

## Why Addressing Gender Inequality is Central to Tackling Today's Polycrises

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### Abstract

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The term “polycrisis” is an increasingly apt way to describe today's challenges. Major wars, high inflation, and climate events are creating hardship all around the world, which is still grappling with a pandemic death toll approaching 7 million people. Faced with such daunting challenges, one might well ask why we should be thinking about the gender dimensions of recovery and resilience for future shocks. The answer is simple: We can no longer afford to think in silos. Today's interlocking challenges demand that sharp inequalities, including gender disparities, must be addressed as part and parcel of efforts to tackle Africa's pressing issues and ensure the continent's future success.

**Keywords:** *Gender, Inequality, Polycrises*

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### **Background to the Study**

The burdens of the pandemic have been unequally borne across regions and countries, and between the poor and better off. Inequalities exist around gender which can be defined as the “socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, attributes and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for men and women, boys and girls” and people with non-binary identities. As Raewyn Connell laid out more than two decades ago, existing systems typically distribute greater power, resources, and status to men and behaviors considered masculine. As a result, gender intersects with other sources of disadvantage, most notably income, age, race, and ethnicity. This understanding is now mainstream. As recently observed by the IMF, “The gender inequalities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic follow different paths but almost always end up the same: Women have suffered disproportionate economic harm from the crisis.” Among the important nuances revealed by micro-surveys is that rural women working informally continued to work through the pandemic, but with sharply reduced earnings in Nigeria and elsewhere. And as the burden of childcare and home schooling soared, rural households headed by women were far less likely than urban households to have children engaged in learning activities during school closures.

Important insights emerge from IFPRI's longitudinal panel study (which included Ghana, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda) covering income loss, coping strategies, labor and time use, food and water insecurity, and child education outcomes. Among the especially adverse impacts for women were greater food and water insecurity compared to men, including worrying about insufficient food and eating less than usual, while a large proportion of women also did not have adequately diverse diets. Moreover, many women had to add hours to their workday caring for sick family members, and their economic opportunities shrank, cutting their earnings and widening gender income gaps. While today's problems seem daunting, there remain huge causes for optimism, especially in Africa. Over the past three decades, many African countries have achieved enormous gains in levels of education, health, and poverty reduction. Indeed, the pace of change has been staggering and commendable. As captured in the Women Peace and Security Index, which measures performance in inclusion, justice, and security, 6 of the top 10 score improvers during the period 2017-2021 were in sub-Saharan Africa. The Democratic Republic of Congo was among top score improvers since 2017, as the share of women with financial accounts almost tripled, to 24 percent; and increases exceeding 5 percentage points were registered in cell phone use and parliamentary representation. In the Central African Republic, improvements were experienced in the security dimension, where organized violence fell significantly, and women's perceptions of community safety rose 6 percentage points up to 49 percent. Looking ahead, efforts to mitigate gender inequalities must clearly be multi-pronged, and as highlighted above, we need to think outside silos. That said, two major policy fronts emerge to the fore.

### **Ensure Cash Transfers that Protect Against Poverty, are Built and Designed to Promote Women's Opportunities, with a Focus on Digital Payments**

Ways to address gender inequalities as part of social protection program responses include deliberate efforts to overcome gender gaps in cell phone access by distributing

phones to those women who need them, as well as private sector partnerships to subsidize airtime for the poorest, and to make key information services and apps freely available. Programs could also make women the default recipient of cash transfer schemes, instead of the head of household. Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives can be built into program design to give women the skills and capabilities needed to successfully manage accounts and financial decision-making.

### **Reducing the Risk of Violence Against Women**

Women who are not safe at home are denied the freedom from violence needed to pursue opportunities that should be afforded to all. In 2018, 10 of the 15 countries with the worst rates of intimate partner violence were in sub-Saharan Africa in descending order of average intimate partner violence these were, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Zambia, Ethiopia, Liberia, South Sudan, Djibouti, and Uganda. Conflicts and 'crises multiply womens risk of physical, emotional, and sexual violence. During the pandemic, risk factors like economic stress were compounded by service closures and stay-at-home orders, which increased exposure to potential perpetrators.<sup>11</sup> Several governments responded by strengthening existing help services, including police and justice, supporting hotlines, ensuring the provision of psychological support, and health sector responses. Examples of good practice included an NGO in North-Eastern Nigeria, which equipped existing safe spaces with phone booths to enable survivors to contact caseworkers. However, given the high levels of prevalence and often low levels of reporting, prevention of gender-based violence is key. Targeted programs with promising results in prevention include community dialogues and efforts to change harmful norms, safe spaces, as well as possibilities to reduce the risk of violence through cash plus social protection programs. These efforts should be accompanied by more systematic monitoring and evaluation to build evidence about what works in diverse settings.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, but certainly not least, women should have space and voices in decision-making. This case was powerfully put by former President Sirleaf Johnson in her 2021 Foresight essay, which underlined that "'economic, political, institutional, and social barriers persist throughout the continent, limiting womens abilities to reach high-level leadership positions.'" Persistent gender gaps in power and decision-making, not only limits innovative thinking and solutions, but also the consideration of more basic measures to avoid the worsening of gender inequalities. Overcoming these gaps in power and decision-making requires safeguarding legal protections and rights, investing in women and girls financially, and opening space for women in political parties so that women have the platforms to access high-level appointed and competitive positions across national, regional, and international institutions.

### **Reference**

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