

18 July 2023

4D – Dialogues on Demographic Diversity and Dividend(s)

Gender Equality for Demographic Dividend(s)

Introduction

Gender inequality persists in some form in every country and region worldwide. For example, gender-based violence affects women and girls everywhere. Almost one in three women have experienced intimate partner violence and/or non-partner sexual violence – that’s 736 million women around the globe. Gender equality is a human right and means that women and men, girls and boys enjoy the same resources, rights, opportunities and protections, including freedom from gender-based violence. Gender equality benefits every individual, family and society. Indeed, enabling women and girls to realise their full socio-economic potential would boost the entire world economy. The World Bank estimates that 13 trillion US-Dollars in global GDP potential could be unlocked by increasing gender equality.

Gender equality is also a precondition to unlocking a demographic dividend. To realize the demographic dividend, fertility rates must decline, resulting in smaller family sizes. And family sizes only become smaller when women become empowered due to greater gender equality. When girls can stay in school longer and marry later, when women are empowered in their relationships, families and communities, and when women are able to participate fully in the labour force and political life, then they are able to make independent decisions about the number of children they want. Coupled with access to family planning resources, this tends to result in smaller families and the demographic dividend can come within reach.

Despite progress in key areas for gender equality, disparities remain globally—in healthcare, education opportunities beyond primary school, and participation in socioeconomic and political life outside of the home. About 800 women die every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. In addition, for every woman who dies, 20 to 30 women experience equally preventable injuries, infections or disabilities. A woman’s lifetime risk of dying as a result of pregnancy and childbirth varies immensely depending on where she lives – ranging from 1 in 5,300 in high-income countries to 1 in 49 in low-income countries.

In education, gender gaps in primary school enrolment have mostly disappeared globally in recent decades. Even so, at the primary school level in Sub-Saharan Africa about one in four girls in the region are out of school, compared to one in five boys. This gap becomes wider at the secondary school level, when girls are more likely to leave school than boys due to, for example, child marriage or early pregnancy. Conversely, every further year of secondary education reduces a girls’ likelihood of being married before the age of 18. Exclusion from education results in a lack of basic literacy skills. Two-thirds of the 771 million illiterate adults worldwide are women. In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than one in four young women are illiterate.

Gender gaps in the labour market persist as well. In Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific, women are more likely than men to be engaged in vulnerable work (such as farm or household work), which is associated with lower incomes and job security. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation for many women, including by intensifying women's unpaid workload at home. As a result, more women than men have had to give up or reduce their paid work to care for the sick, elderly, and children.

To harness a demographic dividend, countries must advance gender equality in every area of life. This requires policies, laws and interventions that address the gendered power dynamics, social norms, values and practices that shape the unequal relationships between men and women in households, communities and societies. Priorities for public policies vary according to the stage of demographic transition in each country. However, all public and private interventions in sectors from education and health to public infrastructure, energy and climate adaptation must be grounded in a commitment to gender equality. This also requires including women in decision-making and leadership structures. Only then can demographic dividend(s) and sustainable development become a reality.

Gender equality is at the heart of many of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda goals, while Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 is to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. The Cairo Program of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development also highlighted the challenges posed by gender inequality and called on governments to foster the empowerment of women to improve the quality of life for everyone, thereby contributing to socio-economic development. Ever since, the international community has regularly reaffirmed and expanded its commitments, most recently at the 25th International Conference on Population and Development in Nairobi in 2019. The African Union (AU)'s Agenda 2063 ‘The Africa We Want’, the AU Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend 2017 as well as the AU Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) 2018-2028 identify investments in gender quality as key to realising a demographic dividend for a prosperous Africa and strive to complete women's empowerment in all spheres of social, economic and political life.

Needs for Action

- **Transform social norms and strengthen SRHR for gender equality**

Investing in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and services is central to creating a healthy, educated and empowered population. Universal SRHR enable girls and women and boys and men to make informed and self-determined decisions about their bodies, health and futures. For women and girls, SRHR are essential to their autonomy and ability to decide freely if, when and how many children to have. Changing social norms that reinforce gender inequality, such as traditional gender roles that ascribe to women the sole role as wife and mother, is equally critical. This work must include men and boys; for example, by teaching them models of positive masculinity to end violence against women. Engaging religious and traditional leaders in the effort to change gender norms and end harmful cultural practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation can be very effective to improve girls' and women's well-being – and advance gender equality.

- **Support skills development and training for girls and women**

An important prerequisite for gender equality is that girls and women are able to access quality primary and secondary education and training. This enables them to develop the necessary skills required for wage work with a stable income, job security and healthy working conditions. Schools should ensure young women learn about and are encouraged to seek opportunities from vocational training to a university education – including in occupations that have been traditionally occupied by men, e.g., in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. Integrating financial literacy and entrepreneurship in school curricula would enable women to participate more equally in the workforce. In view of the advancing digitalisation of work and a persistent gender digital divide, teaching girls and young women digital skills is critical.

- **Implement gender-sensitive laws and policies**

Gender-sensitive policies are a critical tool to reduce entrenched inequalities. To ensure women have equal opportunities in the workforce, gender-responsive labour policies can help create work environments that are safe for women, mandate equal pay for men and women, or set quotas for women in leadership positions. In the education sector, governments at the national and local level should identify and address the main barriers that keep girls out of school. These include child marriage, the prohibitive cost of school supplies for families living in extreme poverty, and the absence of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools. In addition, ensuring the effective and efficient implementation of national laws and policies to address violence against women, such as rape laws, is necessary so that women can fully participate in social and economic life. Further, countries need to establish accountability mechanisms to ensure existing laws and policies to advance gender equality are effectively implemented.

- **Invest in adequate and gender-responsive infrastructure and services**

Inadequate and gender-blind infrastructure and services often lead to girls dropping out of school and women being unable to take up employment, thus entrenching gender inequality. Education facilities need to provide gender-sensitive infrastructure, including toilets with running water and doors so girls can manage their menstrual health during the school day, and efficient transportation infrastructure so that girls can get to school safely without the risk of encountering sexual violence. To enable women to participate in the labour force, governments must create the conditions for women's employability and guarantee them a minimum level of social protection to lift them out of the poverty trap.

- **Improve data on girls and women**

A lack of disaggregated data on girls' and women's unique needs – including those of women and girls who experience multiple forms of marginalisation due to, for example, their race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality or disability – prevents a comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face. This hinders the development of targeted policies to promote gender equality. National statistical systems need to be strengthened and the capacity of local research institutions increased to collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data.

Best Practices

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to advance gender equality and each country must decide which approaches are best suited to meet its needs and demands. However, policymakers can learn from successful interventions elsewhere and adapt them to their local contexts.

- ***Dignity for Girls – Uganda***

The Dignity for Girls project was launched by Faith in Water in Uganda in 2016 with the aim of preventing girls from staying home from school, or dropping out altogether, when they are menstruating. The project worked with three faith groups that are major providers of education – the Catholic Church, the Church of Uganda and the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council – to tackle a lack of information, resources and facilities around menstruation, which present a major barrier for girls' schooling. In addition to reaching over 30,000 people with awareness raising efforts and training on menstrual health, the project upgraded school latrines so girls can manage their periods while in school. Twenty-four faith-based schools were given status as centres of excellence on teaching menstrual hygiene management. While the original project has ended, the Ugandan organisations HEAR Uganda and A Rocha Uganda are continuing awareness raising and training activities to erase menstruation as a barrier to girls' schooling.

- ***African Girls Can Code Initiative (AGCCI) – Multiple Countries***

The African Girls Can Code Initiative (AGCCI), commissioned by UN Women and the African Union Commission in collaboration with the International Telecommunication Union, was launched in 2018. AGCCI aims to train and empower a minimum of 2,000 young girls aged 17 to 25 across Africa to become computer programmers, creators and designers, placing them on track to take up studies and careers in the information, communication and technology, education and coding sectors. So far, 600 girls have been trained through the AGCCI coding camps nationally and regionally. The regional coding camps took place in Pretoria, South Africa, in 2019 and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2018. Additionally, national coding camps were hosted in Ethiopia with participants from the regions of Addis Ababa, Hawassa and Adama.

- ***School for Husbands – Six Sahel Countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania and Niger)***

Between 2015 and 2020, over 24,000 men joined Husband Schools or Future Husbands' Clubs created and implemented by the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend Project (SWEDD), in which they took classes promoting household task-sharing, healthy sexual behaviours and the eradication of violence against women. These clubs are designed to create spaces for peer-led discussions to instil a sense of community responsibility among men. A further goal is to involve men in decision-making concerning sexual health and gender equality. Currently, 1,640 clubs are being established with an expected reach of 49,200 participants.