Santana*], before the United States Supreme Court, <https://www.scotusblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/15-1191-amicus-respondent-equality-now-human-rights-watch.pdf>
- 11 <https://www.institutesi.org/pages/universal-periodic-review>.
- 12 <https://www.institutesi.org/resources/mainstreaming-statelessnessand-the-right-to-nationality-in-the-universal-periodic-review>.
- 13 <https://www.equalnationalityrights.org/resources/259479/> ; see also <https://www.equalnationalityrights.org/resources/259482/>.
- 14 <https://www.equalnationalityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Equal-Citizens-Thriving-Families-Realizing-Gender-Equal-Nationality-Rights-in-MENA.pdf>.
- 15 <https://www.equalnationalityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Gender-discrimination-childhood-statelessness.pdf>.
- 16 <https://news.trust.org/item/20190627194611-ydi45/>.
- 17 <https://www.context.news/socioeconomic-inclusion/malaysian-mothers-cheer-vote-to-fix-sexist-constitution>.
- 18 <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/11/28/malaysia-still-discriminates-against-women-over-citizenship>.
- 19 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-women-refugees-rights-citizenship/2020/12/24/0b5f74b0-445d-11eb-ac2a-3ac0f2b8cee_story.html.
- 20 <https://equalitynow.org/resource/reports/proposed-select-draft-articles-on-nationality-rights-to-ensure-gender-equality/>.



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