Gender equality matters for Africa's development.

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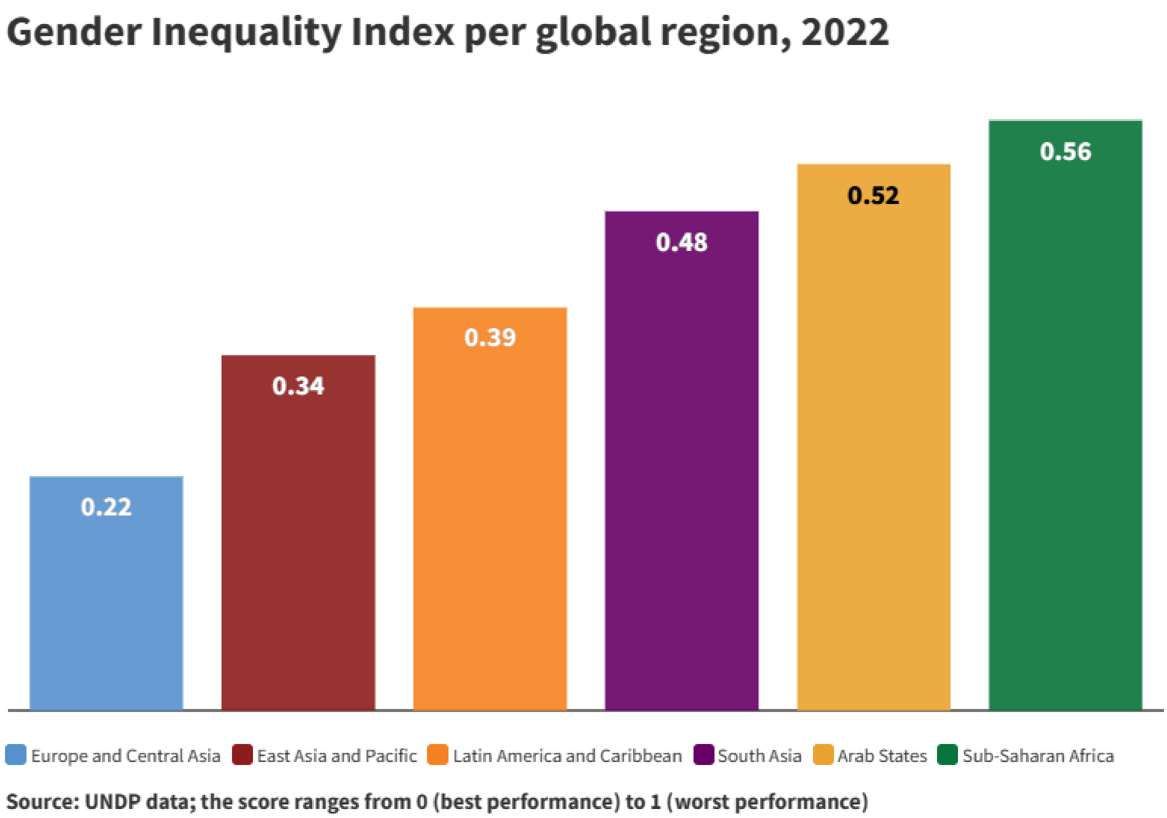
Summary:

Addressing gender inequalities in Africa is not only growth-promoting but also reduces poverty and improves human development.

Text:

Attention to gender equality has never been more urgent. The rise in global fragility fueled by conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic, repercussions from the war in Ukraine, and persistent issues like climate change have worsened existing gender disparities.

Despite the significant progress in policy and legislation and African countries' ratification of international and regional conventions, the continent is far from achieving gender equality. Gender inequalities in Africa are deeply rooted in long-standing social and cultural norms and traditions. As shown in the chart below, Sub-Saharan Africa is the worst-performing region in the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievement between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market.



Given the current rate of progress, it is estimated that Africa could take more than 100 years to achieve full gender equality. Gender inequalities affect various aspects of life in Africa, including education, healthcare, employment, political representation, and access to resources.

African women are more likely to die from communicable diseases, such as HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, and nutritional deficiencies than men. Even though there has been an improvement in maternal healthcare continentwide in the last two decades, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for around 70% of global maternal deaths, a consequence of gender bias in the distribution of healthcare.

Women and girls in Africa also bear most of the burden regarding unpaid care and domestic work; they face a higher risk of violence at home and in public spaces and are under-represented in the labour market and politics, governance and decision-making throughout the continent.

In 2019 (pre-pandemic level), the average labour force participation rate in Africa stood at 56% for women compared to 73% for men — a gap of 17 percentage points. However, this is an improvement from a gap of 23 percentage points in 1990. At the regional level, the highest gap is in North Africa, where the female labour force participation rate was about 21.9% in 2019 compared to 69.5% for men. North Africa has lower gender inequality in education, but this academic achievement does not necessarily translate into progress for women in the labour market. As revealed by the World Bank 2021 Women, Business and the Law (WBL) report, women in the region face unfair laws that economically disempower them. Countries such as Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia prohibit women from working in certain industries.

In African parliamentary bodies, women hold an average of 24% of seats, while their presence in top executive roles is a meagre 7%. Despite local governments being perceived as entry points for women in politics, only 21% of African council positions are held by women. Nevertheless, there are standout examples of progress. Rwanda, Namibia, South Africa, and Senegal rank among the top ten nations globally for female representation in their parliaments.

Even in education, where the continent has made the most significant progress in reducing gender inequality, girls in sub-Saharan Africa are still the most disadvantaged regarding access to schooling compared to other global regions. A multitude of factors, including widespread child marriage (though on a downward trend), teenage pregnancy, poverty and the social norm of valuing boys over girls, constrain females' access to education in sub-Saharan Africa.

Furthermore, the exacerbating effects of climate change further compound these inequities. African women, constrained by their societal roles, economic status, and restricted resource accessibility, find themselves disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

What could be the benefits of closing these gender inequalities in Africa?

New ISS African Futures and Innovation research shows what Africa's development could gain from more gender inclusion. Using the progress made by other countries or regions at similar levels of development as a benchmark, the study models the impact of an ambitious but realistic reduction in gender inequalities (Gender scenario) on Africa's development prospects to 2043, the end of the third ten-year implementation plan of the African Union's Agenda 2063. Then, the report includes an illustrative gender equality scenario that models the impact of full gender equality by 2043, with the full knowledge that it is not practically achievable.

In the Gender scenario, the 2043 African economy is about US$259 billion larger than what is projected in the Current Path forecast (business-as-usual scenario) in the same year. The services sector benefits the most from reduced gender inequalities in Africa, with a value-added of US$174 billion larger than the Current Path forecast in 2043. Reduced gender barriers in the scenario accelerate women's movement from agriculture to other sectors, particularly the service sector. While most women are still employed in the agricultural sector, the share of women employed in the African service sector has been increasing partly due to shifting social norms.

In the Gender scenario, Africa's GDP per capita (PPP) would also be US$355 more than the Current Path forecast by 2043. At the same time, the number of poor people is 53 million fewer than projected in the business-as-usual scenario at the same stage.

Even more impressively, the illustrative Gender Equality scenario shows an African economy that is US$1 trillion larger than the Current Path forecast. GDP per capita would be 12% higher, and Africa would have 80 million fewer persons in extreme poverty compared with the Current Path forecast in 2043. These findings imply that aggressively implementing policies to reduce gender inequalities and create a level playing field for all could significantly enhance African growth and development.

Although no silver bullet exists, several policies can help tackle gender inequalities in Africa and reap its associated economic gains.

Efforts to address gender inequalities in Africa must confront deep-rooted cultural and traditional values as the primary cause. Governments should prioritise implementing international and regional conventions to reduce gender disparities, especially in rural areas where discriminatory practices persist unchecked. Involving religious and traditional leaders in awareness campaigns and education is crucial.

Investing in free education up to the secondary level can significantly promote gender equality in education. Policies should also combat child marriage and teenage pregnancies, ensuring a minimum marriage age of 18 and improving access to contraceptives and sex education. Encouraging girls and women to pursue STEM programs through scholarships and role models can narrow the gender gap in lucrative sectors.

Reproductive health services, legal reforms to address land ownership disparities, and gender-sensitive agricultural programs are essential for economic empowerment. Removing legal barriers to women's employment, investing in infrastructure (including electricity, roads, water and sanitation) that reduces the time women spend on household production, and extending paternity leave can enhance women's participation in labour and mitigate wage inequality.

Adopting mandatory quotas for women candidates, gender-responsive electoral processes, and mentorship programs can boost women's political participation. Education on domestic violence and support for victims are critical, alongside legal consequences for perpetrators.

By implementing these measures, gender inequalities in Africa can be significantly reduced, fostering development and prosperity on the continent.

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