



Task Force 01

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER

Gender Mainstreaming as a Key Driver of a Global Inclusion Agenda

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Abstract

In Africa, where gender inequality remains a big problem, addressing gender-based socio-economic vulnerability should be a priority to enhance the resilience of women (and the society) as countries deal with the multitude of crises facing the world. Building on the work by the South African Institute of International Affairs which demonstrated that the lack of gender inclusivity was the biggest factor responsible for the high socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by African countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, this policy brief seeks to enhance the understanding of the intersectionality of gender and poverty and how it can contribute to socio-economic vulnerability especially during crises. It further proposes ways in which these vulnerabilities can be addressed through gender inclusive policies. To achieve these goals, the brief analyses the key factors that drive gender-based socio-economic vulnerabilities in countries across Africa and make recommendations on how these can be improved to minimize such vulnerabilities.

Diagnosis of the issue

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic's economic fallout. Women faced a higher risk of job losses and thus were more likely than men to stop working, and they bore the burden of unpaid care and domestic work (Nieves et al. 2021). Moreover, women earn less for the jobs that they do, are overrepresented in vulnerable employment or likely to work in the informal economy, and have fewer savings (Pozzan et al. 2020, 5). Consequently, the pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequalities, pushing more women into extreme poverty and widening the gender poverty gap thus risking women's economic gains of past decades. The World Economic Forum highlighted that the global gender gap closure has been set back significantly due to the pandemic, with estimates indicating that the impact on women could lead to a \$1 trillion reduction in global GDP by 2030. However, proactive measures to achieve gender parity improvements could potentially add \$13 trillion to global GDP by the same year.

While the gendered effects of COVID-19 on poverty is generally a universal issue, the severity of these effects varies from country to country. Factors such as existing gender gaps, social norms, economic structures, and access to resources play a crucial role in determining the extent of the impact on women's poverty levels. For instance, regions like sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are projected to experience a resurgence in extreme poverty, with women being disproportionately affected due to their employment in sectors hit hardest by the pandemic (Levine et al. 2021). As such, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities, making it essential for countries to tailor their responses to address the specific challenges faced by women in different socio-economic contexts.

In countries like South Africa for instance, gender played a big role in determining the extent to which its citizens felt the impoverishing effects of COVID-19 (Naidoo and Naidoo 2022). Yet the government social protection interventions saw women benefit less from them than their male counterparts (Casale and Shepherd 2022). This is partly due to the lack of a gender perspective in the design of the interventions that the government undertook. For example, the COVID-19 Temporary Employee/ Employer Relief Scheme (“TERS”) that was introduced in 2020, supplemented income for employees following losses in earning due to reduced working hours (The Republic of South Africa 2021). Unfortunately, this scheme only covered employers and employees in the formal sector thus significantly excluding women, the majority of whom work in the informal sector. This shows the importance of designing policies in a manner that considers gender as a key determinant of social and economic vulnerability during such crises as the COVID-19 pandemics.

Against this background, this brief proposes areas of interventions that can be adopted in developing countries to enhance the resilience of people to the socio-economics effects of pandemics by addressing gender disparities. The recommendations further look into the role that the G20 can play in facilitating their adoption and implementation. These proposals are based on the analysis of the factors that drive the socio-economic vulnerabilities of societies due to pre-existing gender disparities in opportunities. They are also made based on the current and potential priorities of the G20.

Recommendations

Policies play a crucial role in minimizing the social and economic vulnerability of women during pandemics like COVID-19. The blanket approach used during the height of the COVID-19 crisis, where countries of varying socioeconomic statuses implemented uniform containment measures, likely worsened the economic situations of vulnerable groups. The following recommendations underscore the importance of policymakers factoring in gender when crafting pandemic containment strategies aimed at minimizing social and economic losses for people during crises.

1. **Investing in Women's Economic Empowerment:** Developing countries can enhance women's economic resilience to pandemics by investing in programs that promote women's entrepreneurship, access to finance, and skills development. The current rate at which these countries are investing in women empowerment will see more than 340 million women and girls still living in extreme poverty by 2030 (UN Women 2024). Entrepreneurship can help women avoid losses, which they tend to suffer the most during pandemics compared to men. Improved access to finance helps women mobilize savings that can help them navigate the economic fallouts from pandemics. Lastly skills development can help on several fronts including helping more women get formal employment and move out of the informal sector, and help women move out of vulnerable employment, and help women grow their businesses or build careers in resilient sectors.

With the establishment of the G20 Women's Empowerment Working Group that was created under India's presidency in 2023, the G20 can support the women empowerment efforts in developing countries through advocacy and resource mobilization. The working group, which aims to support countries in addressing gender inequality in its

different dimensions, should especially recognize the unique challenges faced by women in developing countries and take advantage of the African Union's new seat at the G20.

In this regard, the working group can work with the union's gender experts to highlight these challenges and putting them at the fore of the G20 agenda.

2. **Promoting Gender-Equal Access to Healthcare:** Ensuring equitable access to healthcare services for women during pandemics is also crucial in minimizing socio-economic losses among them. During the pandemic, women's access to health may have suffered due to the shifting priorities in the health sectors and lack of capacity in the health systems of low-income countries (Osanan et al. 2020). Developing countries can prioritize investments in healthcare infrastructure, maternal health services, and reproductive health programs. The G20 can advocate for gender-inclusive healthcare policies and support capacity-building initiatives to strengthen healthcare systems. It must prioritize the health and wellbeing of women (and children) by making it a permanent fixture on its agenda for action (Kant and Clark 2023).

3. **Addressing gender-based violence:** Nearly one in three women globally experienced intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, with women in developing countries suffering more than those in the developed world (Kifle et al. 2024, 127). Evidence shows that a link exists between low-socio-economic status and increased risk for domestic violence during lockdowns which suggests the need for socio-economic interventions to mitigate these risks. Developing countries should implement comprehensive strategies to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, which tends

to escalate during crises like pandemics. Through the women's empowerment working group, the G20 can facilitate knowledge-sharing, resource mobilization, and technical support to help countries strengthen their response to gender-based violence and protect women and girls. This should be linked with the women empowerment initiative under the working group on the empowerment of women since evidence shows that women empowerment can minimize women's experiences and tolerance of gender-based violence.

4. **Addressing gender inequalities in the health and care sectors:** Enhancing women's access to decent work, promoting equal pay, and ensuring labor rights protection are essential for building resilience to socio-economic shocks. Health and care work is one area where all these issues feature prominently since a lot of this work is not adequately accounted for and women are overrepresented in the sector (up to 67% according to the World Health Organisation).¹ During the pandemic, the health and care responsibilities – including unpaid care – nearly doubled thus highlighting the need for addressing the gender disparities in this sector (WHO 2024). In view of this, the G20 can recommend adoption of policies that advance gender equality in the health and care work, particularly by promoting improved working conditions in the sector and ensuring that all non-paid work is accounted for and properly compensated.

¹ According to the World Health Organisation, 67% of the workforce in the sector are women.

5. **Investing in education and digital inclusion:** Prioritizing girls' education, bridging the digital gender gap, and promoting STEM education for women can enhance their economic opportunities and resilience. In the developing world, gender disparities in education and digitalization are significant. For example, in low-income countries, 90% of girls and young women do not have internet access, compared to 78% of and young men (UNICEF 2023). The G20 can advocate for inclusive education policies, support digital literacy programs for women, and promote access to technology to empower women economically. Under the Indian presidency, digital inclusion was emphasized as a way of empowering and promoting socio-economic inclusion of marginalized communities. Here, the G20 endorsed both the voluntary G20 Framework for Digital Public Infrastructure Systems and India's proposal to establish a Global Digital Public Infrastructure Repository. The G20 should ensure that these initiatives are fully implemented without leaving lower-income countries behind.

6. **Fostering gender-responsive governance and policymaking:** Developing countries should prioritize gender-responsive governance structures and policies that address the specific needs of women during pandemics. The G20 can provide support on integrating gender perspectives into policy-making processes, promoting women's participation in decision-making, and fostering gender equality at all levels of governance.

Scenario of outcomes

Implementing the recommendations proposed for empowering women in developing countries by the G20 could herald transformative outcomes with far-reaching implications. By investing in women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship, access to finance, and skills development (including skills in the utilization of digital technologies), there's a potential to bolster the socio-economic resilience of women and their households. This could manifest in increased income generation, poverty reduction, and improved livelihoods for women and their families, ultimately contributing to broader economic growth. Failure to adequately invest in women's empowerment will likely see many women further fall into poverty, with the gender gap increasing more and more when global (and local) crises hit.

For the health and care economy, absence of the right investments is likely to see the economic vulnerabilities faced by women in the sector increase. From receiving lower compensations to shouldering the burden of unpaid yet critical work for our society especially during global pandemics, this situation will only get worse if the G20 and the rest of the global community does not act accordingly. Additionally, promoting gender-equal access to healthcare services and investing in healthcare infrastructure could lead to improved health outcomes for women, as well as reduce the risks of women falling into poverty due to poor health and the need for spending their limited resources on health services rather than investing in their socio-economic wellbeing.

Addressing gender-based violence through comprehensive strategies and support systems will significantly impact the safety and security of women during crises. A lack of such efforts could expose women and girls to perilous environments, compromising

their mental and emotional well-being, while also limiting their prospects for economic engagement and therefore increasing the welfare gender gap.

Finally, failing to foster gender-responsive governance and policymaking would lead to a lack of representation of women in decision-making processes, decreased inclusion of gender perspectives in policy formulation, and diminished gender equality at all levels of governance. This is likely to result in less inclusive and equitable societies, as well as poorer outcomes for women and girls in developing countries.



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