



Gender

Conclusion

Kouassi Yeboua and Jakkie Cilliers

Last updated 05 February 2025 using IFs 7.96

Conclusion

Gender inequality has been central to the policy debate regarding development for several decades. This report analyses the recent trends in gender inequalities in Africa and models the impact of a more rapid reduction in gender inequalities on Africa's development prospects, presenting the results of an ambitious Gender scenario and an ideal Gender Equality scenario.

The overview of gender inequalities in Africa highlights some progress in areas like education, yet persistent disparities persist. These inequalities are largely shaped by enduring cultural norms, discriminatory laws and traditional gender roles, which often assign specific responsibilities and expectations to men and women. Achieving gender equality in Africa remains a distant goal. According to the World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report 2023, at the current rate of progress, it will take 102 years to close the gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa.[1]

Sub-Saharan Africa is the lowest-ranked region in the gender gap in educational attainment compared to other global regions. Africa has made progress in providing healthcare services to its population. However, it has not translated into an equal improvement in the health status for men and women, as reflected in the high maternal mortality rates in many African countries. While North Africa has achieved the SDG target of fewer than 70 maternal deaths per 100 000 live births, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for around 70% of the estimated global maternal deaths in 2020.[2]

Despite numerous commitments to end violence against women, the prevalence of domestic violence remains high on the continent. Child marriage is still a widespread practice in many African countries. Women and girls disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid domestic care and work such as fetching water and firewood and caring for children.

In addition to limited access to financial resources compared to their male counterparts, African women also have limited access to productive resources such as land, agricultural inputs, equipment and extension services, and markets for their produce, which significantly undermine their economic empowerment.

The analysis also reveals that African women are woefully under-represented in the formal economy, politics and decision-making process. Still, they are disproportionately represented in the informal economy, which is less secure and rewarding. It is, however, worth noting that countries such as South Africa, Rwanda and Namibia are doing well in reducing the gender gap in political participation. North Africa, which has much lower gender inequalities in education and health compared to other African subregions, has the highest gender gaps in employment and political participation.

Climate change worsens these inequalities. African women face greater vulnerability to climate change due to their social roles, economic circumstances and limited access to resources.

The gender scenarios in this theme show that reducing gender gaps or achieving full gender equality could significantly improve Africa's future growth prospects. The findings indicate that addressing gender inequalities is not only growth-promoting but also reduces poverty, improves human development and accelerates demographic transition through lower fertility. Gender inequalities constitute a constraint and a drag on Africa's development.

Efforts to effectively address gender inequalities in Africa should start by addressing the root cause, which is the deep-rooted cultural and traditional values. Governments should ensure the implementation of the numerous international and regional conventions and treaties to reduce gender inequalities. Particular attention should be given to rural Africa, where legislation to end discriminatory gender practices is often completely ignored. The traditional leadership sector in many African countries lags in promoting and mainstreaming gender equality, often appearing unaffected, if not indifferent, to the associated legislation. Governments should involve religious and traditional leaders in their awareness campaigns, community education and dialogue on the importance and benefits of gender equality. Deep

structural and intersectional gender analysis should be conducted to understand the context and the multiple dimensions and layers of inequality and power. Furthermore, meaningful engagement and capacity-building— especially of local actors, men, women, community, local organisations, traditional leaders and policymakers—are essential for driving and sustaining the process of change.[3] Media and communications in local languages challenging discriminatory norms could also help make progress.

Governments should invest in free education (from nursery to secondary school), which is vital in promoting gender equality in education. Because of poverty, some parents often choose between sending their boy or girl child to school. They generally select the boy child whenever they face this choice because of the lower premium they place on their daughter's education. Thus, high school fees for nursery, primary and secondary schools exclude the poorest children, especially girls. In Ghana, after the abolition of tuition fees for upper secondary school in September 2017, 90 000 additional boys and girls students joined school the following year.[4] Policymakers could also use cash transfers to poor households on condition that they send all their children to school. Of course, implementing these policies has a fiscal cost, which will require effort to improve domestic revenue mobilisation.

These policies should go hand-in-hand with measures to reduce child marriage and teenage pregnancies, which disrupt girls' education in many African countries. All African countries should set the minimum age of marriage to at least 18 years, as recommended by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare, and sanction parents who permit marriage before age 18. Access to modern and affordable contraceptives and sexual education programmes should be improved to reduce teenage pregnancies. A study conducted in the US shows that federal funding for more comprehensive sex education reduces county-level teenage pregnancies.[5] There is also a need to adopt policies that allow adolescent mothers to return to school after giving birth.

Jobs requiring STEM skills tend to pay better, particularly in fast-growing sectors such as computer science and engineering. However, in Africa, females are significantly underrepresented in TVET and STEM programmes, which contributes to the continuing gender pay gap. African girls and women should be encouraged to choose these programmes by focusing on how rewarding they can be and positive narratives about gendered roles. STEM-related [infrastructure](#) and fully funded scholarships should be provided, as well as the promotion of female role models in STEM fields to encourage female participation in these programs.

On the healthcare side, governments should promote reproductive health and family planning services to reduce health burdens associated with maternity. To correct gender inequality in access to assets such as land, governments should adopt measures and legal reforms to eradicate discriminatory customary laws to open up women's ability to inherit and purchase land. Programmes targeting female farmers should also be promoted to improve their access to agricultural inputs, new technologies and credit. Gender-sensitive agricultural investment could reduce the productivity gap between men and women in the sector, boost domestic food production, and reduce food import and food insecurity. Reduced food import dependency could also relax the balance of payment constraints to growth.

This theme illustrates the significant economic gains to be made from reducing barriers to women's participation in the labour force. A study by the IMF shows that adding more women to the labour force brings larger productivity and growth gains than an equal increase in male workers,[6] implying that men and women are not *perfectly substitutable* in production. Barriers to gender equality in labour force participation in Africa should be addressed by removing legal restrictions to women's employment and ability to establish and develop formal businesses (a widespread practice in North Africa). In addition, action must be taken to improve the working environment for women still in the informal economy. Informal cross-border trade is an example of a section in the informal economy dominated by female traders, who face discrimination and poor working conditions, especially at border posts, which hinder their businesses and jeopardise their livelihoods.

A study by UNCTAD highlights the lack of trade facilitation and inadequate border infrastructure as major hurdles for

women traders, with corruption and cumbersome immigration requirements further complicating trading. Actions such as streamlining border processes for women, improving sanitation, public transport and warehousing infrastructure at border posts and increasing awareness of trade issues and facilitation initiatives will make a big difference for these informal female traders.[7]

African governments should invest in infrastructure to reduce women's unpaid domestic work and care burden, freeing up more time to devote to paid work by emphasising shared household responsibilities. A study by Seguino and Were[8] finds a positive effect of physical infrastructure investment on gender equality in employment rates. These include access to improved water facilities and electricity to provide modern fuel at home to reduce time spent fetching water and firewood, as well as providing quality public transportation systems and childcare and elderly care services. This should be accompanied by complementary employment policies such as quotas for project jobs, investment in skill training and macro-level policies (e.g. monetary and fiscal policy) to grow the economy and increase labour absorption capacity.

Regulations for maternity leave are an excellent initiative to protect women in paid employment, but it is also a barrier to female employment. Due to a longer paid maternity leave, employers prefer hiring and promoting men, who are generally less impacted by parenthood obligations. A significant extension of compulsory and paid paternity leave could reduce this discriminatory practice (the motherhood penalty). In 2021, Spain became the first country in the world to give mothers and fathers the same parental leave: 16 weeks, non-transferable and fully paid.[9] Other countries such as Iceland, Denmark and Finland have also followed suit.

Wage-setting procedures should reflect the productivity and competence of employees, not gender. Given that women are generally concentrated in low-wage jobs in Africa, increasing the minimum wages could also reduce wage inequality and stimulate growth as low-income groups tend to have higher consumption rates.[10]

On the political participation side, measures such as legally imposed mandatory quotas on nominating candidates in political parties should be adopted to increase women's political participation. Also, governments and African electoral commissions should work to make electoral processes more gender-responsive. This includes ensuring that electoral laws, procedures and systems support women's participation. Stereotypes often prevent some women from getting involved in politics. Political parties could develop special mentoring programmes to help such women get support from more experienced women politicians. Training and leadership programmes for women also could help women become self-confident and engage in politics.

Awareness of domestic violence should be increased by providing courses at school to boys and girls on its impacts. Victims should receive adequate assistance and ensure that perpetrators face the law.

Gender inequalities are not inevitable in Africa. Concrete measures can be taken to eradicate them, if not reduce them significantly, to advance the continent's development.

Recommendations

- Address deep-rooted cultural obstacles by involving religious and traditional leaders in awareness campaigns and undertaking community education and dialogue on the benefits of gender equality.
- Invest in free education and conditional cash transfers to poor households.
- Reduce child marriage and teenage pregnancies
- Encourage women to choose STEM programmes, provide STEM-related infrastructure and promote female role models.
- Roll out reproductive health and family planning services to reduce health burdens associated with maternity.
- Eradicate discriminatory customary laws so women can inherit and purchase land.
- Improve female farmers' access to agricultural inputs, new technologies. Provide incentives to banks to increase financial access for women.
- Remove legal restrictions to women's employment and ability to establish and develop formal businesses.
- Invest in infrastructure such as water facilities, electricity, child- and elderly care to reduce unpaid domestic work burden.
- Increase awareness of domestic violence through courses at schools and ensure that perpetrators face the law.
- Encourage women's participation in politics by ensuring that electoral laws, procedures, and systems support women's participation.

Endnotes

1. World Economic Forum, [Global Gender Gap Report 2023](#), 20 June 2023.
2. World Health Organization, [Maternal mortality](#).
3. J Njuki et al, [Meeting the challenge of gender inequalities through gender transformative research: Lessons from research in Africa, Asia, and Latin America](#), *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 44, 2022, 206–28.
4. J Walker et al, [The power of education to fight inequality](#), OXFAM Briefing Paper, Oxford: Oxfam, September 2019.
5. NDE Mark and LL Wu, [More comprehensive sex education reduced teen births: Quasi-experimental evidence](#), *National Academy of Sciences*, 119:8, 2022.
6. C Lagarde and JD Ostry, [Economic gains from gender inclusion: Even greater than you thought](#), International Monetary Fund, 28 November 2018.
7. UNCTAD, [Gender-sensitive policy recommendations to support women cross-border traders in Malawi, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia](#), 2019.
8. S Seguino and M Were, [Gender, development and economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa](#), *Journal of African Economies*, 23:suppl_1, 2014, i18–i61.
9. T Jurado-Guerrero and J Muñoz-Comet, [Spain: A pioneer in gender-equal parental leave](#), N-IUSSP, 23 September 2021.
10. S Seguino, [Macroeconomic policy tools to finance gender equality](#), *Development Policy Review*, 37:4, 2018, 504–25.

Donors and sponsors



HUMANITY
UNITED



Sweden
Sverige



Hanns
Seidel
Foundation



AUDA-NEPAD
AFRICAN UNION DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the [Creative Commons BY license](#). You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts can be embedded in any site.

Cite this research

Kouassi Yeboua and Jakkie Cilliers (2025) Gender. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/16-gender/> [Online Resource] Updated 05 February 2025.

About the authors

Dr Kouassi Yeboua previously worked as a Senior Researcher at AFI, where he led significant ISS studies on the long-term development prospects of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Horn of Africa, Nigeria, Malawi, and Mozambique. His research focuses on development economics, macroeconomics, gender, and economic modeling. He holds a PhD in Economics.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.