

AFRICA GENDER INDEX 2023 ANALYTICAL REPORT

African women in times of crisis

November 2024



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AFRICA GENDER INDEX REPORT 2023

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Foreword	7
Executive summary	8
1. Introducing the Africa Gender Index	10
Introduction	10
The Africa Gender Index	10
2. Key findings of the Africa Gender Index 2023	14
Overall results	14
Results by dimension	16
Sub-regional scores	18
3. Dimension I : Economic and business	21
Labour market participation and outcomes	23
Access to finance	28
Women's participation in business	31
4. Dimension II : Social Education	36
Health and nutrition	39
Gender-based violence	41
5. Dimension III : Empowerment and representation	43
Women in politics and government	45
Women leadership in business	48
6. Cross-cutting themes	50
Women in agriculture	50
Women and energy	52
Women and clean water	53
7. Conclusions and recommendations	54
Africa's progress towards gender equality	54
Recommendations to policy makers	55
Annex 1 : Results of the Africa Gender Index 2023 and Component Indices	56
Annex 2 : References	58

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Foreword

Empowering African women and girls is fundamental to the continent's growth and resilience in an increasingly complex global environment. As Africa navigates rapidly evolving political landscape, regional challenges, and the urgent threats posed by climate change, it becomes clear that harnessing the full potential of all its citizens—both women and men—is essential for sustainable development.

The Africa Gender Index 2023 Analytical Report, produced by the African Development Bank Group and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, serves as a vital resource in our collective commitment to gender equality. This report provides robust data that highlights persistent gender disparities across three dimensions – economic, social and empowerment - across all the 54 African countries. The insights derived from this data are instrumental in understanding the implications of gender inequality on economic performance and social cohesion.

As the continent grapples with global and regional shocks—from economic disruptions to health crises—the need for strategic, evidence-based interventions has never been more urgent. The Index reveals significant gaps in women's economic participation and leadership roles, emphasizing the critical need for targeted actions that can dismantle systemic barriers and foster inclusive growth.

Ms. Martha T.M. PHIRI

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Reliable data empowers policymakers, business leaders, and civil society organizations to engage in informed dialogue and drive accountability in their commitments to gender equality. In a time marked by fragility, understanding the multifaceted impacts of gender inequality is crucial for developing effective strategies that not only address immediate challenges but also lay the groundwork for long-term stability and prosperity.

This second edition of the Africa Gender Index calls for decisive leadership at national, regional, and international levels. It underscores that investing in gender equality is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity that enhances economic efficiency and resilience. By prioritizing gender equity, we position ourselves to respond more effectively to the challenges posed by climate change and geopolitical shifts.

As we present this report, we aim to spark meaningful dialogue and promote informed discussions on gender equality. It is our hope that the Africa Gender Index 2023 will serve as a catalyst for action, ensuring that gender considerations remain central to development agendas across the continent.

Ms. Sweta C. Saxena

Director Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division

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Executive summary

The Africa Gender Index (AGI) is an authoritative source of data on gender equality and women's empowerment in Africa. It draws together statistics from all 54 African countries across three dimensions (economic, social and empowerment & representation) into a single index. This enables African countries to track not only their own progress over time but also against regional peers.

This second edition of the Index, following its launch in 2019, comes at a particularly challenging time for African women and girls. Africa has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic only to be confronted with complex new crises, including rising food insecurity, global economic turbulence and a looming debt crisis. Conflict and political instability are on the rise, and the accelerating impacts of climate change are taking an increasing toll on the continent. These shocks impact women and men differently and have the potential to undermine Africa's progress in empowering women. The theme of this report is, therefore, "African women in times of crisis".

On the whole, the AGI improved between 2019 and 2023, with significant variations across dimensions, regions and countries. The Africa-wide gender index score for 2023 has improved to 50.3% (where 100% represents gender equality), from 48.6% in 2019. This indicates that, across the continent, African women enjoy barely half the social, economic and representation opportunities available to men. There is an urgent need to step up measures to close this gender equality gap.

Africa has made significant progress towards gender equality in the social dimension. This reflects long-term improvements in girls' access to education and in certain health outcomes for women and girls, despite some setbacks during the COVID-19 pandemic. The other dimensions are less positive. The empowerment and representation dimension has seen a slight improvement since 2019, but from a very low base. In the economic and business dimension, the 2023 gender equality figures show a decline over 2019, as rising economic stress across the continent has disproportionately affected women.

There are wide variations across countries, with gender index scores ranging from 30.9% in both Guinea-Bissau and Libya to 88.3% in Namibia. Lesotho's gender index score also exceeds 80%, while there are 10 countries in the 60-80% range, and 29 between 40% and 60%. There are 14 countries with scores below

40% – many of which have experienced protracted conflict and instability

Results by dimension

In the **economic dimension**, the gender index score has decreased to 58.2% in 2023 from 61.0% in 2019. While there has been a decline in the economic status of both men and women, women have experienced a larger decline. African women encounter various barriers to their equal participation in the workforce and are more likely to be engaged in vulnerable employment in the informal sector, leading to lower earnings and poorer working conditions. This translates to a significant gender gap in earnings. The larger gender gap in 2023 likely reflects a rise in economic stress across Africa, which is often associated with a reassertion of traditional gender roles.

Despite efforts in many countries to improve financial services for women, there has been an overall regression in women's access to finance, suggesting persistent barriers to the uptake of services. While women are Africa's primary food producers, they face inequality in the agricultural sector, including lower access to land, finance, equipment, pesticides and fertiliser. African women and girls continue to face a highly unequal burden of unpaid domestic and care work (around three times higher than males), taking them away from gainful employment. This is closely tied to poor access to infrastructure services, including affordable energy and clean water.

In the **social dimension**, there has been progress towards gender equality, with an overall score of 98.3% in 2023, compared to 95.1% in 2019. The score reflects important progress in girls' education. Overall, more girls than boys now graduate from primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school, although they still lag behind at the tertiary level, and there is a continuing gender gap in youth literacy (population aged 15-24). Girls nonetheless continue to face a range of barriers to their education, including heavier domestic responsibilities, high rates of teenage pregnancy and early marriage, and a lack of facilities for menstrual hygiene management in schools. Some of these barriers have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. In some African countries, the rise in gender equality in education is driven by a decline in boys' school completion rates, which may be linked to rising economic stress and pressure to enter the workforce earlier.

Figure 1 : Africa Gender Index results : 2019 and 2023

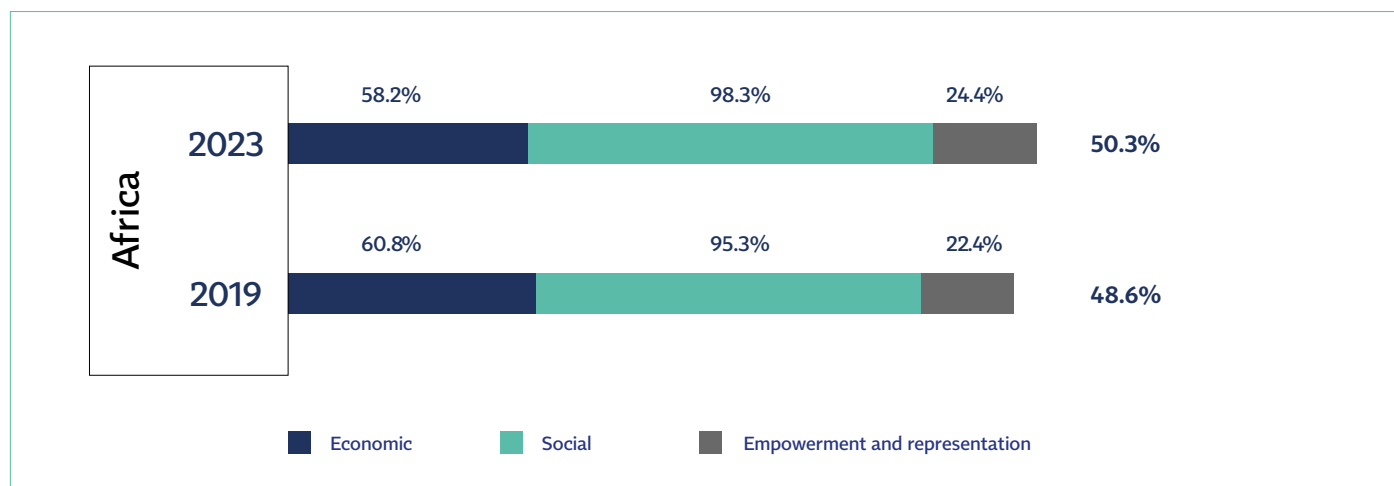
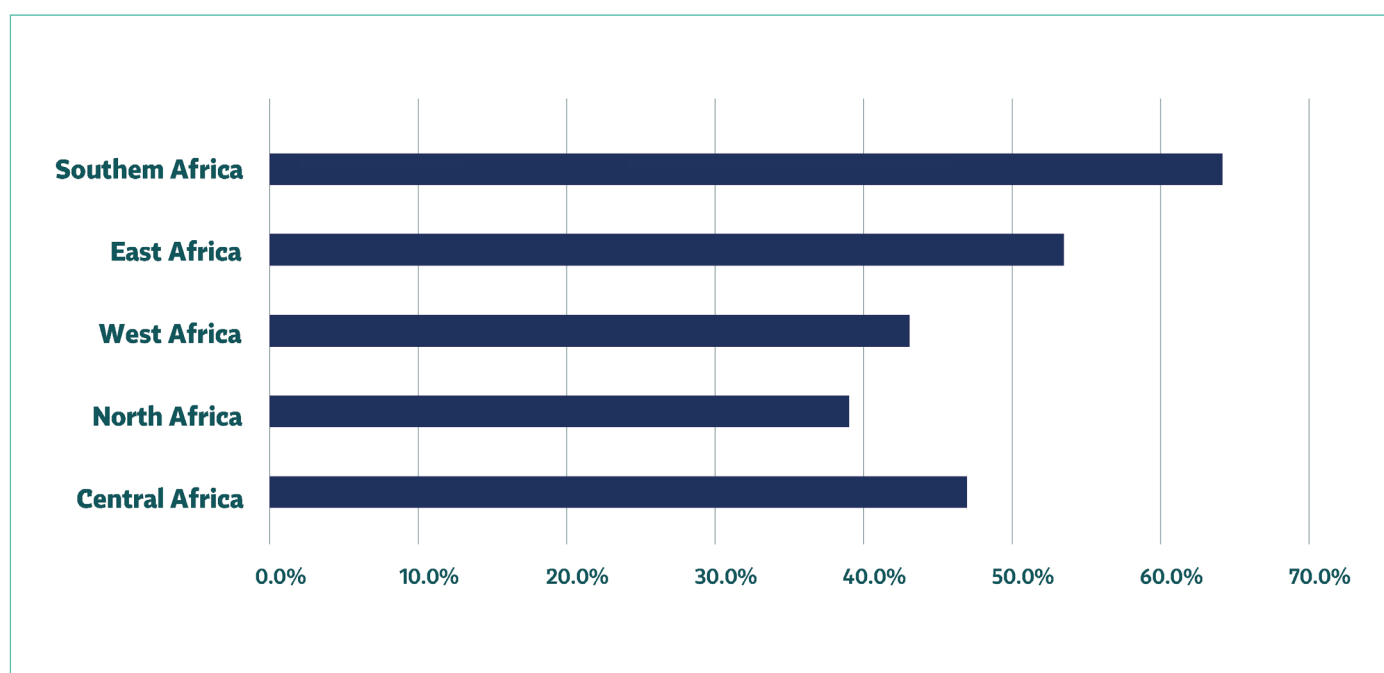


Figure 2 : Sub-regional AGI scores

In terms of sub-regional progress, Southern Africa leads the way, with an average score of 64%, while North Africa is furthest behind at 39.2% (Figure 1).



The social dimension also considers health outcomes. While life expectancy remains higher among women, they continue to face inequality in a range of areas. Maternal mortality rates are far higher in Africa than in other regions. There is a substantial gender gap in HIV infection rates, linked to inadequate awareness of sexually transmitted infections among adolescent girls and limited access to preventative contraception. Teenage pregnancy and early marriage remain pervasive and increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to negative maternal and child health outcomes. The prevalence of female genital mutilation/cutting has also increased. Encouragingly, there has been a significant decline in intimate partner violence, although recent rises in food insecurity, conflict and economic stress, all of which are associated with higher rates of gender-based violence, raise fears that this trend may be reversed.

In the **empowerment and representation dimension**, the gender index score has slightly increased from 22.9% in 2019 to 24.4% in 2023. However, African women are still underrepresented in both parliaments and ministerial posts. Gender quotas are an important tool for redressing this, but they often lack proper enforcement. Women also face entrenched gender expectations that discourage their pursuit of leadership roles. They also continue to lag behind men in business management and in skilled professional roles.

In light of the mixed performance along the three dimensions, the report offers a **set of recommendations for African policy makers** to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Reduce sex-segregation in labour markets : Policy makers should review national laws restricting women's access to certain occupations or job families. They should undertake analysis of the informal barriers to women's participation across sectors and occupations, and develop tailored strategies for overcoming them.

Tackling time poverty : Policy makers should press ahead with expanding access to basic infrastructure services, particularly clean water and energy, to reduce women's time poverty and provide more time for employment and livelihood activities.

Supporting "out-of-school girls" : Policy makers should develop programmes to support young women who dropped out of school as a result of COVID-19 or other pressures to return to the education system. This should include tailored support for young mothers.

Investigating the barriers to boys' education : Policy makers should recognise that there are also gender-specific barriers to boys' education. They should commission more data collection and analysis to inform potential policy responses.

Strengthening reproductive health and rights : Policy makers should develop programmes to improve adolescent girls' awareness of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and improve their education about and access to contraceptives.

Reducing gender-based violence against women : Ensure that shelters and other essential services for survivors of gender-based violence are prioritised in national budgets.

Quotas in parliament and government : African countries should consider introducing quotas to strengthen women's participation in politics and government. Ideally, a system of quotas should encompass all levels of government and senior administrative roles. Where quotas are already in place, they should be reviewed regularly to identify opportunities to improve their enforcement and ensure they lead to meaningful participation.

Shocks and crises : When planning national policy responses to the shocks and crises facing Africa today, including health threats, food insecurity and climate change, African countries should ensure that women are engaged at every stage, to help mitigate the effects on women and to facilitate their contribution to building national resilience.

Data on gender equality : Given continuing gaps in national data on gender equality, and the growing threat to women posed by the shocks and crises facing Africa today, African countries should review their national statistical institutes from a gender lens, to identify hidden biases and to improve the generation of data, including on the gendered impacts of shocks and crises..



1. Introducing the Africa Gender Index

Introduction

Africa's greatest asset is its people, yet the persistence of gender inequality across the continent means that Africa is not making optimal use of its human capital. With its rapidly growing population, the continent will be home to 40% of the world's workforce by the end of this century. A young and vibrant workforce should be a driver of growth and prosperity. Yet, across the economic, social and political spheres, African women continue to face an array of barriers to achieving their potential. Not only is this an injustice against women, but it is also a major constraint on Africa's development.

The Africa Gender Index (AGI) provides an authoritative source of data on Africa's progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment. Launched in 2019, it is produced jointly by the African Development Bank ("the Bank") and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) on a three-year cycle. This second iteration draws together data from national statistical institutes in all 54 African countries against a set of indicators, measuring equality in the economy, the social sphere (health and education), and voice and empowerment. By presenting the data in the form of an index, it enables African countries to track their progress towards gender equality and compare their status with regional peers.

The Africa Gender Index

The Africa Gender Index (AGI) measures gender equality in three dimensions: economic and business, social, and empowerment and representation (see Table 1). The **economic and business dimension** considers whether women and men have equal economic opportunity: their labour force participation, wages and salaries, and access to resources. The **social dimension** assesses inequalities in education—including completion rates and literacy—and in health outcomes. The **empowerment and representation dimension** measures the extent to which men and women participate equally in decision making in politics, government and enterprises.

Each dimension consists of a series of indicators drawing on data from national statistical institutes. The indicators have been chosen based on their analytical soundness, relevance to gender

This report also provides analysis and commentary based on the AGI data. Drawing on recent literature and consultations with gender experts across the continent, the commentary draws out patterns and trends in the data and presents possible explanations. It also compiles examples of successful policy initiatives and programmes at country level that have helped to drive progress towards gender equality.

Africa today faces a set of interlocking crises that threaten to undermine its hard-won development gains. It emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic only to be confronted by rising indebtedness, global economic turbulence and a sharp rise in food insecurity. Conflict and political instability are on the rise across the continent, and the accelerating impacts of climate change are placing growing pressure on food systems and livelihoods.

These shocks and crises affect women and men differently, and their impact falls most heavily on those who already face inequality. If they are not addressed at the policy level, they have the potential to reverse the progress Africa has made in empowering women. We have therefore chosen to make "African women in times of crisis" the theme of this report, in an effort to alert policy makers to the dangers.

equality and women's empowerment, measurability and country coverage. For each indicator, data is collected for both women and men, and an index score is calculated on a scale of 0 to 1, showing the ratio of women to men (indicated in this report as a percentage). A score of 1 (100%) represents perfect gender equality. A score below 1 shows gender inequality against women, while a score above 1 indicates that men are lagging behind. The dimensions and indicators are presented in Table 1.

The preparation of the AGI also involves collection of data on certain women-specific indicators, such as maternal mortality and gender-based violence. These do not contribute to the overall index or dimension score, because there is no male equivalent. However, they are referred to where relevant in this analytical report.

Table 1 : Summary of dimensions, sub-components and indicators

Dimension	Sub-components	Indicators
Economic and business	Labour market participation and outcomes	Labour force participation rate (15 years and older)
		Paid employment as a proportion of total employment
		Vulnerable employment
		Youth unemployment rate (aged 15-24)
Social	Access to resources Management	Wages and salaries from all sectors, including incomes from household enterprises in the formal and informal sectors
		Access to credit from formal and informal financial institutions
		Proportion of firms with female participation in ownership
		Completion rates in primary, lower secondary, upper secondary schools
Social	Education	Tertiary graduation rate
		Youth literacy rate
		Stunting rate among children aged <5 years
		Life expectancy at birth
Empowerment representation	and Health	HIV prevalence rate
		Representation in national parliaments
		Cabinet-level positions
		Representation in top management of businesses
Empowerment representation	Management	Share of managers, professionals, technicians

While the index captures the most recent data available for each country, the time lags involved in the production of the data mean that it may not always reflect the latest developments in each country. This analytical report, therefore, also discusses recent developments that may not yet be apparent in the data. It is also important to note that the quality of gender statistics

across Africa is gradually improving (Box 2), so some changes since the last AGI in 2019 may reflect improvements in the data.

The full methodology (see Box 1) is published separately in the AGI methodological and statistical report.

Box 1 : Calculating the Africa Gender Index (AGI)

The four main steps to constructing the Africa Gender Index are:

1. Normalising the variables
2. Aggregating within the dimensions
3. Calculating the dimension gender gap
4. Aggregating across the dimensions

Step 1 : Normalising the variables

The underlying indicators for the AGI are measured in different units. To combine them into an index, they have to be normalised into a scale between zero and one using natural or defined minimum and maximum values : “goalposts”. However, normalisation is sensitive to both the choice of limits and outliers at both ends of the distribution of indicators across countries. For example, outliers may become unintended thresholds and introduce spurious variability in the data if care is not taken. We have used goalposts to reduce spurious variability in the index. Values higher than the natural maximum goalpost have been capped at the maximum value. However, using the exact minimum values means that a country with that value will have a zero index value. This will create a problem for geometric mean aggregation method adopted for the AGI. As such, a value of 0.4 is subtracted from the observed minimum values and 0.5 added to the maximum value if the value is less than the highest possible level. For example, in the case of completion rates by level of education, if the highest value is 100 per cent—all students complete.

The same minimum and maximum values are used for both males and females (except for life expectancy at birth where different values are used because of the observed variation between males and females). Using the same values for women and men ensures a fair spread of the distribution of the sub-indices and avoids giving a false impression that females are doing better when in fact, the highest aspiration is far below that of males.

The goalposts are fixed for a period of five years to allow progress to be monitored. So, the same goalposts used in the 2019 report are adopted in this edition, given the same indicators are maintained.

Thus, indicators will be normalised as follows:

Normalised value of an indicator = (actual value – minimum value) / (maximum value – minimum value)

Since the aim is to measure progress, deprivation indicators are normalised as :

Indicator index = 1 - Normalised value

The goalpost for each indicator is presented in the methodological report.

Step 2 : Aggregating within dimensions

A common way to aggregate the sub-dimensions into sub-indices is by arithmetic or geometric mean. While the arithmetic method of aggregation is useful when all individual indicators have the

same measurement unit, geometric mean of aggregation is better if one wants some degree of non-compensability between dimensions. This is to stress that all the dimensions making up the index are equally important and a poor performance in one dimension cannot be fully compensated for by a good performance in another. Further, geometric mean aggregations reward those countries with higher scores in all dimensions. In an arithmetic method of aggregation, good performance in one dimension can be compensated fully by poor performance in another. In other words, there is perfect substitutability, while, with geometric aggregations, compensability is lower for the indicators with low values. Therefore, the marginal change from an increase in low absolute score would be much higher than in a high absolute score under geometric mean aggregation. Consequently, a country would have a greater incentive to address those dimensions with low scores if the aggregation were geometric rather than arithmetic. In this regard, the AGI adopts geometric mean of aggregation both within dimensions and across dimensions.

Step 3 : Calculating the dimension gender gap

The next step is to calculate the gender gap in each dimension as follows :

Dimension gender gap = $\text{Dimension Index}_f / \text{Dimension Index}_m$
where subscript “f” and “m” represent female and male achievements.

Step 4 : Aggregating across dimensions

The final stage of the index construction process is aggregating the dimension gaps using the geometric mean method to stress the importance of each of the dimensions. This means that the index will reward countries with good performance across all the dimensions and penalise those with uneven performance across dimensions.

The AGI is given as follows:

AGI = Economic dimension gender gap^{1/3} X social development gender gaps^{1/3} X Empowerment and Representation gender gap^{1/3}

The implementation of the AGI methodology is led by a technical team from the Bank and UNECA. The team consists of statisticians and gender specialists. A thorough data collection process was followed involving the 54 African National Statistical Offices (NSOs). The data collection process started with a request to NSOs to nominate focal persons that will participate through the data collection and validation process. After the nomination of the focal persons by the NSOs, the technical team organised the first regional workshop to discuss the process, timeline and

the methodological framework. The data collection template/questionnaire was also introduced during the workshop paving the way for the pilot data collection held in July-August 2022. The technical team made presentations on the concepts and framework including the dimensions and indicators covered in the AGI.

The second regional workshop was held to review and discuss the pilot data collection, lessons learned and approaches to improve the data coverage. Additionally, a brainstorming session on the theme of the AGI 2023 analytical report was undertaken with the focal points and involving gender specialists from ministries.

Following the second regional workshop the main data collection process was launched in November 2022. By end of the data collection process in June 2023, data covering 54 countries and 19 indicators had been collected. The data coverage has improved since the 2019 report when only 51 countries participated. Data validation was undertaken simultaneously with the data collection process. The technical team continuously reviewed,

and checked data submitted by focal persons, using the relevant statistical approaches, and communicated and resolved issues. Joint reviews by the technical team and the focal persons were undertaken during the regional workshops.

The third and final regional workshop, on data validation, took place in August-September 2023. The technical team followed intra-country as well as inter-country approaches. Subsequently, the team proceeded to producing the AGI the components of which are discussed in detail in the methodology section.

The preliminary findings of the AGI 2023 were presented during the November 2023 5th Gender Statistics Forum in Casablanca (Morocco), and in the 6th Forum in July 2024 in Gaborone (Botswana). These two regional workshops took advantage of the presence of focal points from NSOs, ministries responsible for gender, experts from UN Women and other stakeholders, to validate the data, the results and the findings.



2. Key findings of the Africa Gender Index 2023

- Africa's gender equality score stands at 50.3% in 2023, a slight improvement from 48.6% in 2019.
- Since 2019, gender equality has declined slightly in the economic sphere in the face of persistent economic crises.
- There are major variations across Africa in gender pay equality, which ranges from 39.2% in North Africa to 64% in Southern Africa.
- Gender disparities are narrowest in the social sphere (health and education), but far higher in representation in government and business.

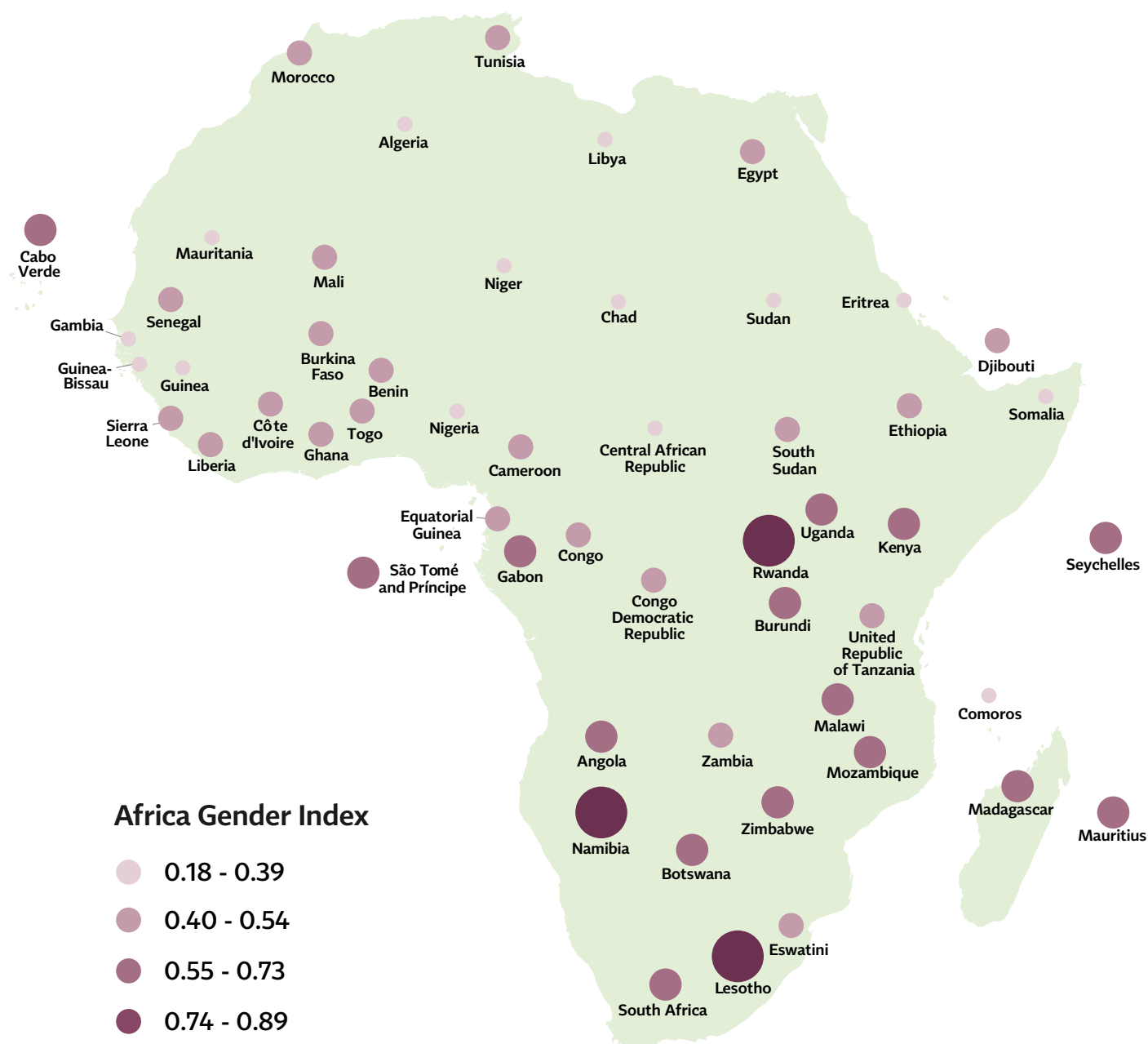
Overall results

The AGI Score for 2023 stands at 50.3%, indicating large and persistent gender inequality. While this is an improvement over the 2019 score of 48.6%, the rate of progress remains disappointing. Despite Africa's commitment to empowering women and promoting gender equality, it is evident that sustained efforts are required to achieve continent-wide gender equality. At the country level, gender index scores vary widely, ranging from 30.9% to 88.3%. Two African countries, Namibia and Lesotho, are leading the pack with scores above 80%. Ten countries score in the range of 60-80%, and another 28 are between 40% and 60%. Additionally, there are 14 with scores below 40%, many of which have experienced protracted conflict and instability.



Figure 3 : AGI country scores 2023

The Africa Gender Index country scores for 2023 range from 30.9% to 88.3%, with an average score of 50.3% (Figure 2). The Index shows important progress across parts of the continent, but some countries are being left behind, notably, a belt of conflict-affected countries in the Sahel region.¹ The COVID-19 crisis and subsequent shocks and crises are threatening to undermine some of the hard-won progress.



A score of 1 represent parity between women and men.
A score between 0 and 1 means there is gender inequality in favour of males, while a score above 1 means that women are doing well compared to men.

¹ Sahel region: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

Results by dimension

- Both men and women have seen a decline in their economic status, but the decline has been greater for women.
- Gender inequality is narrowest in the social sphere, amid signs that boys face growing challenges in education completion.
- African women remain poorly represented in government and the formal economy.



Table 2 : African Gender Index scores by dimension, 2019 and 2023 (percentage)

	2019 AGI	2023 AGI	Trend
Africa Gender Index	48.6%	50.3%	↗
Economic and Business Dimension	61.0%	58.2%	↘
Social Dimension	95.0%	98.3%	↗
Empowerment and Representation Dimension	22.9%	24.4%	↗

There are large differences in gender equality scores across the three AGI dimensions. In the **economic and business dimension**, the 2023 gender index score stands at 58.2% – 2.8 percentage points less than in the 2019 edition. The data reveal that both men and women have experienced a decline in their economic status since 2019, with women disproportionately affected.

Women continue to face significant barriers to their equal participation in the labour force. The gender index score in labour force participation is 70.2% in 2023. Youth unemployment is higher among women, and women are much more likely to be in vulnerable employment in the informal sector. This translates into a gender index score of 73.5% in earnings from employment. It is likely that the larger gender disparity in 2023 reflects a rise in economic stress across Africa, which is often associated with a reassertion of traditional gender roles. This raises fears that the trend towards greater inequality in the economic dimension may continue.

Gender inequality has narrowed in the **social dimension**, with an overall index score of 98.3% in 2023, compared to 95.0% in

2019. The data shows that, overall, both men and women have experienced improvements in their social status since 2019, but women have enjoyed a faster rate of improvement, narrowing the gender gap. This reflects important progress over recent decades in promoting girls' education. More girls than boys now graduate from primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school, although they still lag behind boys at the tertiary level, and there is a continuing gender gap in youth literacy. In health, African women enjoy higher life expectancy than men. However, there remain entrenched gender inequalities in health, given the persistence of high maternal mortality and morbidity, barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services, and high rates of gender-based violence.

In the third dimension, empowerment and representation, the gender index score has improved slightly, although against a very low baseline. The 2023 score stands at 24.4%, compared to 22.9% in 2019. Women lag far behind men in their representation in parliament and as cabinet ministers. Their participation in business in management, professional and skilled technical roles also lags behind men's.

Box 2 : Visible Women – Improving gender statistics in Africa

Reliable gender statistics are one of the foundation stones for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Gender data allows stakeholders across the public and private sectors and civil society to identify inequality and engage in evidence-based dialogue and advocacy.

Despite its importance, there are still many gaps in the gender data available for African countries. There are four principal challenges. First, despite regular censuses and surveys conducted by National Statistical Offices, there are gaps in data collection due to poor co-ordination and communication between stakeholders, a lack of capacity at the data collection level and issues of commitment, often leading to duplication and missed opportunities to leverage resources.² Second, technical challenges and limited capacity at national and local levels hampers the production of reliable data.³ Third, data dissemination methods are often ineffective or outdated, resulting in poor data access and low utilisation.⁴ Finally, low political prioritisation and underfunding impact the level of data that is produced, disseminated and used. Not to be overlooked is the impact of shocks and crises on the quantity and quality of current gender data. For example, COVID-19 brought with it interruptions to data collection efforts and survey programmes.⁵

In recent years, several initiatives have been launched to improve the generation and use of gender statistics across Africa. UN Women, UNECA and the African Development Bank have launched joint regional initiatives to improve the collection, use and dissemination of gender statistics. Regional co-ordination and coherence were improved through the introduction of a Minimum Set of Gender Indicators for Africa (MSGIA), which was adopted by the Statistical Commission for Africa and provides strategic direction to African countries in setting gender data priorities.⁶

In 2019, the Africa Gender Data Network was established by UNECA, Data2X and Open Data Watch and expanded in 2021. Made up of senior government gender statisticians from 15 African countries, the network works to raise the standard of

gender data production by researching barriers to data collection and developing new methodologies, as well as improving dissemination and use of gender data across member countries through capacity building and networking.⁷ A Community of Practice on Data and Statistics was also set up in 2020 to strengthen co-operation and collaboration across East and Southern Africa. Training sessions for statisticians have improved awareness of data visualisation tools and the accessibility of gender statistics, which has led to increased demand for data materials from CSOs lobbying policy makers.⁸

UN Women and the World Health Organization (WHO) undertook a five-year (2018-2022) Joint Programme on Violence against Women Data with the objective of improving the quality and comparability of data on violence against women through methodological improvements, capacity building, and accessibility for data use.⁹

At the country level, **Zimbabwe** is using the Africa Gender Index methodology to construct a country gender equality index, bringing together diverse stakeholders to look at how programmes and policies shift the dial on gender equality. A gender expert in **Uganda** highlighted several interventions aimed at improving gender data collection, including a study of COVID-19's impact on the informal sector, which enabled the government to roll out data-informed interventions to support women. Uganda also conducted a national violence survey in 2021. Additionally, **Kenya** produced its first-ever time-use survey,¹⁰ based on the 2021 Kenya Continuous Household Survey, representing strong progress in improving gender statistics at the country level. In 2020, Kenya also published a new Gender Sector Statistics Plan¹¹ and Women's Empowerment Index.¹² **Senegal** also conducted its first time-use survey in 2021.¹³

With clear momentum at the international, regional and country levels, there are promising initiatives underway that are likely to improve gender data collection, dissemination and use. As statisticians continue to build a body of data, this will better inform policy dialogues and awareness of gender issues, building more equitable and resilient societies.

² UN Women, Women Count, Regional Programme Africa, n.d., link.

³ UN Women, Women Count, Regional Programme Africa, n.d., link; Open Data Watch, Advancing gender data and statistics in Africa, March 2022, link.

⁴ UN Women, Women Count, Regional Programme Africa, n.d., link.

⁵ Open Data Watch, Advancing gender data and statistics in Africa, March 2022, link.

⁶ UN Women, Minimum Set of Gender Indicators for Africa, Phase IV Report, September 2020, link. ⁵ Open Data Watch, Advancing gender data and statistics in Africa, March 2022, link.

⁷ UN Women, 2020 Annual Report, Making Every Woman and Girl Count, Rising to the Covid-19 Challenge, 2021, link.

⁸ WHO, Strengthening data on violence against women for action, n.d., link.

⁹ UN Women, Kenya Time Use Survey Report, 2023, link.

¹¹ Republic of Kenya, Gender Sector Statistics Plan, n.d., link.

¹² UN Women, New Women's Empowerment Index for Kenyan Women and Girls, August 2020, link.

¹³ Ross, J., Time-use data in Senegal spur advocacy, policy and programme revisions, June 2023, link.

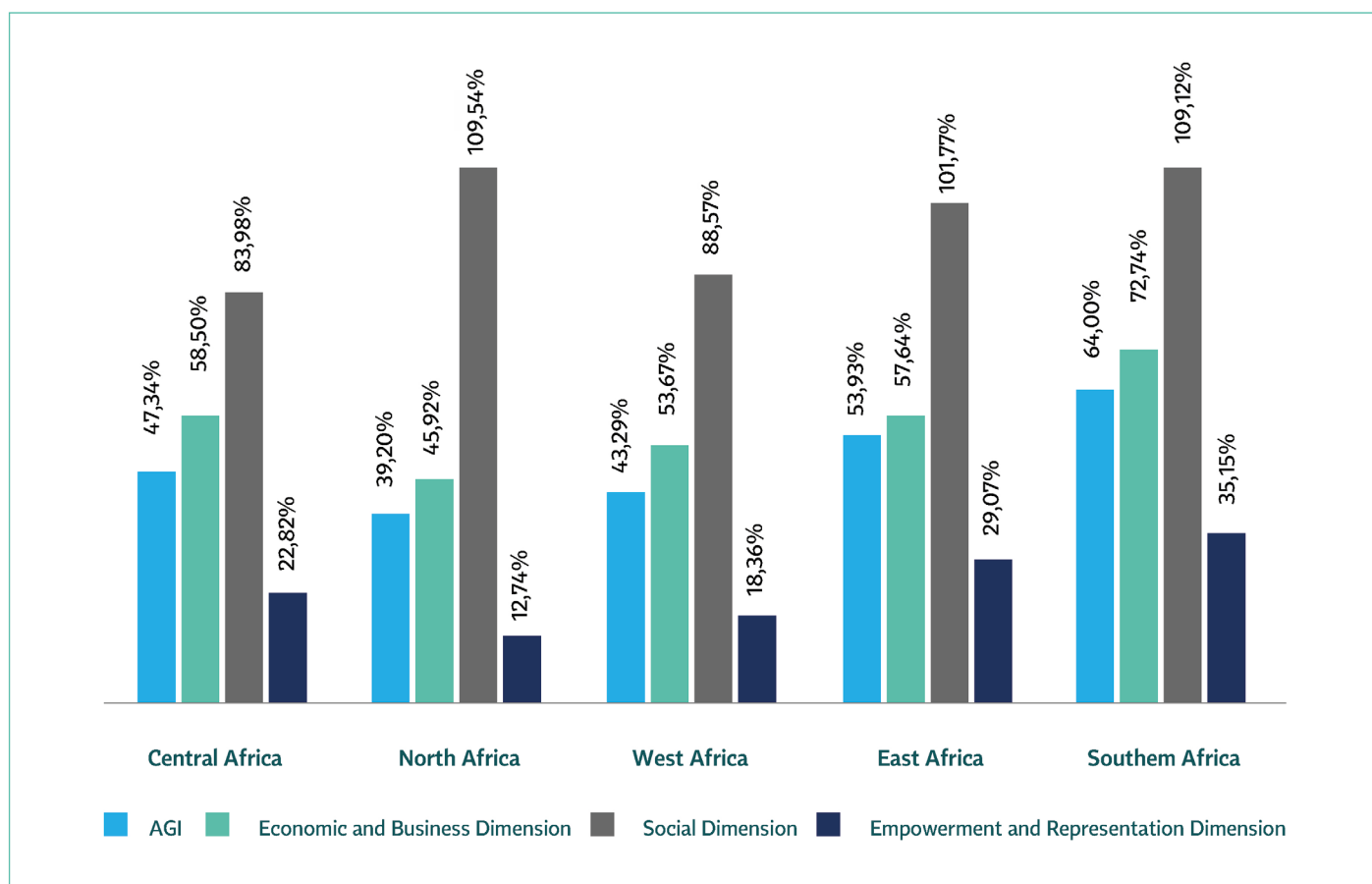
Sub-regional scores

Across Africa's sub-regions, the 2023 AGI scores range from 39.2% in North Africa to 64.0% in Southern Africa (Figure 3). Southern Africa has the highest AGI average score and the highest average scores for both the economic and business dimension (72.7%) and the empowerment and representation dimension (35.2%). Five of the ten highest-scoring countries on

the empowerment and representation dimension are in Southern Africa.

While North Africa has the lowest overall score, it also has the widest spread across the dimensions. It has the highest score for the social dimension, at 109.5%, combined with the lowest score on empowerment and representation, at 12.7%.

Figure 4 : AGI 2023 results by sub-region



Box 3 : Challenging times for African women

African countries face a set of interlocking shocks and crises. The continuing social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are combining with global economic turbulence, a looming debt crisis and sharp rises in food insecurity. There has been a marked increase in conflicts and political instability, the forced displacement of populations is at record levels, and the accelerating impacts of climate change are placing growing pressure on livelihoods and food systems.

African women are at the frontline of this "poly-crisis". As the AGI shows, African women face continuing inequalities in the social, economic and political spheres. Crises inevitably impact most heavily on those who are already disadvantaged, with fewer resources to manage shocks and pressures. As a result, there is real concern that Africa's past achievements in empowering women and overcoming gender inequality may be under threat. The time lags in collecting data mean that the extent of this reversal will not be known for some time.

In this report, therefore, we highlight some of the concerns that emerge from the literature and our consultations with gender experts across Africa on the impact of the following shocks and crises on gender equality and women's empowerment.

The lasting effects of COVID-19 : The emergency phase of the pandemic may be over, but it has had lasting impacts on African women. While mortality and morbidity rates were generally higher among men, lockdown measures and their associated economic and social stress had specific and long-lasting effects on women and girls. Women were more likely to lose their employment during the pandemic and less likely to return to work afterwards. This was partly due to a sharp rise in the burden of unpaid care work, which falls disproportionately on women and girls. COVID-19 containment measures also had a significant impact on service industries, which tend to have a high concentration of women employees.¹⁴ Economic stress often leads to a reassertion of traditional gender roles, making it more likely that men will be favoured in rehiring when jobs are scarce, even after the crisis passes.¹⁵

School closures during the pandemic affected more than 300 million students across Africa, with many missing more than a year of instruction.¹⁶ School dropout rates among girls rose sharply, driven by a rise in domestic responsibilities and the gender digital divide in access to the internet and mobile technology, among other factors.¹⁷ Young women who left the education system will face lifelong effects in terms of lost income and missed opportunities. The pandemic also saw sharp rises in gender-based violence, early marriage and unwanted pregnancies. Girls who married early were less likely to have returned when schools reopened, and many faced long-term health consequences from teenage pregnancy. The pandemic also disrupted essential services for women, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive health.

The rising debt crisis : Africa's debt burden grew rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as countries borrowed to finance emergency health measures and relief packages for households and businesses. With African currencies depreciating against the United States dollar, debt service costs reached 10% of government revenues in 2021 – triple the level of 2011.¹⁸ In 2023, 22 African countries were in debt distress or at risk of it.¹⁹ As a consequence, African governments have reined in their expenditure on social programmes. The services that women rely on – including social protection payments, health care and gender-based violence prevention and support services – were often the first casualties. The policy conditionalities associated with debt rarely take account of the gendered impacts of austerity measures.

Food insecurity : Food insecurity is a long-term challenge in many parts of Africa but has spiked since 2019. COVID-19 lockdown measures disrupted the production and transport of food. On the heels of the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to sharp rises in the price of wheat, fuel and fertiliser, driving up the cost of both imported food and domestic production. This has been compounded by the accelerating effects of climate change that are resulting in more frequent and more severe episodes of extreme weather. Much of East Africa is suffering from protracted drought, with the threat of famine returning to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. West and Central Africa, by contrast, have experienced some of the worst floods on record. Food insecurity impacts the poorest households most, and particularly those headed by women. In sub-Saharan Africa, women farmers produce 60-70% of the food,²⁰ but have less access than men to land and agricultural inputs, making them more vulnerable to disruption in food and agricultural markets. Yet, few countries consider gender in their national agriculture policies. Negative coping strategies for food insecurity include withdrawing girls from school and early marriage. Food stress also leads to increased urbanisation among men, who migrate in search of economic opportunities, leaving women bearing the burden of feeding their families.

Climate change : Climate change is a multiplier of other threats facing Africa today. By disrupting food systems, degrading natural resources and intensifying water stress, it deepens conflict and population displacement. Climate change affects women in specific ways. The most vulnerable economic sectors, such as agriculture, fishing and forestry, are those that women particularly depend on for their livelihoods. Women's burdens in collecting water and cooking fuel becomes heavier, making them more time-poor and increasing the pressure on girls to leave school. With less access to land and finance, women are less able to adapt to the impacts of climate change. This affects not just the well-being of rural women, but the resilience of their communities, as a whole.

¹⁴ UN Women, *Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in East and Southern Africa*, March, 2021, p.12, link.

¹⁵ UN Women, *The Levers of Change – Gender equality attitudes study 2022*, June 2022, pp.6-8, link.

¹⁶ UNICEF, *The Impacts of COVID-19 on Education Spending in Africa and Possible Recovery Pathways*, December 2022, p.5, link.

¹⁷ YoungLives, *Addressing the gender digital divide is critical to ensure no one is left behind from COVID-19*, October 2021, link.

¹⁸ Smith, G., *Millions Will Fall Into Extreme Poverty If the U.S. and China Can't Come Together On The African Debt Crisis*, April 2023, link.

¹⁹ Chatham House, *The response to debt distress in Africa and the role of China*, December 2022, link.

²⁰ *The Elders, Covid-19 and the impact on African women : all responses must respect the gendered impacts of the pandemic*, June 2020, link.

Rising conflict and insecurity: Africa has experienced a steady rise in conflict over the past two decades, paying a heavy toll in lives lost and disruption to national development. Including women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding should be a key element in building resilience to conflict, as recognised in the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000 on Women, Peace and Security. Violence against women and girls, which is pervasive across Africa, increases dramatically in times of conflict. A disturbing example has been the kidnapping and forced marriage of girls by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, driven both by opposition to girls' education and the pursuit of ransom payments. In recent conflicts in Ethiopia and Sudan, there have been marked

increases in sexual violence, combined with reduced access for women and girls to health services, safe spaces and avenues for seeking justice. Women who are survivors of sexual violence in conflict often face long-term challenges in reintegrating into their communities. Women's access to education, healthcare and sexual and reproductive services is also impeded in times of conflict – either through forced population displacement or from the mobility constraints faced by women in insecure areas. Africa has reached a record level of 36 million forcibly displaced persons (44% of the global total).²¹ Women in displacement face additional risks around human trafficking.

²¹ Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, *Record 36 Million Africans Forcibly Displaced*, July 2022, [link](#).



3. Dimension I : Economic and business

- The AGI score for the economy and business dimension stands at 58.2% in 2023 – a decline from the 2019 score of 61.7%.
- Women are far more likely to be in vulnerable employment, with low earnings and a lack of workers' basic rights.
- The high burden of unpaid care work facing women and girls reduces their time for study and income-earning.
- While the availability of finance for women has improved, uptake rates of financial products remain low.

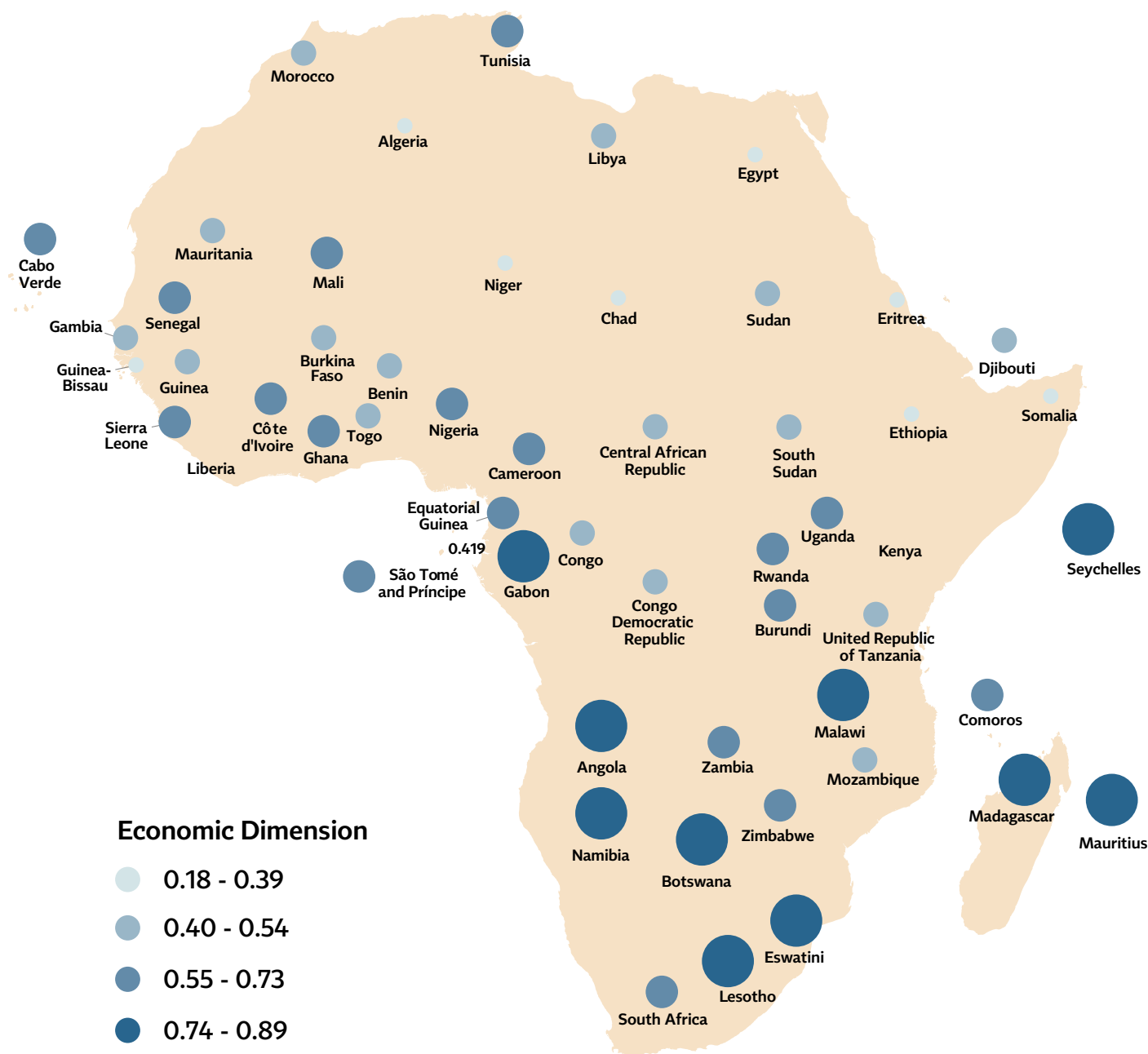
The first dimension of the Africa Gender Index addresses the economic and business dimension of gender equality. It collects data for indicators measuring labour market participation, earnings, access to finance and participation in business.

The 2023 economic and business dimension score is 58.2%, showing significant inequality for women in each of the component's indicators, apart from youth unemployment where there is limited gender disparity (91.4%). The dimension represents a decline from 2019, when it stood at 61.0%.²²

There is substantial gender disparity in the business and economic dimension across African countries and sub-regions, with wide variations. At the sub-regional level, Southern Africa is closest to gender parity, at 72.7%, while North Africa is furthest away, at 45.9%. At the country level, Guinea-Bissau, Egypt, Algeria, Niger, Somalia, Chad, Eritrea and Ethiopia each score below 40%. In the other direction, Angola, Kenya, Namibia, Seychelles, Gabon and Botswana have made the most progress towards gender parity in the economic and business sphere, scoring above 80%.

Figure 5 : AGI Country Scores 2023 for the Economic and Business Dimension

African women earn less than men across all economic sectors, including agriculture. The AGI average score for the Economic and Business Dimension is 58.2%. Women are the primary producers and processors of food in Africa, but lack of access to land and inputs means that they achieve lower agricultural yields and experience greater insecurity of income than men. Women run small agribusinesses in the informal sector but find it hard to invest and grow their businesses.



A score of 1 represent parity between women and men.
A score between 0 and 1 means there is gender inequality in favour of males, while a score above 1 means that women are doing well compared to men.

Labour market participation and outcomes

- Barriers facing women in the labour market
- Social norms that constrain women's access to paid employment
- Gender-segregated labour markets that hinder women's access to certain occupations
- A skills gap at technical and managerial levels
- High rates of gender-based violence and sexual harassment
- The high burden of unpaid domestic and care work.



Table 3 : The economic and business dimension - labour market participation and outcomes ²³

Component	Indicator	2019 results	2023 results	Trend
Labour market participation and outcomes	Labour Force Participation Rate (aged 15 and older)	69.3%	70.2%	↗
	Employees (in total employment aged 15+)	62.9%	59.3%	↘
	Vulnerable employment (in total employment of those aged 15+)	70.7%	56.6%	↘
	Youth unemployment (% 15-24)	90.3%	91.4%	↗
	Mean wages and salaries (all sectors)	74.0%	73.5%	↘

²² AfDB, Africa Gender Index Report 2019, March 2020, link.

²³ Note : The figures displayed in the dimension tables do not directly represent female to male indicator rates, rather they show the computed AGI scores generated using underlying data collected by AfDB.

Across Africa, the AGI score for labour force participation (that is, the share of the working age population who are employed or actively seeking work) stands at 70.2%, while gender equality in employment is lower still, at 59.3%. Young women (aged 15-24) are more likely than young men to be unemployed, although youth unemployment rates are high for both women and men across the continent.

Women are also much more likely than men to be in vulnerable employment (Box 4) in the informal sector, with an AGI score of 56.6%. Working women are often engaged in small-scale trade or family-run business, including subsistence agriculture, or in

vulnerable jobs such as domestic help in private households.²⁴ These occupations often provide inadequate and unreliable incomes and poor working conditions, without employment contracts, or access to health insurance, or to any form of social protection.²⁵ Women working in the formal sector are paid on average only 75% of the wages received by men for the same jobs. This may reflect unequal pay practices, differences in educational attainment, accumulated work experience, choice of educational specialisation, sectoral and occupational segregation, and cultural barriers to women's access to better-paid professional, technical, and managerial positions.

Box 4. Women's employment and the COVID-19 pandemic

AGI 2023 finds that African working women are much more likely than men to be in 'vulnerable employment'. This term refers to own-account workers and those contributing to informal family businesses. These workers usually lack employment contracts and are much less likely to enjoy decent working conditions, health insurance, adequate social security and "voice", in the form of effective representation by trade unions and similar organisations. Vulnerable employment is often characterised by irregular and inadequate earnings and a lack of workers' basic rights.²⁶

Women in vulnerable employment were among those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, yet government responses did not always include a gender perspective. Women workers are concentrated in the service sectors that were hardest hit by COVID-19 lockdown measures, such as leisure, hospitality and retail, leading to higher job losses among women. A World Bank

study found that, in Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Eswatini and South Africa, more women than men reported losing their jobs during the pandemic.²⁷ In addition, the increased domestic care burden on women, such as looking after out-of-school children and vulnerable family members, meant that many were unable to keep working, while others lost income through reduced working hours.

Since the pandemic, it has also emerged that women have taken longer to return to their pre-pandemic levels of income and economic security.²⁸ UN Women's analysis suggests that economic stress often leads to a reassertion of traditional gender roles. Unemployed men are likely to be favoured in rehiring after an economic crisis, while women are expected to focus on unpaid care roles. In this way, the pandemic has represented a significant setback for women's economic empowerment.²⁹

²⁴ AfDB, *African Development Bank Report 2015 – growth, poverty and inequality nexus: overcoming barriers to sustainable development*, 2015, p.98, [link](#).

²⁵ UNECA, *Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in Africa*, March 2022, [link](#).

²⁶ AfDB, *The Future of Work: Regional Perspectives*, 2018, p.30, [link](#).

²⁷ World Bank, *Assessing the damage: early evidence on impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on girls and women in Africa*, May 2022, [link](#).

²⁸ *Reproductive Health Journal*, *Health and economic implications of the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on women and children in Africa*, May 2023, [link](#).

²⁹ UN Women, *Covid-19 and its economic toll on women: The story behind the numbers*, September 2020, [link](#).

Gender inequality in employment has far-reaching consequences. African women have significantly lower access to income from employment than men and are, therefore, more likely to be dependent on a male breadwinner. In addition, African economies are not utilising half of their human capital effectively, which hinders productivity and economic growth. Africa's labour force is set to double by 2050 and then double again by 2100, by which time Africa is expected to account for 40% of the global labour force.³⁰ African countries need to position themselves to harness this demographic opportunity to close the development gap with other global regions.

The literature offers many explanations for African women's unequal participation in the workforce.

First, there are persistent social and cultural norms against paid employment for women. Survey data shows that, across Africa, 18% of people disagreed with the statement: "It is perfectly acceptable for any woman in your family to have a paid job outside the home if she wants to." This figure ranges from a low of 4% in Mauritius to 38% in Algeria,³¹ reflecting variations in social norms across regions and between rural and urban settings. Yet the reality is that many African women are exposed to family and societal expectations that inhibit their participation in the formal economy. These norms are gradually changing, through efforts by governments and civil society to shift the complex interplay of structural, social, and informal barriers that limit women's economic empowerment. In rural contexts, these barriers can be outweighed by the necessity of bringing resources into the household. Yet progress is not linear, and many of the country experts consulted for this study noted the tendency for traditional views on gender roles to re-emerge in periods of economic stress.

Second, African labour markets are segregated along gender lines because of a range of formal and informal factors. The formal factors include legal restrictions on women's participation in certain jobs and occupations. For example, there are restrictions on women taking on roles involving night shifts or potentially dangerous work. Informally, there is a common perception that certain occupations are suitable for women while others are not. This can translate into discriminatory hiring practices that close off certain sectors to women. For example, women represent more than half of the agricultural workforce and around 40% of the workforce in the services sector, including retail and hospitality. However, they are only 7.7% of the workforce in industry,³² amid a widespread perception that women should not undertake manual work in factory conditions. The gap in pay levels between women and men acts as a further disincentive to women's labour force

participation since women earn less than men and, consequently, have less impact on household earnings.³³

Third, women are held back from professional and technical positions by a skills mismatch. As discussed in Chapter 4, the gender gap in primary, lower and upper secondary education has narrowed considerably in recent decades but remains significant at the tertiary level. Even in countries such as Botswana, where a greater proportion of women do attend tertiary education compared to young men, women tend to study social sciences and humanities, while men typically focus on courses in science, engineering and computer sciences.³⁴ This translates into shortages of African women with the skills needed for many higher-status, better-paid occupations.

Fourth, persistently high rates of gender-based violence mean that many African women face unacceptable risks in the workplace or when traveling to and from work. Women workers are vulnerable to sexual harassment in the street and on public transport. They are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation or harassment within the workplace. This creates a strong disincentive to labour market participation. Some African countries have introduced laws to tackle this. For example, Madagascar enacted legislation in 2019 criminalising gender-based violence in the private and public spheres,³⁵ while Sierra Leone has introduced specific offences and penalties for sexual harassment in the workplace.³⁶ Two African countries (Benin and Madagascar) have comprehensive legal frameworks protecting women and girls from all forms of violence.³⁷

Finally, African women's labour force participation is held back by their high burden of unpaid domestic and care work. The African Centre for Economic Transformation (2023) found that women in sub-Saharan Africa spend on average 2.7 times more hours daily on unpaid care work than men.³⁸ In urban areas, a lack of childcare services reduces women's availability to pursue paid work. In rural areas, the burden of collecting water and firewood falls disproportionately on women and girls, taking them away from study and livelihood activities. In Malawi, for example, rural women spend on, average, 54 minutes per day collecting water, while men spend only 6 minutes. The burden of unpaid work rose sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, with women taking on additional childcare and educational responsibilities during periods of lockdown, as well as the burden of caring for sick and elderly family members.³⁹ In countries where women spend more time undertaking unpaid domestic and care work, they are less likely to participate in the labour force (Figure 4).

³⁰ Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *Global Africa: Africa in the world and the world in Africa*, July 2023, p.37, [link](#).

³¹ OECD, *Women's economic empowerment, SIGI 2021 Regional Report for Africa*, December 2021, [link](#).

³² AfDB & UN Women, *Green Jobs for Women in Africa*, 2021, p.19, [link](#).

³³ African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Women's Labour Participation in Africa- A Review of Key Drivers and Challenges*, June 2023, [link](#).

³⁴ Human Resource Development Council of Botswana, *Tertiary Education Statistics*, 2021, [link](#).

³⁵ Government of Madagascar, *Loi n°2019-008 relative à la lutte contre les Violences Basées sur le Genre*, 2019, [link](#).

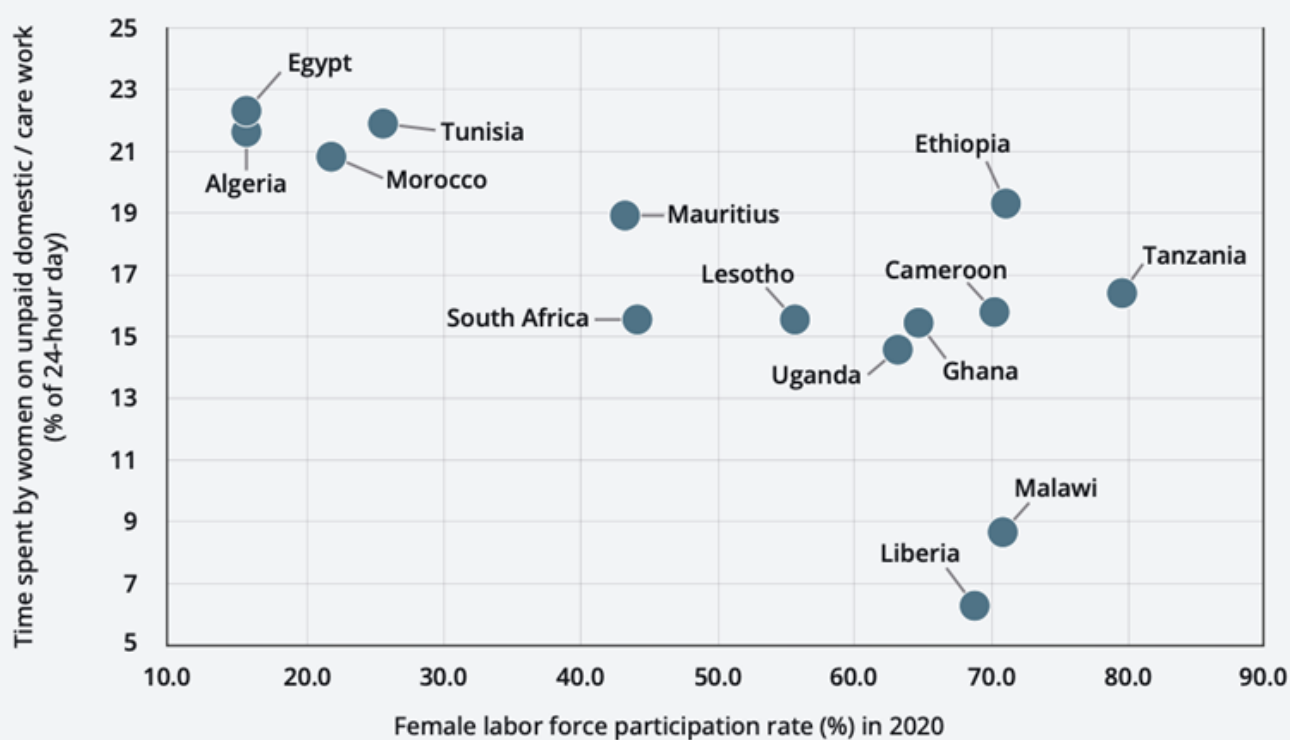
³⁶ Government of Sierra Leone, *Employment Act*, 2023, May 2023, [link](#).

³⁷ OECD, *SIGI 2023 Global Report: Gender Equality in Times of Crisis*, 2023, [link](#).

³⁸ African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Women's Labour Participation in Africa- A Review of Key Drivers and Challenges*, June 2023, p.11, [link](#).

³⁹ OECD, *Executive summary, SIGI 2021 Regional Report for Africa*, 2021, [link](#).

Figure 6 : Time spent on domestic/unpaid care work and female labour force participation in Africa, 2020



Source: International Labour Organization; World Bank Gender Data Portal.

Note: Data on time spent on unpaid domestic/care work are for the latest year with available data.

Box 5 : Women's unpaid care burden

Across Africa, women spend around three times more hours a day than men in unpaid care work,⁴⁰ and women and girls carry out 70% of unpaid domestic work.⁴¹ Globally, the higher level of unpaid care work done by women is a significant factor in gender inequality in income.⁴² Typical unpaid carers are women between 15 and 54 years old, with several children, low levels of education, few economic resources, and are sometimes also living with health problems or disabilities. The levels of unpaid work that women undertake varies across geographical areas but tends to be highest in rural areas with weak infrastructure.⁴³ Rural women often lack access to time-saving services (e.g., water, electricity and modern cooking fuels), causing them to spend more time on unpaid labour.⁴⁴ Women and girls are often at risk of sexual violence while collecting water and firewood.⁴⁵

The COVID-19 worldwide epidemic put the spotlight on care economy issues and its impacts on gender equality, as the care needs increased at the expense of women. The 2022 African Care Economy Index recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that unpaid care has been severely undervalued across Africa and the burden has largely fallen on women. The report finds

that Africa as a region is particularly susceptible to a burdened care economy because of demographic and health challenges including the highest fertility rate in the world, high rates of disability, the majority of elderly care's being provided within family units, inequality and illness, and the gendered division of care work. It calls for a socialised, public-sector response to reverse the unequal distribution of care work in Africa that falls on women.⁴⁶ The extra burden of care needs that fell on African women during the pandemic correlated with their withdrawing from the labour market and not returning, which limits women's access to social safety nets.

There is also a link in the literature between access to quality health services and the unpaid care burden. UNECA highlights that where there is inadequate health funding and low quality of care, women voluntarily fill care gaps when family members fall ill during disease outbreaks. UNECA also finds that violent conflict, which can lead to displacement and dispossession, can also contribute to increased unpaid care and domestic responsibilities of women and girls.⁴⁷

These challenges are not new. Except for Somalia and Sudan⁴⁸, every African country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and 44 African countries have ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the "Maputo Protocol"). Many countries have implemented legislative reforms designed to address one or more of the barriers to women's economic empowerment. However, real-world progress has been slow, and prone to setback in times of economic downturn. There is evidence in the literature that

female labour force participation (LFP) rates in many countries have declined over the past decade,⁴⁹ and this trend is likely to have been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Africa, LFP has declined over the past decade for both males and females (Figure 5). The International Labour Organization predicts that 140 million full-time jobs were lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with women's employment 19% more at risk than men's – especially as 40% of all employed women work in sectors that were hard hit by the pandemic, compared to 36.6% of men.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Women's Labour Participation in Africa- A Review of Key Drivers and Challenges*, June 2023, p.11, [link](#) and ILO, *Care work and care jobs*, June 2018, [link](#).

⁴¹ UNDP, *Evaluating the State of Care in Africa : The Africa Care Economy Index*, November 2022, p.4, [link](#).

⁴² UNDP, 2023 *Gender Social Norms Index – Breaking down gender biases*, 2023, p.10, [link](#).

⁴³ ILO, *Care work and care jobs*, June 2018, [link](#).

⁴⁴ UN Women, Government of Canada, *Baseline survey on unpaid care work status among women and men in 8 districts of Rwanda*, 2022, [link](#).

⁴⁵ UNECA, *Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in Africa*, March 2022, [link](#).

⁴⁶ UNDP, *The Africa Care Economy Index*, May 2022, p.27, [link](#).

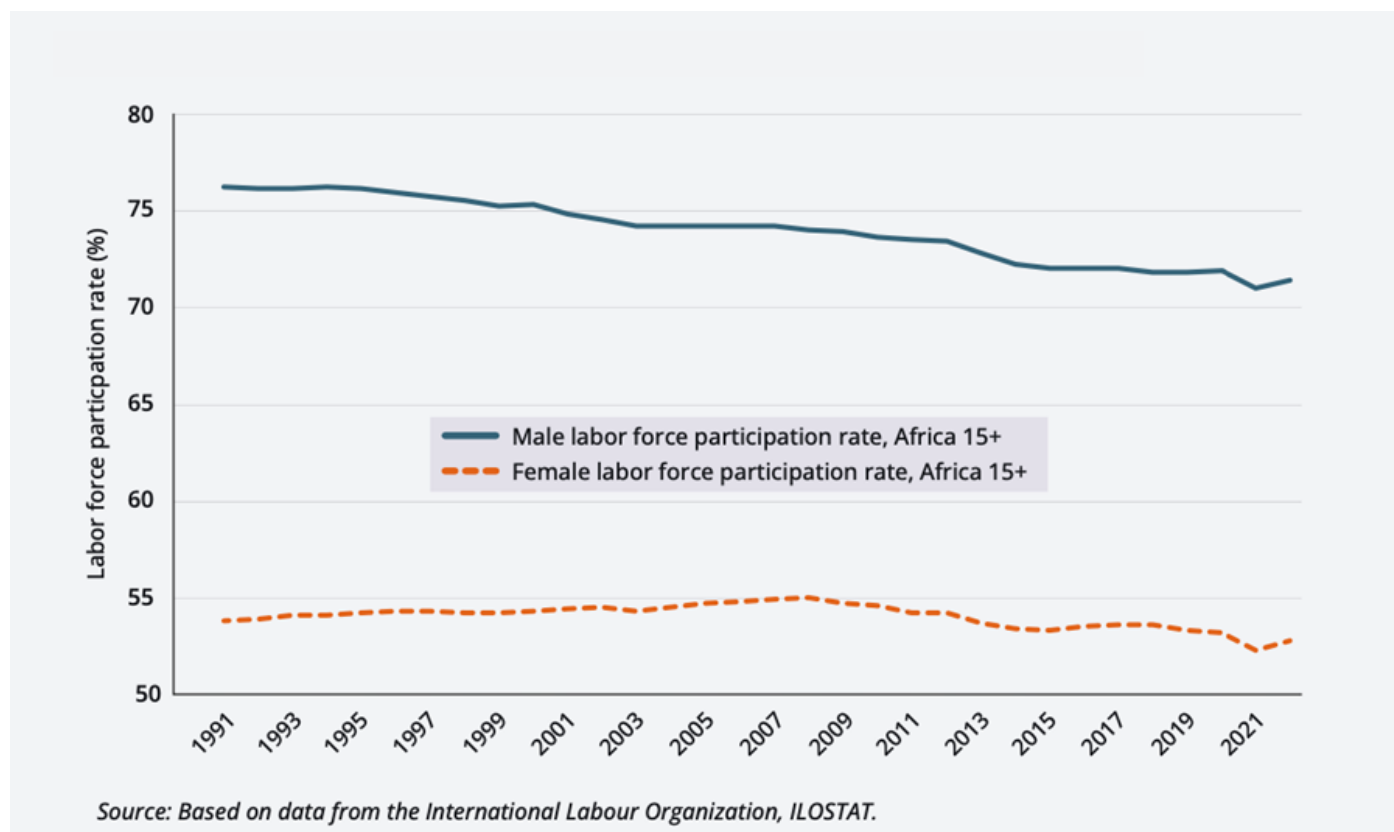
⁴⁷ UNECA, *Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in Africa*, March 2022, [link](#).

⁴⁸ OHCHR, *View the ratification status by country or by treaty – ratification status for CEDAW – Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, [link](#).

⁴⁹ African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Women's Labour Participation in Africa- A Review of Key Drivers and Challenges*, June 2023, p.8, [link](#).

⁵⁰ UN Women, *Covid-19 and its economic toll on women : The story behind the numbers*, 2020, [link](#).

Figure 7 : Female and male labour force participation in Africa, 1990-2021



Access to finance

Barriers to women's access to finance

- Women's unequal access to land titles deprives them of collateral for bank loans
- While the availability of financial services for women has increased, uptake remains low
- Possible explanations include low financial literacy, risk aversion as well as institutional and social norms



Table 4 : Economic dimension – Access to finance

Component	Indicator	2019 results	2023 results	Trend
Access to finance	Access to credit (population aged 15 and older)	73.4%	72.9%	↘

The AGI shows a score of 72.9% in access to credit. This presents a significant barrier to women's ability to engage in non-subsistence farming and small business – two of the major income sources for African women.

The literature describes various supply-side and demand-side constraints to women's access to credit and financial services. On the supply side, there is a lack of appropriately designed financial products for women. Many of the available products have high interest rates and collateral requirements, which exclude women working in the informal sector.^{51, 52} In addition, the literature suggests that women often face more demanding loan arrangements than their male counterparts.⁵³ Women also face discrimination at the institutional level and, in some instances, are unable to access financial resources without the permission of their husbands.⁵⁴

Women's lack of formal land title deprives them of collateral for loans. Even though women account for the majority of the agricultural workforce, just 13% of women are sole owners of land, compared to 36% of men, while 38% of women have joint ownership of land, compared to 51% of men.⁵⁵ In part, this reflects the prevalence of customary land-tenure systems, many of which limit women's rights to inheritance and ownership, or grant control of shared assets to husbands.⁵⁶ Women are also

under-represented among homeowners in urban settings.

Historically, lending institutions have lacked strong incentives to provide targeted financial products to women.⁵⁷ In recent years, however, there has been rapid growth in micro-lending and mobile banking services, many of which focus explicitly on expanding women's access to finance. As result, many African countries now have financial institutions that specifically target women, often backed by international finance institutions such as the Bank. During consultations in preparation for the AGI, many country experts mentioned the spread of women's banks.

The Bank's Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa (AFAWA) programme has introduced a guarantee facility to reduce the risks for financial institutions in providing financial assistance for women and women-run business. The programme aims to unlock USD 5 billion in loans for women by 2026.⁵⁸ For example, AFAWA's Women's Entrepreneurship Enablers programme provides grants of up to USD 250 000 to women entrepreneurs. AFAWA research shows that women reinvest up to 90% of their incomes in developmentally important areas such as education, health and community activities. Increasing women's access to finance can, therefore, have a wider impact in creating a more inclusive economic landscape for women across the continent.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Although not used to compute the 2023 AGI scores, AfDB underlying data shows that on average, more women are employed in the informal economy than men (70.4% compared to 66.2%). More women than men are also in positions of vulnerable employment (69.1% compared to 55.9%).

⁵² AfDB, *Unleashing women's entrepreneurship through strategic partnerships*, n.d., link and AfDB, *Access to finance : why aren't women leaning in?*, March 2020, link.

⁵³ AfDB, *Access to finance : why aren't women leaning in?*, March 2020, link.

⁵⁴ UN Women, *Background paper : Driving Gender-Responsive Financial Inclusion Models in Africa*, 2017, link.

⁵⁵ Lahoti, R., Gaddis, I., Li, W., *Gender Gaps in Property Ownership in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2018, link. Note : This paper uses data for 28 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Because data on land ownership across Africa is generally scarce, these figures may not be reflective of real levels across the continent.

⁵⁶ African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Barriers to Young Women's Employment in the Future World of Work in Ghana and Senegal*, August 2022, link; Jaiyeola, E. and Adeyeye, M., *Obstacles along the path of women enterprises in Africa : a case study of Ogotun women in Ekiti state, Nigeria*, July 2021, link and AfDB, *Unleashing women's entrepreneurship through strategic partnerships*, n.d., link.

⁵⁷ AfDB, *Unleashing women's entrepreneurship through strategic partnerships*, n.d., link.

⁵⁸ AfDB, *Across 2023 the African Development bank Group spearheaded a range of exciting and innovative I initiatives to grow Africa's economies*, December 2023, link.

⁵⁹ AfDB, *African Development Bank, African Guarantee Fund Kick off AFAWA Finance Series Nigeria to unlock financing for women-led start-ups*, October 2023, link.

Box 6 : Senegal's efforts to support women business through access to finance

Senegal's Délégation générale à l'entrepreneuriat rapide des femmes et des jeunes (DER/FJ) is a national initiative to rationalise support for entrepreneurship, with a focus on the inclusion of women and youth. With an annual budget of USD 55 million, DER/FJ offers a combination of financial services (bank accounts, credit facilities) and non-financial support (financial literacy promotion, business formalisation, training and coaching) to strengthen the capacities of entrepreneur(e)s. Interest rates are subsidised during its introductory phase to compete better with informal lending institutions that offer ready access to loans at often extortionate rates. The subsidies will be phased out progressively to avoid market distortion. Learning from Senegal's experience suggests that African governments should:

- Work with banks to revise their collateral requirements;
- Promote more efficient national credit markets to permit lower interest rates;
- Tackle low financial literacy among women;
- Improve the collection of sex-disaggregated data to inform the development of specific gender-sensitive financial inclusion initiatives;
- Foster public-private partnerships, to promote financial inclusion; and
- Promote the adaptation of fin-tech and mobile money services, to meet women's needs better.

Mobile money accounts in Africa have experienced rapid growth, surging by 800% from 22 million in 2012 to 183 million in 2021. As of 2022, 28% of adults in sub-Saharan Africa had a mobile money account (Figure 6).⁶⁰ Mobile money removes the obstacles of poor infrastructure and high transaction costs associated with traditional banking, making it easier for women to access finance and to participate in the financial sector. This has greatly assisted in reducing gender inequality in access to finance, as women increasingly utilise mobile money to support their business and smooth household income, making them more resilient when faced with shocks and crises.⁶¹ Female entrepreneurs leveraging mobile money can invest in fixed assets, expand their businesses, offer credit to customers, and maintain better relationships with suppliers. Furthermore, interoperability allowing cross-border transactions without reliance on traditional international e-commerce infrastructure enhances opportunities for female entrepreneurs, particularly in regions where travel can be challenging or unsafe, providing an additional avenue for economic empowerment. Overall, use of mobile money is

associated with a 20% increase in the likelihood of female-led businesses receiving external investment.⁶²

Despite these many positive initiatives, the access to finance figure in the 2023 AGI has deteriorated slightly from the 2019 figure of 73.4%. One possible explanation is that, while the availability of finance is increasing, it is still not being met by a strong demand from women.⁶³ Research points to various factors that may be suppressing demand, such as lower access to technology, particularly mobile phones,⁶⁴ and underlying social and legal norms that discourage women from accessing financial services, particularly in rural areas.⁶⁵

The Bank's research finds that many women entrepreneurs fail to apply for loans due to low financial literacy, risk aversion and fear of failure, all of which were echoed in interviews with UN Women representatives. As a result of low perceived creditworthiness, many African entrepreneurs self-select out of the formal credit market, relying instead on informal savings.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ World Bank, *Financial Inclusion in Sub-Saharan-Africa – Data from the Global Findex*, April 2024, [link](#).

⁶¹ Kumwenda, M., *How mobile money can empower women : Evidence from Africa*, May 2023, [link](#).

⁶² Fintechly, *Breaking Barriers for Women in Africa Through Mobile Money*, March 2023, [link](#).

⁶³ UN Women, *Driving gender-responsive financial inclusions models in Africa*, 2017, [link](#).

⁶⁴ ADFI, *Overcoming barriers to African women's access to and use of digital financial solutions*, March 2023, [link](#).

⁶⁵ African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Women's Labour Participation in Africa- A Review of Key Drivers and Challenges*, June 2023, [link](#); Jaiyeola, E. and Adeyeye, M., *Obstacles along the path of women enterprises in Africa : a case study of Ogotun women in Ekiti state, Nigeria*, July 2021, [link](#); AfDB, *Unleashing women's entrepreneurship through strategic partnerships*, n.d., [link](#).

⁶⁶ AfDB, *Access to finance : why aren't women leaning in?*, March 2020, [link](#).

Box 7 : Zimbabwe's Woman's Microfinance Bank

Financial exclusion in Zimbabwe, including limited access to credit, the absence of formal savings, low awareness of investment products, and under-utilisation of formal insurance, presents significant challenges for women and women-run businesses.⁶⁷ Zimbabwe Women's Microfinance Bank Limited (ZWMB) is a sponse to this challenge. Launched by the President in 2018, the bank has opened up funding channels for thousands of women and tailored its products to their needs. The bank has focused its lending on women in the agriculture and education sectors, where women make a key contribution to the economy.⁶⁸ According to ZWMB, women constitute 52% of the population and play a vital role in the workforce (contributing extensively to food production) but earn only 10% of the nation's income.⁶⁹

ZWMB and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) started the 'Spotlight Initiative' to enhance financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills among women and youth. The collaboration

provides financial advisory services, nurtures commercially viable ventures and strengthens national policies on gender, human rights (including disability rights), environment, labour and climate change in alignment with global standards.⁷⁰

Learning from the Zimbabwe experience includes:

- More research is needed to identify the barriers faced by women in taking advantage of financial services;
- More can be done to improve the quality of financial services for women-run businesses in terms of timing, duration, cost and suitability; and
- Some gender-neutral financial policies can further disadvantage women if they do not consider the diverse financial needs of women.⁷¹

Women's participation in business

Barriers to women's participation in business

- A gender skills gap in entrepreneurship.
- Lack of mentors, networks and family support.
- A concentration of women-led businesses in less profitable sectors.
- Lower access of women-led businesses to public procurement opportunities.



⁶⁷ ZWMB, *Why women's bank?*, n.d., [link](#).

⁶⁸ *The Herald*, *Women's Bank the grand game changer*, August 2023, [link](#).

⁶⁹ ZWMB, *Corporate overview: background, vision, mission & values*, n.d., [link](#).

⁷⁰ UNDP, *Zimbabwe Women's Microfinance Bank to take empowerment further & tackle financial exclusion*, April 2021, [link](#).

⁷¹ AFI, AfDB et al, *Gender, women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe*, 2019, [link](#).

Table 3 : The economic and business dimension - labour market participation and outcomes ²³

Component	Indicator	2019 results	2023 results	Trend
Access to finance	Access to credit (population aged 15 and older)	44.3%	41.9%	↘

The AGI indicator on participation in business measures the share of businesses that include a woman among the principal owners. The score in 2023 stands at 41.9% – a decline from the 2019 figure of 44.3%. Underlying data show that while 73.1% of firms had male participation in ownership in 2023, only 26.9% had female participation in ownership.

There are many barriers to women's participation in business cited in the literature, ranging from obstacles in the labour force and business itself, to structural barriers stemming from social and cultural norms. The skills gap is a key factor. The education available to young African women prepares them poorly for participation in business. Women entrepreneurs face additional barriers, such as harassment and stereotyping, a lack of career guidance and professional mentorship, and lower access to finance.⁷² Women also face challenges accessing the markets and networks that enable them to grow their businesses.⁷³ In Africa, small businesses in the informal sector depend primarily on support from family members. Cultural norms that differentiate between male and female children are, therefore, likely to be the first barrier faced by young female entrepreneurs. These cultural

expectations, in turn, influence government policy, leading to a lack of legal and policy support for women in business.⁷⁴

While many African women are active in some form of business activity, World Bank data suggests that their profits are on average 34% lower than those of businesses run by men.⁷⁵ This suggests that male entrepreneurs predominate in the most profitable business sectors, leaving women-run businesses concentrated in less productive activities, such as non-capital-intensive manufacturing and service sectors, and informal trade).⁷⁶ The literature suggests that the common perception that men make better entrepreneurs is widely internalised by society. There is also evidence to suggest that women-run businesses are less likely to be able to access public procurement opportunities due to difficulties in navigating bureaucratic processes such as registration and licensing, a lack of female representation in the civil service and local government, and less understanding of the legal framework surrounding public procurement. Lower access to credit also translates into reduced ability to manage business risks such as late payment for goods and services.⁷⁷

⁷² African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Barriers to Young Women's Employment in the Future World of Work in Ghana and Senegal*, August 2022, [link](#); Jaiyeola, E. and Adeyeye, M., *Obstacles along the path of women enterprises in Africa : a case study of Ogotun women in Ekiti state, Nigeria*, July 2021, [link](#) and AfDB, *Unleashing women's entrepreneurship through strategic partnerships*, n.d., [link](#).

⁷³ AfDB, *Unleashing women's entrepreneurship through strategic partnerships*, n.d., [link](#).

⁷⁴ Jaiyeola, E. and Adeyeye, M., *Obstacles along the path of women enterprises in Africa : a case study of Ogotun women in Ekiti state, Nigeria*, July 2021, [link](#).

⁷⁵ Coleman, R., and Campos, F., *Profiting from parity : Addressing constraints to support women-owned businesses*, April 2019, [link](#).

⁷⁶ Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Consortium, *Adult Population Survey*, [link](#).

⁷⁷ Open Government Partnership, *Overcoming women's barriers to participating in entrepreneurship and public procurement in Africa*, February 2021, [link](#).



Box 8 : Zoom on North Africa : Tunisia : A champion of gender equality in North Africa

With an AGI score of 53%, Tunisia is the leader on gender equality in North Africa, followed by Morocco (41.3%) and Egypt (41.2%). Although not far above the continental African average of 50.3%, Tunisia features some important dynamics that are helping to drive progress on gender equality. Thanks to an active civil society, Tunisian women have been able to advocate strongly for women's rights and equality between the sexes, in accordance with the national constitution.

In collaboration with civil society organisations, the Tunisian government has developed a National Action Plan for 2018-2022 to implement the United Nations Security Council resolution on "Women, peace, and security". This action plan focuses on safeguarding women and girls from gender-based violence and discrimination, and on enhancing the involvement of women in political life and decision making. This comprehensive national plan follows the adoption of a historic law in 2017 against gender-based violence, penalising sexual harassment, marital rape and domestic work for under-aged girls, and promoting gender equality in access to education.

Tunisia performed exceptionally well in the AGI's first dimension for economy and business with a score of 7.23%, ranking it among the continental leaders for women's economic inclusion. In the business sphere, the Tunisian government has shown a strong commitment to raising the economic status of women. For instance, the Ministry of Women, Family and Childhood, supported by the African Development Bank, has launched the Raeda programme (meaning "woman leader" in Arabic) to back women-led enterprises across various sectors, such as agriculture, handicrafts and services. Since its inception, 4,500 Tunisian women have been able to launch businesses and thus contribute to the diversification of the Tunisian economy and economic growth.

Overall, the Tunisian case shows that important progress in improving gender equality can come about through civil society activism and engagement in public policy.





4. Dimension II : Social

- The AGI score for the social dimension stands at 98.3% – an improvement on the 2019 score of 95.1%.
- More girls than boys complete primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school, and this is narrowing the gender literacy gap.
- Progress towards gender parity in education is being driven both by improvements in girls' education outcomes and declining participation rates among boys.
- Child marriage and female genital mutilating/cutting remain persistently high.
- A long-term decline in intimate partner violence came under threat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second dimension of the Africa Gender Index addresses social aspects of gender equality. It collects data against indicators of access to education, cursus completion, and literacy rates, as well as health outcomes such as HIV prevalence and life expectancy at birth (see Table 6).

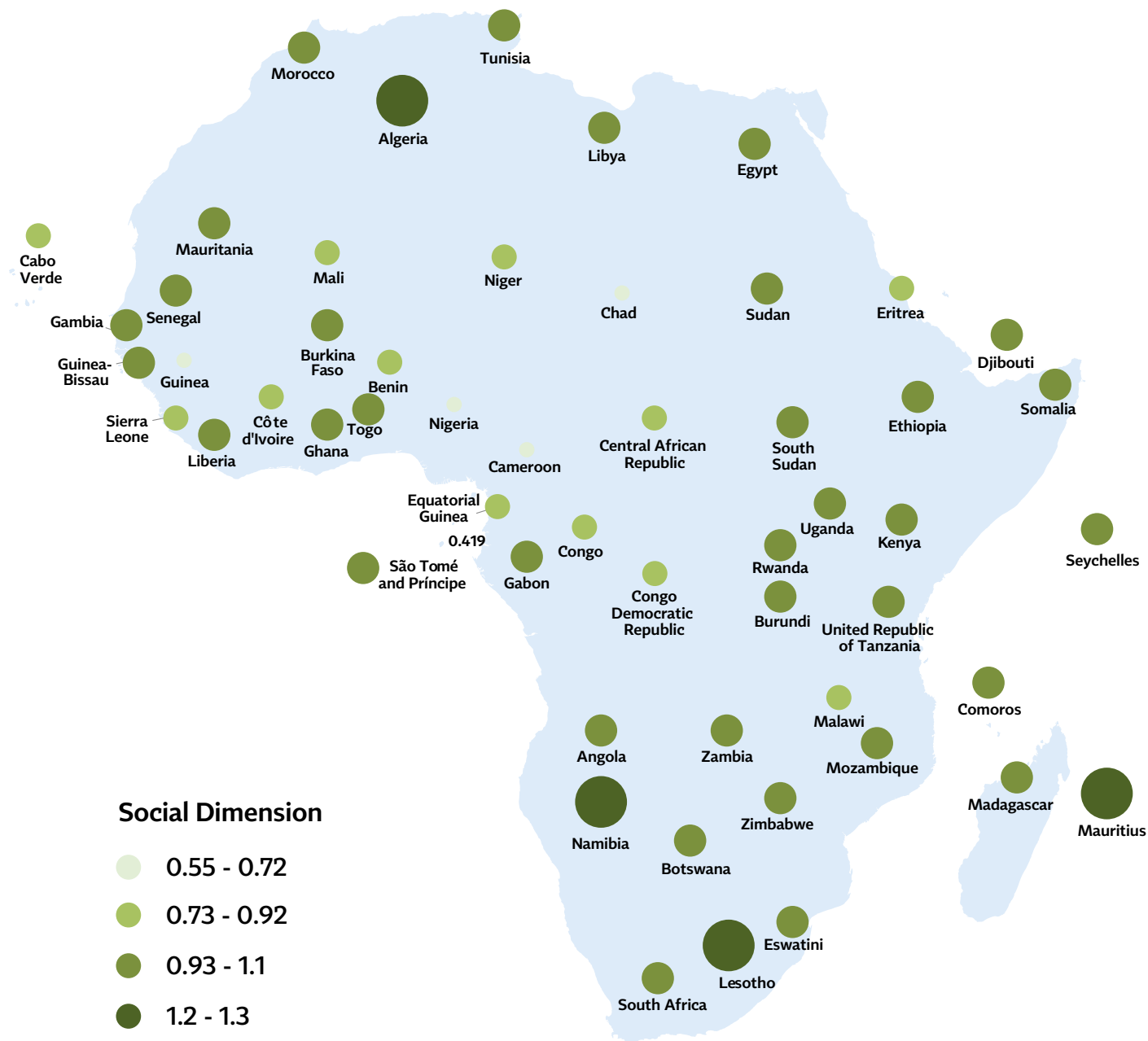
The 2023 gender equality score for the social dimension is 98.3%, approaching gender parity as a continental average. Education indicators are the main driver of this trend, with more girls than boys completing primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school. However, girls still lag behind in tertiary qualifications and

in overall literacy. Most African countries still show inequality against women in the social dimension. Cameroon has the lowest score (68.3%), followed by Chad (69.8%) and Guinea (72.9%).

These figures do not necessarily imply that barriers to girls' education have diminished since 2019. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a demonstrably negative impact on girls' education, while longstanding challenges such as preventing teen pregnancy and providing menstrual hygiene materials remain. However, there has also been a rise in factors influencing school finishing rates among boys.

Figure 8 : AGI 2023 Country Scores for the Social Dimension

African girls and women continue to be disadvantaged in education and training. They face health-related barriers, and are more vulnerable to violence, including sexual violence. The AGI average score for the social dimension is 98.3% and its scores for different countries range widely reflecting considerable variation in services and contexts for African women.



A score of 1 represent parity between women and men.
A score between 0 and 1 means there is gender inequality in favour of males, while a score above 1 means that women are doing well compared to men.

Barriers for girls in education

- High expectations for girls to take on domestic responsibilities at an early age.
- High rates of teenage pregnancy and early marriage and the exclusion of pregnant teenagers and young mothers from school.
- A lower rate of return to school for girls after COVID-19 lockdowns.
- A lack of menstrual hygiene provision in schools.
- Sexual harassment and gender-based violence against girls in school.

Barriers to boys' education

- A lack of formal-sector job opportunities, undermining the perceived value of education as a means of accessing employment.
- Rising economic stress, leading to pressure on boys to start earning early.



Table 6 : The Social Dimension - Education

Component	Indicator	2019 results	2023 results	Trend
Education outcomes	Primary school completion	96.2%	104.7%	↗
	Lower secondary completion	88.7%	106.8%	↗
	Upper secondary completion	86.5%	103.2%	↗
	Tertiary graduation	85.8%	84.2%	↘
	Youth literacy (15-24)	86.8%	92.2%	↗

Over the past two decades, there has been notable progress across Africa in improving girls' access to education, particularly at younger ages. Primary school enrolment rates have improved dramatically,⁷⁸ and the female primary completion rate has risen from 44% in 2000 to 66% in 2020.⁷⁹ The AGI results provide encouraging evidence that this pattern of improvement is now continuing into lower and upper secondary school, in line with global trends.⁸⁰ Feedback from country experts indicated that this trend is happening at a much slower rate in rural and poorer areas. However, gender inequality in tertiary graduation remains significant, with a score of 84.2%, and has widened slightly. Underlying data collected to calculate the AGI scores indicate that, on average, the tertiary graduation rate for women is 41.6% in 2023 (compared to 42% in 2019), versus 55.3% for men (compared to 54.8% in 2019). Research has shown that women are less likely to enrol in tertiary education,⁸¹ with marriage and childbearing offered as the primary explanation, along with social norms and expectations.

The improvement in girls' school completion rates has come about through a concerted effort by African governments and international development partners. Yet the literature shows that there are still significant obstacles to overcome and that many of these have increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One common obstacle is the higher expectations placed on girls to take on domestic responsibilities at an early stage. In Burkina Faso, for example, a UN Women study showed that girls aged 10-15 are three times more likely than boys to spend 21 hours or more each week on household chores.⁸² This is likely to be a contributing factor to gender disparity in lower secondary school completion, where the girls' completion rate is 42.6% versus 67% for boys.

A second obstacle is teenage pregnancy and early marriage, combined with a lack of support for young mothers to resume their education. Data collected for the AGI shows that the use of modern contraceptive methods among 15–19-year-olds averages only 26.9%, while teenage (15-19) pregnancy rates average 17.1%. It is common for pregnant schoolgirls to be expelled or to face stigma and ridicule.⁸³ COVID-19 has been a setback in efforts to address this. In South Africa, teenage pregnancy in 2021 was nearly double the pre-pandemic rates, with 65% of those pregnancies unintended. Of the teenage girls who fell pregnant, one in three did not return to school.⁸⁴

Nigeria country experts consulted for this report stressed that there are wide regional disparities within Nigeria's national figures, caused by higher rates of early marriage and teenage pregnancy in the country's north, which prevent many girls from completing lower and upper secondary school. Six northern States have partnered with the Federal Government, UNICEF and the

UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to tackle the multi-faceted issues that hamper girls' school enrolment, retention and learning outcomes. The programme has generated lessons for promoting girls' education, including the value of small, unconditional cash transfers to the poorest households, community mobilisation and enrolment drives, grants to schools for improved infrastructure, and improvements in the teaching of early-grade literacy and numeracy. These factors were highly successful in attracting girls into school, leading to a 64% increase in girls' enrolment in the participating States. One of the consequences was a drop in early marriage and early pregnancy rates, showing that investments in girls' education can trigger a virtuous circle.

These social barriers are likely to have been increased by conflict and insecurity, which exacerbate poverty. USAID research found that conflict zones in Africa correlate closely with lower enrolment in education.⁸⁵ The gendered impacts of conflict on education in Africa vary across contexts. In some environments, boys' education suffers more, due to child soldiering and higher death rates among males in conflict-affected areas. In other contexts, girls are more significantly impacted, due to fears of insecurity and sexual violence.⁸⁶ Conflict often exacerbates economic stress within households, and the literature suggests that, in such circumstances, boys' education tends to be prioritised.⁸⁷ Research in 2018 found that nearly two million children in Central and West Africa cannot attend school due to conflict and insecurity.⁸⁸ This trend is having long-term impacts on education in the region and is increasing pre-existing inequalities; the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) finds that girls are less likely to return to school following conflict than boys.⁸⁹ The GCPEA have produced guidelines on how to protect schools and universities from military use during armed conflict,⁹⁰ as part of a set of recommendations on safeguarding education in conflict zones.

In Zimbabwe, where nearly a quarter of girls become mothers before turning 18,⁹¹ the government has been working with UNICEF to increase support for young mothers to return to school, using social behaviour campaigns and community engagement.⁹² Following advocacy campaigns from teachers' unions and civil society, Zimbabwe amended its Education Act in 2022 to permit pregnant girls to attend school.⁹³ Country experts also mentioned that Zimbabwe had made concerted efforts to reduce the number of school days that girls lose due to menstruation, as well as the loss of confidence brought about by fear of bullying and harassment during menstruation.⁹⁴ A World Bank pilot project in Zimbabwe showed that a combination of social protection and hygiene interventions improved attendance by over 30% and reduced the dropout rate among girls.⁹⁵ Zimbabwe's lower and upper secondary school completion gender gaps in this year's AGI are 106.8% and 103.2%, respectively – an impressive

⁷⁸ UNESCO, Interview with Lorato Palesa : Gender data research officer with the African Union's International Centre for Girls Education in Africa (AU CIEFFA), 2023, link.

⁷⁹ Armstrong, M., Education : girls are catching up with boys in sub-Saharan Africa, 2022, link.

⁸⁰ A recent report from UNICEF, UN Women and Plan International notes that more girls than ever before are going to school globally, despite concerning negative trends of violence against girls, link.

⁸¹ Kattan, R.B. and Khan, M.M., Closing the gap : Tackling the remaining disparities in girls' education and women's labor market participation, 2023, link.

⁸² UN Women, A new era for girls, taking stock of 25 years of progress, 2020, p.16, link.

⁸³ AfDB, Trends and achievements in Girls' education (1970-2010) and best practices for promotion of girls' education in Africa, March 2011, p.4-6, link.

⁸⁴ Zero dropout, School Dropout, gender matters, 2021, p.35, link.

⁸⁵ USAID, Education, Conflict and Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa, July 2021, p.9, link.

⁸⁶ USAID, Education, Conflict and Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa, July 2021, p.1, link.

⁸⁷ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, Protect women and girls from attack, 2019, link.

⁸⁸ World Bank, How can we protect education attack focus on western and central Africa, 2021, link.

⁸⁹ World Bank, How can we protect education attack focus on western and central Africa, 2021, link.

⁹⁰ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, Guidelines for protecting schools and universities from military use during armed conflict, 2014, link.

⁹¹ Moshiri, L. and Serumaga, D., A new era for girls - Taking stock of 25 years of progress, March 2020, link.

⁹² UNICEF, Quality Learning and Skills Development, n.d., link.

⁹³ Educational International, New Zimbabwean law allows pregnant girls to continue with their education, August 2020, link.

⁹⁴ UNICEF, The Zimbabwe formative research on menstrual hygiene management, final report, December 2019, p.79, link.

⁹⁵ The World Bank, A pilot project in Zimbabwe shows how grants, cash, and menstrual pads can keep adolescent girls in school, January 2023, link.

improvement on the 2019 AGI figures of 88.7% and 86.5%.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant setbacks for efforts to improve girls' education. School closures during the lockdown affected more than 250 million students.⁹⁶ Studies suggest that many girls did not return to school at the end of the pandemic. Country experts link this to increased care and other domestic responsibilities. The pandemic also saw rises in gender-based violence, early marriage and unwanted pregnancies, all of which have had negative impacts on girls' school completion rates. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest levels of child marriage

globally,⁹⁷ and UNESCO data shows that the number of girls out of school at lower and upper secondary levels continued to rise in 2023, despite the reopening of schools and easing of COVID-19 restrictions.⁹⁸ Overall, 9.5 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa "will never set foot in a classroom" – nearly twice the number of boys (5 million).

For 2024, the African Union has adopted Education and Skills Development as its theme, which was pre-launched at an event in February 2024 as part of the Continental Strategy on Education for Africa.⁹⁹

Box 9 : AfDB findings on best practices in promoting girls' education ¹⁰⁰

AfDB's Trends and achievements in girls' education (1970-2010) and best practices for promotion of girls' education in Africa pulls together best practice examples for promoting girls' education from across Africa.

- **The Complementary Basic Education in Tanzania (COBET) programme** was undertaken by the Ministry of Education in partnership with UNICEF to provide education for girls who had dropped out or never attended primary school. The programme created a compressed competency-based curriculum that took three years to complete instead of the usual seven. The school day was shortened, children did not have to wear uniforms, and there were no direct costs to families.
- **Zambia's Programme for the Advancement of Girl's Education (PAGE)** incorporated measures to support pregnant girls' returning to school, affirmative action for female teachers, and improved sanitation facilities. Over eight years, PAGE had a positive impact on community attitudes towards girls' education, with retention rates increasing and more young mothers re-entering school.
- **The Girls Education Movement (GEM) in Uganda** promotes community mobilisation in support of girls' education. It views girls not just as the beneficiaries of its interventions but as active participants in changing gender-based norms. GEM clubs were established across primary and secondary schools to challenge gender stereotypes through peer-led advocacy, helping to dispel societal myths.¹⁰¹

The shift towards gender parity in the AGI education indicators is in part a reflection of challenges around boys' education. In 2023, completion ratios now favour girls in 33 countries for primary school, in 37 countries for lower secondary and in 24 countries for upper secondary. A range of gender experts suggested factors that may be contributing to higher dropout rates among boys. A common explanation is the lack of formal-sector job opportunities. Despite the well-documented benefits of education in limiting the likelihood of long-term unemployment, poverty and child labour, if boys expect to earn their living in the informal sector, where formal qualifications

are not a requirement, they have less incentive to stay in school and delay their earning an income. Country experts in Nigeria, for example, report that teenage boys in the country's southeast face greater family and social pressure to begin entrepreneurial activities than to advance their education. These pressures rise during times of economic stress. Economic pressure can also lead to an increase in labour migration, leaving more boys to be raised in female-headed households. International research suggests that boys without male role models may be disadvantaged in the education system.¹⁰² However, this is an area that would benefit from further research and analysis.

⁹⁶ Ndejjo, R., et. Al., Consequences of school closures due to COVID-19 in DRC, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda, October 2023, [link](#).

⁹⁷ Moshiri, L., and Serumaga, D., A new era for girls – Taking stock of 25 years of progress, March 2020, [link](#).

⁹⁸ Kattan, R.B. and Khan, M.M., Closing the gap : Tackling the remaining disparities in girls' education and women's labor market participation, 2023, [link](#).

⁹⁹ African Union, AU's Committee of Ten Heads of State and Government Convenes to Pledge support for the 2024 AU Education Roadmap, 2024, [link](#).

¹⁰⁰ AfDB, Trends and achievements in girls' education (1970-2010) and best practices for promotion of girls' education in Africa, n.d., [link](#).

¹⁰¹ United Nations, Transforming Education Summit 2022, Summary of the best practice, 2022, p.5, [link](#).

¹⁰² Zero dropout, School Dropout, gender matters, 2021, p.37, [link](#).

Box 10 : South Africa's 'Zero Dropout' campaign highlights the gendered dimensions of school completion rates

UNICEF guidance on gender-responsive education policy stresses that there is no reason for girls' success in education to come at the expense of boys, or vice versa.¹⁰³ The Zero-Dropout Campaign in South Africa is a knowledge hub that aims to inform best practice in gender-responsive dropout prevention. Its 2021 report, *School Dropout – Gender Matters*, stresses the importance of not reinforcing gender stereotypes through gender binaries and ensuring that gender-sensitive approaches also take account of other social conditions, such as racial background, geography and

economic status. The report notes that, in this context, high rates of child pregnancy also have an impact on boys, with teenage fathers facing pressure to drop out of school in order to support their children financially, as well as social stigma. These factors are rarely considered in programming. The report found that factors such as a lack of male teachers (70% of South African teachers are women), harsher disciplinary measures and gang membership all contribute to higher dropout rates among boys.¹⁰⁴

Encouragingly, the AGI shows important progress towards gender parity in literacy rates among 15–24-year-olds, with the index score rising from 86.8% in 2019 to 92.2% in 2023. Morocco has achieved gender parity in youth literacy. Country experts stressed that this was the product of over 20 years of national literacy campaigns, led by Morocco's National Agency for the Fight Against Illiteracy in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and civil society organisations, offering in-person and online literacy classes. Around 70% of the 3.6 million beneficiaries are women.¹⁰⁵ However, there are still

many countries that lag behind. In Chad, equality in literacy stands at just 42%. The Bank has been supporting the implementation of the 2017 National Gender Policy through the Girls Education and Women's Literacy Programme (PEFAF), which promotes equality and equity for girls in accessing quality education and functional literacy for women, to strengthen Chad's human capital.¹⁰⁶ The programme has identified poverty, early pregnancy and marriage, gender-based violence and cultural barriers as the main obstacles to girls' education and literacy.¹⁰⁷

Health and nutrition

Obstacles to women's health

- Rising HIV infection rates and other sexually transmitted infections among teenage girls, due to a low awareness of HIV, gender-based violence, lack of education about and access to contraceptives, and a lack of personal autonomy.
- Low rates of skilled birth attendance in many countries, combined with poor hygiene in many communities and the lack of primary health facilities.
- High rates of respiratory complaints due to the use of low-quality cooking fuels.
- High rates of female genital cutting, child marriage and gender-based violence.



¹⁰³ Global Partnership, *Guidance for Developing Gender-Responsive Education Sector Plans*, January 2017, [link](#).

¹⁰⁴ Zero dropout, *School Dropout, gender matters*, 2021, [link](#).

¹⁰⁵ Alouazen, S., *Morocco's Fight Against Illiteracy: Women Benefits More than Men*, Morocco world news, January 2021, [link](#).

¹⁰⁶ AfDB, *Girls' education and women's literacy project (PEFAF)*, Appraisal Report, November 2020, p.3, [link](#).

¹⁰⁷ AfDB, *Chad - Project to promote training for girls and literacy for Women (PEFAF) - P - TD - IAE-002- ESMF*, February 2020, [link](#).

Table 7 : The Social Dimension – Health and nutrition

Component	Indicator	2019 results	2023 results	Trend
Education outcomes	Prevalence of HIV	90.9%	90.4%	↘
	Children aged <5 years stunting rate	124.8%	114.1%	↗
	Life expectancy at birth	118.1%	122.6%	↘

The AGI health indicators provide only a limited snapshot of the many dimensions of health equality in Africa. The index score for HIV prevalence remains similar to the last AGI, at 90%, while gender disparities in nutrition (under-5 stunting) and life expectancy are in favour of women, at 114% and 123%, respectively. Yet African women also face deep-seated challenges around maternal health, female genital mutilation (FGM) and intimate-partner violence. Gender disparities in HIV infection rates have not narrowed in recent years. A study by UN Women, UNICEF and Plan International suggests that this is part of a wider rise in sexually transmitted infections among adolescent girls, linked to risk factors that include gender-based violence, lack of education about and access to contraceptives, and a lack of personal autonomy. AGI data shows that one in five African women between the ages of 15 and 34 has experienced intimate partner violence in the past 12 months.

Overall, four times as many adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa become newly infected with HIV than boys.¹⁰⁸ Less than a third of adolescent girls have comprehensive knowledge of HIV, and only one in three girls aged between fifteen and nineteen with multiple partners uses condoms.¹⁰⁹ In Botswana (where the index score on HIV infection rates is 67%), three in every ten HIV infections happen amongst 15-24 year olds, with young women in this age group being twice as likely to be infected.¹¹⁰ The USAID-funded DREAMS programme in Zimbabwe (which has an HIV index score of 75%) has been working to reduce the number of young women engaging in transactional sex and relationships for financial stability by providing them with mentorship and equipment for small businesses.¹¹¹

Gender disparities for under-5 stunting and life expectancy at birth are biased towards women, although the AGI score for under-5 stunting has moved closer to parity since 2019, while life expectancy continues to be in favour of women. Explanations for stunting generally are well documented (including poor hygiene practices, poor nutritional awareness, food insecurity and a lack of access to health care) but the causes of the gender

gap are not clear from the research. One possible explanation is that male children are at a higher risk due to biologically higher energy requirements.¹¹² Another is that boys are more prone to infections,¹¹³ potentially linked to differences in the way boy and girl infants are raised in rural settings. Underlying data show that life expectancy for both men and women across the continent is increasing on average, however it has increased at a faster rate for women than it has for men, which explains why the 2023 AGI figure shows an increase in inequality in favour of women.

African women continue to face a range of obstacles to access to health care, and these are likely to have increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises. Most African countries have constitutional provisions affirming girls' and women's right to health, and policy frameworks addressing sexual and reproductive health are in place in many countries.¹¹⁴ Yet Africa still accounts for 69% of maternal deaths globally.¹¹⁵ AGI data shows wide variations in the proportion of births attended by a skilled health professional, from as low as 32.6% in Sudan and 34.1% in Malawi to near universal attendance in countries such as Tanzania and Zimbabwe. However, in many countries the poor quality of primary health services is the key factor, with only half of primary health care facilities in sub-Saharan Africa having access to clean water and adequate sanitation, and only a third with access to reliable electricity.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, between 5% and 17% of maternal deaths in sub-Saharan Africa are due to complications from abortions – a figure that could readily be reduced by improved access to reproductive health products and safe abortion.¹¹⁷

African women and girls carry a triple burden of vulnerability to neglected tropical diseases, non-communicable diseases (the leading cause of death and disability-adjusted life years for women older than 50) and poor reproductive health outcomes.¹¹⁸ The burden is highest in the parts of the continent affected by conflict and climate-related disasters. In times of crisis, essential health and reproductive services for women are often affected.

¹⁰⁸ UNICEF, *HIV and AIDS in adolescents: Turning the tide against AIDS will require more concentrated focus on adolescents and young people*, 2020, [link](#).

¹⁰⁹ UN Women, *A new era for girls, taking stock of 25 years of progress*, 2020, p.35, [link](#).

¹¹⁰ UNICEF, *Every child has the right to survive and thrive, Botswana*, [link](#).

¹¹¹ USAID, *DREAMS: Partnership to reduced HIV/AIDS in Adolescent Girls and Young Women*, [link](#).

¹¹² Nordic Nutrition Recommendations, 2014, [link](#).

¹¹³ Wamani, H., Aström, A.N., Peterson, S., Tumwine, J.K., Tylleskär, T., *Boys are more stunted than girls in sub-Saharan Africa: a meta-analysis of 16 demographic and health surveys*, 2007, [link](#); and Windle, H.J., ¹⁰⁸ Kelleher, D., Crabtree, J.E., *Childhood Helicobacter pylori infection and growth impairment in developing countries: a vicious cycle?*, 2007, [link](#).

¹¹⁴ Djibouti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan and the United Republic of Tanzania; see UNECA, *Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in Africa Progress, challenges, opportunities and key priority actions to accelerate implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5*, March 2022, [link](#).

¹¹⁵ World Health Organization, African Region, *Maternal mortality: The urgency of a systemic and multisectoral approach in mitigating maternal deaths in Africa*, March 2023, [link](#).

¹¹⁶ WHO and UNICEF, *WASH in health care facilities: Global Baseline Report 2019*, 2019, [link](#).

¹¹⁷ Bongomin, F., and August, E., *Sexual and Reproductive Health Across Africa: Challenges and Opportunities*, December, 2023, [link](#).

¹¹⁸ Habib, M. et al., *The challenges for women's health in sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons learned from an integrative multistakeholder workshop in Gabon*, 2021, [link](#).

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is a violation of the most basic human rights of women and girls. It also has widespread social and economic costs. The effects are wide-reaching, from deterring

girls from attending school, to inhibiting women from pursuing careers and livelihood activities. It is a key factor in gender disparity in health across Africa.

Table 8 : Gender-based violence (women-specific indicators)

Women-specific indicators collected for the AGI	2019 results	2023 results	Trend
Child marriage (% of women 20-24 years old first married or in union before age 15)	8.9%	8.2%	↘
Child marriage (% of women 20-24 years old who were first married or in union before age 18)	31.8%	31.2%	↘
Prevalence of female genital mutilation/cutting (% of women aged 15-24 years)	34.6%	44.1%	↗
Violence against women by intimate partner in the last 12 months (females aged 15-34 years)	30.7%	21.9%	↘

Note : These women-specific indicators are not used to compute the AGI figures. Rather, these are satellite indicators for special analysis focusing on gender-based violence.

Early marriage remains pervasive. On average, across the countries where data is available, 31.2% of women aged 20-24 were first married or in a union before the age of 18 and 8.2% before the age of 15. Gender experts suggest that early marriage is a major barrier inhibiting girls from finishing their education, particularly at the tertiary level. It is also associated with early pregnancy and leads to a range of negative maternal and child health outcomes.

Violence also occurs within homes and communities, with 21.9% of women aged 15-34 experiencing domestic violence within the last 12 months. There are, however, very large variations in the national data, from as low as 0.7% to over 50%. Encouragingly, the average rate of intimate partner violence has declined significantly since 2019, with studies suggesting that women's empowerment at both the country and the individual level contributes to this positive trend.¹¹⁹ However, there is a widespread concern among gender experts that this improving trend may have been set back because of COVID-19 and subsequent crises.

The intensification of violence against women and girls during the pandemic has been well documented. Domestic abuse, child marriage and female genital mutilation are all thought to have increased under lockdowns.¹²⁰ Crisis and fragility exacerbates women's vulnerability to GBV and there is evidence that intimate-partner violence rises in times of conflict and economic stress. There is also a link between rising food insecurity and GBV.¹²¹ Increased child marriage can also emerge as a negative coping strategy. Gender experts note that in times of economic stress and high unemployment, domestic violence against women increases, which in turn further undermines economic stability.¹²²

Sexual violence against women and girls is all too often used as a weapon of war to terrorise communities. Women and girls are acutely vulnerable to violence in times of conflict and during population displacement. In Sudan, for example, the outbreak of large-scale violence has led to increases in sexual and gender-based violence, while leaving survivors unable to access support services.¹²³ In Ethiopia, conflict and other crises in 2021 also led to increases in sexual violence, while leaving women and girls unable to access health services, safe spaces and avenues for seeking justice.¹²⁴

Tackling violence against women and girls is a priority for many African governments. In the wake of recent shocks and crises, governments are looking to mainstream gender into emergency response and bolster services for survivors. For example, the African Union has produced guidelines on gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19. Madagascar adopted a Social Emergency Plan during the pandemic that provided support to vulnerable women, including street merchants, washerwomen and sex workers, while in South Sudan, 24/7 national helplines were launched to assist gender-based violence survivors and link them with services. GBV committees were established in communities in the Central African Republic, along with capacity building training on referral pathways for survivors. Burkina Faso created 338 safe spaces for adolescent girls to strengthen their skills and knowledge around sexual and reproductive health and GBV.¹²⁵ Empowerment interventions, such as vocational training and providing information on sexual and reproductive health, and marriage, have also been found to decrease rates of teen pregnancy, early marriage, and sexual violence in Uganda.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ The Lancet Global Health, *Prevalence and changes of intimate partner violence against women aged 15 to 49 years in 53 low-income and middle-income countries from 2000 to 2021: a second analysis of population based surveys*, December 2023, [link](#).

¹²⁰ UN Women, *Gender Based Violence in Africa during the Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2020, [link](#).

¹²¹ Plan International, *Beyond Hunger: The gendered impacts of the global hunger crisis*, January 2023, [link](#).

¹²² United Nations, *Gender, Climate & Security, Sustaining inclusive peace on the frontlines of climate change*, n.d., [link](#).

¹²³ UN Women Africa, *In Sudan, women's organizations fight back against sexual violence in conflict*, June 2019, [link](#).

¹²⁴ UN Women Africa, *In Ethiopia, a rapidly changing humanitarian crisis demonstrates the need for a flexible response*, October 2023, [link](#).

¹²⁵ UN Women, *Gender Based Violence in Africa during the Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2020, [link](#).

¹²⁶ Bandiera, O., Buehner, N., Burgess, R., Goldstein, M., Gulesci, S., Rasul, I., & Sulaiman, M., *Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Africa*, 2020, [link](#).

Box 11 : Zoom on Southern Africa : “Namibia : the African champion of gender equality

In 2023, Namibia has retained its position as Africa’s leader on gender equality. At the global level, it ranks 8th out of 142 nations in the Global Gender Gap Report from the World Economic Forum. These excellent achievements are underpinned by a range of factors, including supporting legal frameworks, public education and awareness, civil society advocacy and sustained government commitment.

Namibia was an early adopter of laws for the protection of women. As early as the late 1990s, when gender equality was not yet prominent in the global development agenda, the Namibian parliament had voted several laws for the protection of Namibian women, such as the Combating Domestic Violence Act that addressed gender-based violence, the Affirmative Action Employment Act to promote gender equality in the workplace,

and the Combating of Rape Act to criminalise sexual violence.

The Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare developed a National Gender Plan for Action (NGPA) for 2010-2020, currently being updated, which set out comprehensive plans for promoting gender equality in areas such as human rights, health, education, poverty, rural and economic development, and governance. The government also adopted another National Action Plan on women, peace and security for the period 2019-2024. This plan sets out actions to promote women’s rights in areas such as security, gender mainstreaming into peace and security structures and processes, equal representation in decision-making positions, the promotion of a peaceful and inclusive society, and the prevention of violence against women.

Namibia celebrates Namibian Women’s Day annually on December 10th to highlight women who have contributed to the country’s independence as well as their roles in the socio-economic and political development of the nation, thus promoting women’s central role in the country’s public political and social life. Namibia is a great example of the impact of a dedicated

government and civil society actors in the improvement of gender equality. Although some challenges such as gender income disparity and gender-based violence still exist, Namibia is performing better than many developed nations worldwide in terms of gender equality, foreseeing more positive improvements for women and girls in the country.

Box 12 : Zoom on Central Africa : “The case of Gabon : Insight into the country’s journey towards gender equality”

Gabon has made significant improvement in gender equality, progressing from a score of 0.456 in the 2019 AGI to 0.651 in the 2023 edition. This makes the country the regional lead on gender equality in Central Africa, followed by Angola (0.614) and São Tomé and Príncipe (0.621). Gabon has made impressive progress towards gender equality in both the economic and business dimensions and empowerment and representation, with a very slight decrease in the social dimension.

This result is driven by government commitment. The national strategy for women, the government’s Decade of Gabonese Women 2015-2025, aims to highlight the participation of women in public and political life, to promote women’s rights and their economic empowerment. The plan underpinning the strategy includes reinforcing the legal framework protecting women’s rights, creating opportunities for women’s and girls’ economic empowerment, promoting equitable human and social development, and creating a political environment that prioritises and implements this plan.

In the social sphere, Gabon has reformed the civil code to promote women’s equality. In previous revisions of the civil code from 2021 (Law Number 004_2021), Gabonese women were legally bound to obey their husbands, husbands could forbid

their wives to work, and women were prohibited from owning a Bank account. The revision of the civil code has improved women rights, by detaching their freedom to work from a husband’s approval and introducing criminal charges to sexual offenders. This revision promotes gender equality and encourages a change in mentalities around gender roles.

The Gabonese government is also committed to advancing the economic empowerment of women. Through the first phase of the GRAINE project (Gabonaise des Réalisations Agricoles et des Initiatives des Nationaux Engagés), in collaboration with the African Development Bank, more than 500 youths and women are being provided with capacity-building training in food security and industrial crop farming. This project, beyond ensuring the diversification of the economy, which relies heavily on oil extraction, will enhance the capacities of women in creating agricultural enterprises and create thousands of jobs for women and young people.

Although Gabon has made great progress in several areas pertaining to gender equality, there is still much to do, especially concerning women’s economic empowerment. As the country undergoes a change in leadership with a transitional government, it is to be hoped that gender equality will continue to be considered as a policy priority.



5. Dimension III: Empowerment and representation

- The AGI score for the empowerment and representation dimension stands at 24.4% – a slight improvement on the 2019 score of 22.9%.
- African women make up just 25% of parliamentarians and cabinet ministers.
- Women still lag well behind in business management and the professions.

The third dimension of the Africa Gender Index addresses the empowerment and representation dimension of gender equality. Indicators under this dimension include those measuring women's representation in parliament and government, and their participation in business and technical professions.

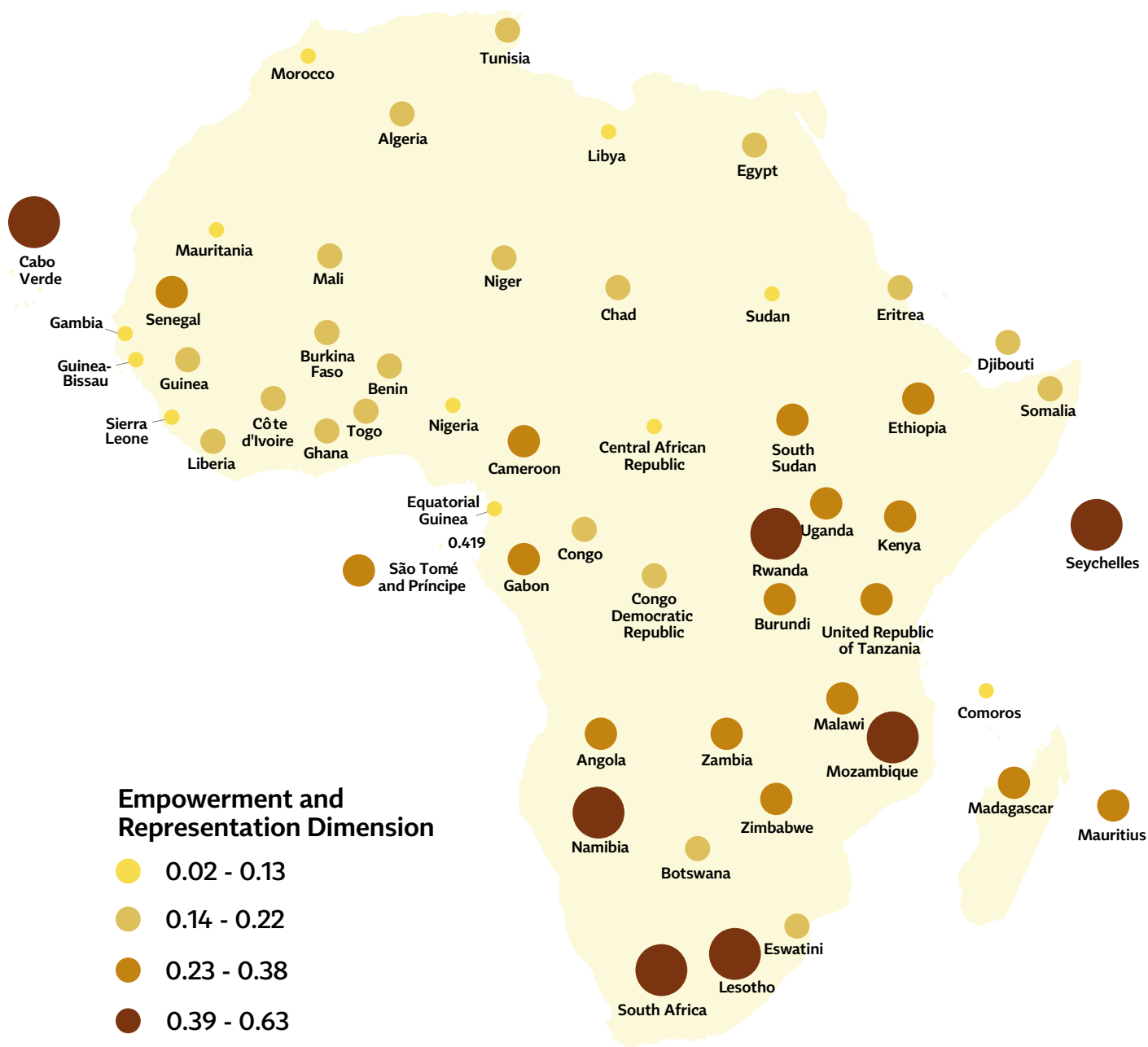
While the 2023 index score for the empowerment and representation dimension made a modest gain, compared to the previous AGI in 2019 (from 22.9% to 24.4%), it was from a low baseline. There is still significant inequality against women in each of the component indicators.

At the regional level, Southern Africa has a somewhat lower disparity, with an index score of 35.2%, while North Africa has the highest, with a score of 12.7%. Nigeria, Comoros, Mauritania and Libya all score below 10%, while Rwanda, Namibia, Cabo Verde and Lesotho all score above 50%, each having made progress in narrowing the gender gap compared to the 2019 AGI result.



Figure 9 : AGI 2023 Country Scores for the Empowerment and Representation Dimension

The Africa Gender Index scores show marked differences between the number of men and women in senior and representational positions. The AGI score for the representation and empowerment dimension is 24.4% showing a major gender gap exists. In both the private sector and in public life, most senior jobs are held by men



A score of 1 represent parity between women and men. A score between 0 and 1 means there is gender inequality in favour of males, while a score above 1 means that women are doing well compared to men.

Women in politics and government

Barriers to women taking on national leadership roles

- Entrenched patriarchal power structures and social norms.
- Restrictive electoral laws and weak implementation of gender quotas.
- Discriminatory practices among political parties.
- A lack of skills, self-confidence and political networks.



Table 9 : Empowerment and representation dimension - National leadership

Component	Indicator	2019 results	2023 results	Trend
National leadership	Representation in parliament	25.3%	28.3%	↗
	Representation among cabinet ministers	26.3%	34.2%	↗

Across Africa, women lag significantly behind men in terms of their participation in parliament and in government at cabinet level. Equality within parliament is rated at 28.3%, with men comprising over 75% of members of parliament (MPs). Cabinet representation is slightly higher, with a 34.2% gender gap.

Unequal representation for women in parliament and cabinet has wide-ranging implications for gender equality and for society, as a whole. It results in the over-representation of male views in law and policy making, leaving women and their interests more likely to be overlooked.

It may also be a contributing factor to the rise of conflict and political instability across Africa. Research suggests that women's equal representation in government is a key factor in promoting peace and resilience across areas of Africa that are vulnerable to conflict, shocks and crisis.¹²⁷ A greater representation of women is more likely to lead to the adoption of policies to address climate change and its wider impacts, such as food insecurity.^{128, 129} It has also been found to have a positive effect on corruption levels and the management of development assistance.¹³⁰

The literature offers a number of explanations for women's lower political representation. It emphasises the role that entrenched patriarchy and gendered expectations play in limiting women's overall civic participation and their ability to present themselves for elected positions.¹³¹ This is bolstered by structural barriers, such as restrictive electoral frameworks that act as barriers to women's participation in elections, and a general lack of political will to promote gender equality in government.¹³²

While some countries have removed the formal barriers to women's parliamentary participation, women still face entrenched gendered expectations that inhibit their ability to participate effectively. For example, women in Kenya are increasingly present in local and national policy forums, but they still have little power within the policy-making process due to a range of informal barriers.¹³³ Where women are appointed to parliamentary committees, such appointments tend to be in policy areas perceived as 'soft', such as social affairs, family policy or education.¹³⁴

Political parties act as gatekeepers for entry into politics. They often resist selecting female candidates, believing them to be less effective politicians and/or less acceptable to the electorate.¹³⁵ Some countries have introduced quotas for women in party

candidate lists to overcome this but they vary significantly depending on political systems. However, enforcement is often inadequate. In some countries, the number of female parliamentarians fluctuates because political parties are only made to pay fines for submitting non-compliant candidate lists, while still being able to register their candidates. In Burkina Faso, DR Congo and Liberia, the enforcement of quotas is ultimately undermined by a lack of statutory sanctions for non-compliance.¹³⁶ In Liberia, women make up less than 11% of the National Legislature, even though a 30% quota was set in 2005.¹³⁷

In addition to political barriers, gaps in skills and self-confidence also prevent women from participating in national politics.¹³⁸ As the AGI data shows, women are less likely to have attended university, where the skills for political success are generally learned. This also leads to reduced women's confidence, compared to men, in putting themselves forward for high office, which creates a self-reinforcing cycle.

The high costs of political campaigns are another barrier.¹³⁹ In most African countries, political campaigns are self-financed, leaving women at a disadvantage. This is linked to women's lack of political capital. Male politicians often owe their success to the support of friends and family members. A career in public life enables them to build networks that are hard for women candidates to match.¹⁴⁰

Experts stress that women who are prominent in public life increasingly experience online harassment, pushing them out of politics.¹⁴¹ The literature also identifies other links between violence and women's lack of political influence. Gender-based violence—which increases with wider conflict and insecurity—limits women's participation at all levels of politics and government.¹⁴² In some cases, political violence and gender-based violence are used with the express purpose of limiting women's participation.¹⁴³

The literature emphasises gender quotas as one of the most effective strategies for promoting women's participation in the political sphere. Across Africa, 36 countries have some form of a legislated candidate quota or seat reservations for women in parliament at the single or lower house level; 10 of these countries also have legislated quotas in the upper house.¹⁴⁴ Even in countries without formal quotas, gender equality can still be

¹²⁷ UNDP, *Promoting peace through women's leadership and political participation: evidence from the Sahel*, March 2022, [link](#).

¹²⁸ UNFCCC, *Dimensions and examples of the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, the role of women as agents of change and opportunities for women*, June 2022, [link](#).

¹²⁹ AfDB, *Gender responsive climate resilient solutions in Africa*, September 2021, [link](#).

¹³⁰ Loudi, N., *Women's parliamentary representation and environmental quality in Africa: effects and transmission channels*, December 2021, [link](#).

¹³¹ CThe 2023 edition of the Gender Social Norms Index ([link](#)) finds that nearly half of the global population believe men make better political leaders than women.

¹³² Dube, S., *Enhancing women's political participation in Africa*, March 2022, [link](#).

¹³³ Sidha, Z., *Despite increased representation Kenyan politicians still face gender barriers*, August 2023, [link](#).

¹³⁴ Bathily, N., *Africa takes historic lead in female parliamentary speakers*, February 2020, [link](#).

¹³⁵ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in parliament: 1995-2020, 25 years in review*, 2020, [link](#); and OECD, *SIGI 2021 Regional Report for Africa*, n.d., [link](#).

¹³⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in parliament: 1995-2020, 25 years in review*, 2020, [link](#).

¹³⁷ UNDP, *Towards a more "equally equal" Liberia: the case for a mandatory gender quota*, August 2022, [link](#).

¹³⁸ Musau, Z., *African Women in politics: Miles to go before parity is achieved*, April 2019, [link](#).

¹³⁹ Wahman, M., *The cost of politics in Zambia: implications for political participation and development*, March 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴⁰ Ette, M., and Akpan-Obong, P., *Negotiating access and privilege: politics of female participation and representation in Nigeria*, March 2022, [link](#).

¹⁴¹ UN Women Africa, *Online harassment risks pushing Kenyan women out of politics*, October 2023, [link](#).

¹⁴² UK Government, *Why addressing gender inequality and gender-based violence matters to the UK's work on peace and stability in Africa*, December 2019, [link](#).

¹⁴³ ACLED, *Gender-based violence and women's political participation*, August 2017, [link](#).

¹⁴⁴ International IDEA, *Gender quotas database*, n.d., [link](#).

encouraged by government and political parties. South Africa, for example, has a voluntary party quota introduced by the country's leading political party.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Namibia's ruling party uses a "zebra system" to ensure gender parity among its ministers.¹⁴⁶ The government of Ethiopia grants financial support to political parties based on criteria that include the number of female candidates nominated and in leadership positions.¹⁴⁷

Rwanda remains the most prominent example of the successful implementation of a quota system. It has maintained gender parity within parliament and even has over-representation of women in cabinet (55% female). While not in the top ranks for gender equality in parliament, Mali has made significant progress towards gender parity, improving its score by 26.9 percentage points since 2019.¹⁴⁸ The 2015 law on gender quotas has been strengthened with procedures that specify that candidate lists with over 70% representation of either gender will no longer be accepted.¹⁴⁹ Cabo Verde saw a similar increase of 26.8 percentage points¹⁵⁰ following its 2019 adoption of a law on gender parity

in political representation that has resulted in increased representation of women in parliament and on city councils.¹⁵¹ Also of note is São Tomé and Príncipe's 2022 introduction of a 40% quota for women in parliament, which will be implemented in the next elections.¹⁵²

Gender experts for the AGI report that there is ongoing advocacy work to encourage governments to appoint more women to positions of leadership and increase their visibility at the sub-national and national levels. This is seen as a commitment and the first step to improving women's representation in government and to recognise their decision-making capacity.¹⁵³ Indeed, the literature suggests that a high proportion of women in cabinet indicates political will and commitment to gender equality at the highest level, and leads rapidly to amplifying women's voices and decision-making powers.¹⁵⁴ This area should be monitored as these efforts progress, particularly to evaluate their impact on parliamentary representation in future AGI reports.

Box 13 : Equality before the law

Every African country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and 42 African countries have ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the "Maputo Protocol").

A recent study¹⁵⁵ found that all ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD and SADC member countries except Cameroon and São Tomé and Príncipe protect women's economic rights in their constitutions. Comoros, Lesotho, Malawi, and Zimbabwe have constitutions that prohibit gender discrimination in pay. Women's right to political participation is also upheld legally and constitutionally across Africa. In the SADC region, all but five countries have quotas to increase female representation both nationally and

sub-nationally. All SADC, IGAD and ECOWAS member states have constitutional and legislative provisions against sexual and gender-based violence; for example, Cabo Verde's amended 2010 constitution includes a provision on addressing domestic violence, and Malawi's constitution explicitly mentions the elimination of sexual violence. Five of the eleven ECCAS member states have updated their constitutions to protect women's rights against violence, and all member states with the exceptions of Congo and Equatorial Guinea have legislative measures on aspects of violence against women. Eswatini, Malawi and Zambia have constitutional provisions to eliminate harmful traditional practises, FGM is prohibited under the law in all IGAD member states, and all ECOWAS countries have institutional reforms to address FGM and child marriage.

¹⁴⁵ Myakayaka-Manzini, M., *Political party quotas in South Africa*, November 2003, [link](#).

¹⁴⁶ O'Riordan, A., *Namibia's 'zebra' politics could make it stand out from the global herd*, July 2014, [link](#); and *Gender Links for Equality and Justice, Namibia narrowly misses 50% women in parliament*, March 2020, [link](#).

¹⁴⁷ International IDEA, *Quota type*, Ethiopia, n.d., [link](#).

¹⁴⁸ Underlying data used to calculate the AGI figures indicate that the number of female MPs in Mali increased from 8.8% in 2019 to 26.5% in 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Malian parliament working to increase gender equality*, March 2019, [link](#).

¹⁵⁰ From 23.6% women MPs in 2019 to 36.1% in 2023.

¹⁵¹ Council of the European Union, *Joint staff working document : the EU special incentive arrangement for sustainable development and good governance (GSP+) assessment of the Republic of Cabo Verde covering the period 2020-2022*, November 2023, [link](#).

¹⁵² Inter-parliamentary Union, *Women in parliament 2022, 2023*, [link](#).

¹⁵³ Adeleke, A., *Ministerial list : is it freedom for Nigerian women?*, August 2023, [link](#).

¹⁵⁴ International IDEA, *Women's political participation : Africa barometer 2021, 2021*, [link](#).

¹⁵⁵ UNDP et al, *Gender equality and international law in Africa : the role of regional economic communities*, n.d., [link](#).

Women leadership in business

Barriers for women in business and the professions

- Entrenched social and cultural norms.
- Lower graduation rates from tertiary education.
- A lack of role models and professional mentors.
- Gender skills gap in management, entrepreneurship and STEM subjects.



Table 10 : Empowerment and representation dimension - Business representation

Component	Indicator	2019 results	2023 results	Trend
Women in business	Women as managers, professionals and technicians	41.4%	42.1%	↗
	Proportion of firms with male top manager	22.9%	19.9%	↘

Women also lag behind men in participation in business, both in skilled technical roles and as top managers. Gender disparity among managers, professionals and technicians is 42.1%, and the share of firms with a female top-manager gap stands at just 19.9%. However, the figures vary widely across countries. Lesotho is near gender parity (97%) on the top manager of firms, while DR Congo, South Africa and Rwanda all score below 50%. On the managers, professionals and technicians gap, Mauritius, Seychelles, Namibia and Lesotho all have a gender gap of above 100%, indicating that women are more numerous in these roles.

There are many barriers to women's participation in business cited in the literature. These range from gender-specific obstacles, to structural barriers stemming from social and cultural norms. A key barrier to women's taking top managerial and technical roles is the skills gap. Young African women continue to be disadvantaged at the higher levels of the education system, particularly at the tertiary level. They are therefore more likely to lack the training needed for professional and business roles.¹⁵⁶ Gender experts confirm that the skills gap is the primary barrier facing women's entry to employment the private sector. Within the workplace, women also face challenges with harassment and stereotyping. The lack of women in business can be self-perpetuating, as younger women lack role models and professional mentors.¹⁵⁷

Some of Africa's leading companies are taking measures to create leadership roles for women. In Nigeria, UN Women convened private-sector organisations for a consultative dialogue on promoting and implementing gender-responsive policies that would enable women to engage more in business and rise to positions of leadership. UN Women has advocated changes in workplace practices, public procurement policies

and investment and financing practices. It has also sought to promote improved health and child care, more mentorship and leadership opportunities, and zero-tolerance policies towards sexual harassment.¹⁵⁸ Some of Nigeria's larger private companies are implementing initiatives to improve gender equality, such as providing employees with parental leave and childcare subsidies and creating more opportunities for professional development for women within their workforces.¹⁵⁹ While these are promising beginnings, gender experts note that shifting attitudes and practices within the private sector still has a long way to go.

The government can also be a decisive influence in promoting gender equality in business. In 2021, the Moroccan government passed a law mandating quotas for women on the boards of publicly traded companies, with a target of 30% female representation by 2024 and 40% by 2027.¹⁶⁰ Quotas are in place for state-owned companies in Kenya and South Africa,¹⁶¹ and South Africa set targets for top management positions as part of its 2003 Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act.¹⁶² Since 2012, Nigeria's Central Bank has required commercial banks to apply a gender quota for their board members and management staff, and to publish their gender gaps in management in their annual reports.¹⁶³

An active civil society and engagement with women's organisations can address obstacles to women's leadership in the private sector. Women's groups and CSOs can engage with communities to challenge gender stereotypes and create leadership opportunities for women. Women's networks provide mentorship to women who aspire to senior professional and managerial positions, as well as helping to bridge the skills and competency gaps.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁶ African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Women's Labour Participation in Africa- A Review of Key Drivers and Challenges*, June 2023, [link](#) and African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Barriers to Young Women's Employment in the Future World of Work in Ghana and Senegal*, August 2022, [link](#).

¹⁵⁷ African Centre for Economic Transformation, *Barriers to Young Women's Employment in the Future World of Work in Ghana and Senegal*, August 2022, [link](#).

¹⁵⁸ UN Women, *The role of the private sector in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Nigeria*, n.d., [link](#).

¹⁵⁹ IFC World Bank Group, *Gender equality in Nigeria's private sector*, September 2021, [link](#).

Box 14 : Zoom on East Africa : “Rwanda : strong political will for gender equality”

When it comes to social and economic innovation, Rwanda is rightly praised as a pioneer on the African continent, as well as a pioneer on gender equality, with an overall AGI score of 79.5%, followed by the Seychelles (72.8%) and Madagascar (63.9%). Rwanda is not only a continental leader on gender equality, but also an international one, as the first country in the world with a female parliamentary majority, at 61% of elected representatives.

In Rwanda, gender equality is enshrined in the constitution, and the government includes a Ministry for Gender and Family Promotion, a Gender Monitoring office and a National Women's Council, to ensure that gender equality is at the top of the country's policy priorities. Gender considerations are also included in legal frameworks, including the State Finance Law, which mandates consideration of gender equality objectives in national budgets and the allocation of resources to address gender disparities.



Gender equality is fully considered in strategic planning, as demonstrated by the government's Vision 2050, which articulates a long-term strategic direction for Rwanda, aiming to transform the economy, modernise the lives of Rwandans and promote gender equality and women's empowerment. The government also adopted a Revised National Gender Policy in 2021, which sets out how gender considerations will be included in government policies and programmes, with clear objectives around women's economic empowerment, political participation and education. A novel aspect of this strategy is its inclusion of men and boys in the promotion of gender equality across give priority areas.

Rwanda actively promotes the education of women and girls, especially in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. The University of Rwanda College of Science and Technology, funded by the African Development Bank, has graduated many women leaders in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).

Rwanda still has work to do in ensuring the full implementation of its strong national laws and policies on gender equality. However, it is clear that the country's ambitions on gender equality are backed by strong political will at the highest levels of government, providing a clear direction towards further improvements in the lives of Rwanda's women and girls.

Box 15 : Zoom on West Africa : “Senegal : a strong governmental commitment to gender equality”

Thanks to clear national policies and legal frameworks, Senegal has succeeded in raising its position in the AGI, achieving top position in West Africa with a score of 0.537, followed by Ghana (0.505) and Togo (0.481). Senegal's 2023 score shows important progress from its 2019 results of 50.4%, with good prospects for continuing improvement.

The National Strategy for Equity and Equality of Genders (SNEEG) (2016-2026), aims to make Senegal an emerging economy by 2035, with a legal system and society free from gender-based discrimination, and where men and women have equal access to the benefits of national development and economic growth. The objective of gender equality is included in many national strategies, such as Senegal's Numeric Strategy (2016-2025), the National Plan for the Eradication of Gender-Based Violence (2017-2021), the National Strategy for Social Protection (2015-2035), and the National Action Plan for the Abandonment of Genital Mutilation (2010-2015).

In the economic sphere, the National Strategy for the Economic Empowerment of Women (SNAEF) (2021-2025) is designed to improve women's participation to the economy as entrepreneurs

and employees, and eliminate the obstacles across economic sectors. The strategy is estimated to cost CFA 90 billion, with 20% to be financed by government. To support this dynamic further, the Bank is helping capacity building for 9,000 women entrepreneurs as part of a national programme to promote the formalisation of the economy. Currently, 83% of women in Senegal are employed in the informal sector.

Senegal is often cited as the West African country with the highest number of women in parliament, at 41.8% of the total. This is partly due to a supportive legal framework, through the adoption of a gender parity law for elected bodies, and the establishment of a National Observatory for Parity.

In general, Senegal has made strong progress towards more gender equality, as demonstrated by government support for a range of initiatives designed to raise the status of women. However, several social, cultural and religious factors still hold back the achievement of full gender equality. Continuous effort will be needed to implement the national laws, strategies and programmes intended to protect, empower and guarantee the equality of women.

¹⁶⁰ Mouline, S., Ozlu, O. & Herzog, L., A big step forward for women's leadership in Morocco, January 2022, [link](#).

¹⁶¹ AfDB, Where are the women : Inclusive boardrooms in Africa's top listed companies?, 2015, [link](#).

¹⁶² Minasyan, A., Board gender quotas bring women to the board but not to senior management, September 2020, [link](#).

¹⁶³ AfDB, Where are the women : Inclusive boardrooms in Africa's top listed companies?, 2015, [link](#).

¹⁶⁴ Wilson Center, Advancing women leaders in Africa, n.d., [link](#).

6. Cross-cutting themes

Women in agriculture

Barriers facing women in agriculture

- Lack of access to quality agricultural land.
- Lack of access to finance.
- Lack of access to equipment, pesticides and fertiliser and productivity-enhancing inputs and services.



Women are the primary producers and processors of food in Africa, yet they face structural constraints that make them systematically less productive than they could be. This is a obstacle both to gender equality for millions of African women and to food security for all.

The constraints include a lack of land tenure and unequal access to agricultural inputs, including equipment, technology, pesticides and fertilisers. A recent UN Women analysis across five countries found that equalising women's access to agricultural inputs could raise crop production by 19%, lifting hundreds of thousands out of poverty and boosting economic growth.¹⁶⁵ The 2022 Global Food Security Index¹⁶⁶ found that the disadvantages facing women in agriculture undermine food security by making them less resilient to shocks.

African countries have many formal and informal land tenure systems, and many of them make it more difficult for women to own agricultural land than it is for men. Many women farmers have only an informal right to land, which prevents them from using their land as collateral, hampers access to water and extension services, and can discourage women from investing in long-term or high-value perennial crops.¹⁶⁷ A range of African countries still have legal restrictions on women's right to acquire and own land.¹⁶⁸ Even where women hold formal title, it is often in the form of joint ownership and short-term user rights.¹⁶⁹ Familial codes, religious laws and customary practices can also limit how women make use of their land.¹⁷⁰

Data on land ownership is sparse, but in 2023 the Center for Global Development found that, across sub-Saharan Africa,

¹⁶⁵ UN Women, *The gender gap in agricultural productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa : causes, costs and solutions*, n.d., p.1, [link](#).

¹⁶⁶ Global Food Security Index 2022, n.d., [link](#).

¹⁶⁷ R. Meinzen-Dick, A. Quisumbing, C. Doss, S. Theis, *Women's land rights as a pathway to poverty reduction : Framework and review of available evidence*, June 2019, [link](#).

¹⁶⁸ World Bank Group, *Women's Land Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa : Where do we Stand in Practice?*, October 2023, [link](#).

¹⁶⁹ FAQ, *Leaving no one behind, empowering Africa's rural women for zero hunger and shared prosperity*, 2018, p.8, [link](#).

¹⁷⁰ World Bank Group, *Women's Land Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa : Where do we Stand in Practice?*, October 2023, [link](#).

women own 30% of the land¹⁷¹ while producing 60-70% of the food.¹⁷² Where women do own land, it is often of a lower quality (for example, with less access to water) and in smaller plot sizes, which limits their ability to produce high-value crops. In Rwanda, this factor is thought to account for two-thirds of the gender productivity gap.¹⁷³ The 2003 Maputo Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security called on African governments to strengthen women's rights over the land on which they work.¹⁷⁴

Access to credit is another obstacle to increasing women's agricultural production. Women farmers are often engaged in small-scale, informal and subsistence activities. Their lack of collateral limits access to formal credit through commercial banks and, therefore, their ability to invest in labour and technology to increase efficiency, improve yields and develop businesses. The resulting gender gap in the use of machinery and equipment explains 15% of the gender agricultural productivity gap in Malawi. Limited ability to invest in pesticides and fertilisers also has a significant impact. In Ethiopia, unequal access to pesticides explains 45% of the gender agricultural productivity gap.¹⁷⁵ The Bank's AFAWA project with the Export Trading Group aims to bridge these gaps by providing more equitable access to agricultural infrastructure and inputs and by helping women farmers to access finance.¹⁷⁶

Women working in agriculture are significantly impacted by the current crises and challenges faced by African countries. The pandemic caused major disruption to global food markets,

including sharp increases in the price of fertiliser, which has been putting immense pressure on women farmers.¹⁷⁷ Conflict poses a further threat. A recent report found that women in Maiduguri in Nigeria had to stop farming due to threats to their safety while working the land.¹⁷⁸ The literature also shows clear links between the current food crisis and a rise in gender-based violence. Child marriage rates rose by 51% in Ethiopia in 2023, in the face of one of the worst droughts on record.¹⁷⁹

While climate change is a profound threat to Africans generally, it affects men and women in different ways, and the sectors most vulnerable to climate change are those on which women, specifically, depend for their livelihoods. Women farmers are particularly exposed to climate extremes and variability because their limited assets and access to essential inputs leave them with fewer resources for adaptation.¹⁸⁰ Climate change also increases the labour burden on women, who often have the primary responsibility for food production and fetching water.¹⁸¹ In North Kordofan in Sudan, the pressures of climate change on pastoral communities have led to many men's migrating from villages, leaving women to care for the children and livestock in increasingly challenging conditions. A successful peace-building project in the region found that, in such conditions, empowering women helped enhance climate resilience and vice versa.¹⁸² Indeed, climate-smart agriculture provides an avenue for women to enter mainstream agricultural development; in Tanzania women's knowledge of climate-smart adaptation has seen them diversify into harvesting drought tolerant crops.¹⁸³

Box 16 : Women in national agricultural plans

As Africa's primary food producers, women are central to increasing agricultural productivity and food security. Yet, traditionally, Africa's national agriculture and food strategies have paid only scant attention to gender. This is beginning to change. For example, Ethiopia's National Agriculture Investment Plan (NAIP) calls for the removal of gender inequalities in the

sector, while Malawi's equivalent plan recognises the importance of engaging women in agricultural activities.¹⁸⁴ In the Gambia, the NAIP was developed in close consultation between the Ministry of Women Affairs and women's organisations and includes measures to mitigate gender inequalities.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷¹ Wamboye, E., *Land Rights, Gender Equality, and Economic Outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa*, February 2023, [link](#).

¹⁷² The Elders, *COVID-19 and the impact on African women : all responses must respect the gendered impacts of the pandemic*, June 2020, [link](#).

¹⁷³ UN Women, *The gender gap in agricultural productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa : causes, costs and solutions*, n.d., p. 3, [link](#).

¹⁷⁴ NEPAD, *Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme*, 2003, p. 11, [link](#).

¹⁷⁵ UN Women, *The gender gap in agricultural productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa : causes, costs and solutions*, n.d., p. 3, [link](#).

¹⁷⁶ AfDB, *COP28 : African Development Bank's AFAWA grants \$1.8 million to boost entrepreneurship skills for thousands of women in partnership with Export Trading Group*, December 2023, [link](#).

¹⁷⁷ The Elders, *COVID-19 and the impact on African women : all responses must respect the gendered impacts of the pandemic*, June 2020, [link](#).

¹⁷⁸ CARE, *Nigeria : VSLA Women and the Global Food Crisis*, July 2022, [link](#).

¹⁷⁹ Plan International, *Beyond Hunger : The gendered impacts of the global hunger crisis*, January 2023, [link](#).

¹⁸⁰ UN Women, *The Broken Promise, Benefits Derived by Women from the 10 per cent Agriculture Budget in Selected Countries in East and southern Africa*, n.d., p. 4, [link](#).

¹⁸¹ AfDB, *Gender Responsive Climate Resilient Solutions in Africa*, September 2021, [link](#).

¹⁸² United Nations, *Gender, Climate & Security, Sustaining inclusive peace on the frontlines of climate change*, n.d., [link](#).

¹⁸³ UN Women, *The Broken Promise, Benefits Derived by Women from the 10 per cent Agriculture Budget in Selected Countries in East and southern Africa*, n.d., p. 5, [link](#).

¹⁸⁴ UN Women, *The Broken Promise, Benefits Derived by Women from the 10 per cent Agriculture Budget in Selected Countries in East and southern Africa*, n.d., p. 4, [link](#).

¹⁸⁵ FAQ, *National gender profile of agriculture and rural livelihoods*, 2019, p. 46, 47, [link](#).

Women and energy access

- The lack of affordable power increases the domestic burden on women.
- Reliance on traditional cookstoves and fuels is one of the leading causes of mortality among African women.



Access to energy is critical for women and girls across Africa. It empowers them to spend less time on domestic activities, including collecting firewood, giving them more time to spend on education, livelihoods and community engagement.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pledged nations to achieve universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy for all by 2030, but progress has fallen well behind. Around half of African households lack access to electricity.¹⁸⁶ In rural areas of West Africa, only 8% of households have access to electricity. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war increased the challenge – the former raising demand for energy, and the latter sharply increasing the price of oil and gas.¹⁸⁷ For the first time in seven years, the African continent has seen a decline in overall access to electricity.¹⁸⁸

This leaves around 850 million Africans dependent on wood and charcoal for cooking, and the burden of collecting firewood falls primarily on women.¹⁸⁹ In Rwanda, women spend 73 minutes per day gathering cooking fuels, compared to 36 minutes for men.¹⁹⁰ In Tanzania, women in the Singida region spend 1,500 hours of excess labour each year due to the lack of efficient cooking methods.¹⁹¹

Most African households use traditional cookstoves that burn much more fuel than necessary and generate indoor pollution. The public health costs for women are high. Women who are exposed to indoor smoke have over twice the rate of serious lung complaints.¹⁹² Indoor pollution also affects maternal health, leading to increases in adverse birth outcomes, and is a common

cause of accidents and injury.¹⁹³ It is thought that around 600,000 African women and children die annually from the hazards of cooking with biomass.¹⁹⁴ Women can also be vulnerable to sexual violence while collecting firewood, particularly in conflict areas.¹⁹⁵

The promotion of clean cooking is, therefore, an urgent priority for African women. Over the past decade, there has been extensive research into cooking fuels and technologies, and many African companies have developed products and services suitable for African markets. However, scaling up these solutions remains a significant challenge. At the 2023 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP28) in Dubai, the Bank, the International Energy Agency and the Clear Cooking Alliance launched a partnership to promote universal access to clean cooking across Africa. The Bank announced that it would devote up to 20% of its annual lending for energy to clean cooking over the coming decade.

Clean energy solutions must be designed to meet the needs of African women, who are often the primary decision-makers on domestic purchases. A pilot project in Rwanda by the Shell Foundation found that taking a gendered approach to customer education on pay-as-you-go home solar systems, which ensured that women were engaged in installation and customer education, saw a 9% reduction in defaults and missed payments.¹⁹⁶ The Solar Sister is a women-led social enterprise that trains and supports women entrepreneurs in Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania to sell solar-powered products and fuel-efficient cooking stoves.¹⁹⁷ Initiatives such as these can play a crucial role in mitigating the gendered impacts of climate change.

¹⁸⁶ UN Women, *Economic Empowerment Facts and Figures*, [link](#).

¹⁸⁷ UN Women and UNIDO, *Gender Equality in the sustainable energy transition*, 2023, [link](#); AfDB, *Gender and Energy Country Brief – KENYA*, November 2020, p.4, p.12, [link](#).

¹⁸⁸ *Climate & Capital, Solar Sisters: A women-led movement for clean energy in Africa*, January 2021, [link](#).

¹⁸⁹ Njema, M., Guita, J.K., Mendum, R., *Women's work is never done: Lifting the gendered burden of firewood collection and household energy use in Kenya*, 2021, [link](#).

¹⁹⁰ AfDB, *Gender and Energy Country Brief – Rwanda*, November 2020, p.5, [Link](#).

¹⁹¹ UN Women, *Fuel-Efficient Cooking Stoves Transform Women's Unpaid Care Work in Tanzania*, December 2023, [link](#).

¹⁹² World Economic Forum, *Cooking with polluting fuels is a silent killer – here's what can be done*, October 2021, [link](#).

¹⁹³ World Economic Forum, *Here's how the fuel we cook with can affect our mental health*, July 2022, [link](#).

¹⁹⁴ AfDB, *Global leaders call for increase resources to provide 1 billion people with clean cooking solutions in Africa*, December 2023, [link](#).

¹⁹⁵ Clean Cooking Alliance, *Gender and clean cooking*, n.d., [link](#).

¹⁹⁶ World Energy Council, *The Power of Clean Energy for Women*, n.d., [link](#).

¹⁹⁷ *Climate & Capital, Solar Sisters: A women-led movement for clean energy in Africa*, January 2021, [link](#).

Women and access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

- Women and girls spend hundreds of millions of hours per day collecting water.
- Lack of WASH access increases their risk of gender-based violence.
- Lack of clean water and hygiene in health clinics is a key factor in high maternal mortality.



Just 30% of households in sub-Saharan Africa had access to safely managed drinking water in 2022.¹⁹⁸ The typical rural household faces a 33-minute round trip (25 minutes in urban areas) to collect clean water. The result is a staggering waste of around 200 million hours per day.¹⁹⁹ In most African countries, water collection falls predominantly on women and girls. In 21 sub-Saharan African countries, over a quarter of surveyed households rely on women to collect water, and girls are more likely than boys to be responsible for water collection.²⁰⁰ This increases the already high levels of unpaid burden on women and girls, taking more of their time away from livelihood activities and education.²⁰¹ Inadequate access to water and sanitation also creates safety risks for women and girls. Those forced to walk long distances to collect water are exposed to higher risks of sexual and gender-based violence.²⁰²

In 2022, only 24% of sub-Saharan African households benefited from safely managed sanitation.²⁰³ This poses further risks to women and girls, around the use of outdoor and shared toilets. There is also plentiful evidence that the lack of adequate WASH facilities and menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in schools impedes girls' attendance.²⁰⁴ The lack of adequate WASH infrastructure also makes Africa more vulnerable to infectious diseases. Only 51% of primary health facilities have access to basic water and sanitation services.²⁰⁵ The resulting lack of hygiene in primary health care is one of the factors in Africa's continuing high rates of maternal mortality.

¹⁹⁸ United Nations, WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP) – Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2022 : Special focus on gender, July 2023, [link](#).

¹⁹⁹ UNICEF, Collecting water is often a colossal waste of time for women and girls, August 2016, [link](#).

²⁰⁰ United Nations, WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP) – Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2022 : Special focus on gender, July 2023, [link](#).

²⁰¹ Koolwal, G. & van de Walle, D., Access to Water, Women's Work, and Child Outcomes, 2013, [link](#).

²⁰² Hansrod, H., How can we achieve progress in girls' education? Why toilets alone aren't enough..., March 2024, [link](#).

²⁰³ United Nations, WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP) – Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2022 : Special focus on gender, July 2023, [link](#).

²⁰⁴ Hansrod, H., How can we achieve progress in girls' education? Why toilets alone aren't enough..., March 2024, [link](#).

²⁰⁵ AfDB, Strategy for Quality Health Infrastructure in Africa – 2022–2030, p.1, May 2022, [link](#).



7. Conclusions and recommendations

Africa's progress towards gender equality

The AGI data show that achieving gender equality in Africa is a generational struggle – a story of gradual improvement, often working against structural barriers and deep-seated social norms. The 2023 score of 50.3% shows a small improvement over 2019, but also reveals the persistence of large and entrenched gender inequalities.

This report also highlights that progress towards gender equality can be fragile and is prone to setbacks in times of crisis. Shocks and pressures—whether public health emergencies, economic downturns, climate pressures or conflict—impact most heavily on those with the fewest resources to cope with them and, thus, tend to exacerbate gender inequality. In addition, there is widespread evidence that restrictive gender norms tend to reassert themselves in times of stress. This is, therefore, a risky time for gender equality in Africa, where the progress of recent years is at risk of being undermined.

Yet there is also plentiful evidence that promoting gender equality helps build resilience to shocks and crises. Women make up the majority of Africa's food producers. Support to women farmers, therefore, helps to build food security. Strengthening women's voices, whether at the local or national levels, helps to build resilience to climate change, while strengthening national capacities for conflict prevention and peace building. Indeed, a key message of this report is that investing in Africa women is also an investment in resilience.

The AGI shows that the expansion of girls' education is one of the key drivers of gender equality. Girls' education has been a major focus of African governments and development partners since the turn of the century and it has led to steady improvements in school enrolment and completion rates, gradually working up from the primary level. The result is that the gender gap is now in favour of girls at primary, lower and upper secondary levels, although women still lag behind in tertiary qualifications and in literacy rates.

While this is positive news, there are some important caveats. First, there are still many millions of African girls who have

never set foot in school, with a much higher rate of exclusion than boys. Girls also face a range of factors that hold back their learning outcomes, including a heavy burden of domestic responsibilities and high rates of teenage pregnancy and early marriage. These obstacles are likely to have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and because of food insecurity and economic stress. Some of the progress in the AGI data may be explained by a looming crisis in boys' education, which merits further investigation.

Despite the progress in education, AGI 2023 shows still disappointing results for women's equality in the economic sphere. African women remain deeply disadvantaged in employment and wage earning. They are much less likely to be in employment than men, and those who are employed are more likely to be in vulnerable employment in the informal sector, with poor working conditions and low or irregular earnings. The reasons are complex and multiple, including gender-segregated labour markets, skills gaps, restrictive social norms, and a heavy burden of unpaid care work.

Considerable effort in recent years has been put into improving access to finance for women and women-run businesses. Initiatives such as the Bank's Affirmative Action for Women in Africa are encouraging financial institutions to lend to women. The spread of mobile money has also helped many women to access financial services. Yet, overall, the number of women making use of the available finance has not increased. More research and analysis are needed to understand the constraints. It is in the voice and empowerment sphere that the AGI reveals the widest gender gaps. Just one in four parliamentarians and one in four cabinet ministers are women. Women in politics and government face an array of formal and informal barriers, often lacking the skills, self-confidence, financial resources and political networks required to attain high office. Yet the countries that have implemented meaningful quotas for women in parliament and government have seen real benefits. Increasing women's participation in the political sphere not only increases the attention given to gender in national policies, but also leads to a greater focus on policies that foster resilience in the face of the shocks and crises facing Africa today.

Recommendations to policy makers

The analysis in this report suggests several measures that policy makers can take to empower women and ensure continuing progress towards gender equality. In the economic sphere:

- **Reduce sex-segregation in labour markets** : Policy makers should review national laws restricting women's access to certain occupations or job families. They should undertake analyses of the informal barriers to women's participation across sectors and occupations and develop tailored strategies for overcoming them;
- **Employer codes of conduct** : Policy makers should make the elimination of gender discrimination in the labour market a policy priority and encourage business and trade associations, and their members, to adopt codes of conduct to promote gender equality, including measures to tackle discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, improving access to child care and other services, and providing support for women to build successful careers;
- **Professional mentorship** : Policy makers should support initiatives to increase opportunities for mentorship for women in business and male-dominated sectors;
- **Gender-sensitive agricultural policies** : Policy makers should recognise the critical role played by women as food producers, and factor this into national agricultural and food security policies and strategies and/or their implementation. A concerted effort to improve women farmers' access to essential inputs, including land, technology, extension services and finance, can help build resilience in the face of growing climate pressures; and
- **Tackling time poverty** : Policy makers should press ahead with expanding access to basic infrastructure services, particularly clean water and energy, to reduce women's time poverty and provide more time for employment and livelihood activities.

In the social sphere:

- **Supporting out-of-school girls** : Policy makers should develop programmes to support young women who dropped out of school because of COVID-19 or other pressures to return to the education system. This should include tailored support for young mothers;
- **Improving menstrual hygiene** : Policy makers should increase their investment in menstrual hygiene and associated awareness raising in schools, to tackle a common cause of girls dropping out of school;
- **Closing the literacy gap** : Policy makers should fund programmes to close the remaining gender gap in literacy and numeracy, to help women enter and succeed in the workforce;
- **Bridging the skills gap** : Policy makers should intensify their efforts to improve young women's access to scientific and technical education, vocational training and opportunities to build skills in business and entrepreneurship, including digital skills;
- **Investigating the barriers to boys' education** : Policy makers should recognise that there are also gender-specific barriers to boys' education. They should commission more data collection and analysis to inform potential policy responses;

- **Strengthening reproductive health and rights** : Policy makers should develop programmes to improve adolescent girls' awareness of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases and improve their education about and access to contraceptives;
- **Improving maternal health** : Policy makers should intensify their efforts to reduce unacceptably high levels of maternal mortality, including by improving the quality of primary health care and the availability of clean water and sanitation in primary health centres;
- **Promoting clean cooking** : Policy makers should recognise indoor air pollution as a major threat to the health of African women and girls and promote access to affordable clean cooking solutions; and
- **Reducing gender-based violence against women** : Ensure that shelters and other essential services for survivors of gender-based violence are prioritised in national budgets.

On voice and representation :

- **Quotas in parliament and government** : African countries should consider introducing quotas to strengthen women's participation in politics and government. Ideally, a system of quotas would encompass all levels of government and senior administrative roles. Where quotas are already in place, they should be reviewed regularly to identify opportunities to improve their enforcement and ensure they lead to meaningful participation;
- **Support for women politicians** : African countries should explore options for supporting aspiring female politicians, helping them to campaign, develop policy-making skills, and build support networks;
- **Gender in debt management** : Policy makers in countries facing debt pressure should ensure that fiscal constraints do not lead to cuts in services that are essential to women, particularly women's health and reproductive services and protection from domestic violence. Fiscal measures should, therefore, be designed with a gender lens, in consultation with women;
- **Women, Peace and Security** : Given the alarming rise of conflict and insecurity across Africa, African countries should intensify their engagement with the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security agenda, developing and implementing national action plans to protect women in times of conflict and to increase their participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding;
- **Shocks and crises** : When planning national policy responses to the shocks and crises facing Africa today, including health threats, food insecurity and climate change, African countries should ensure that women are engaged at every stage, to help mitigate the effects on women and to facilitate their contribution to building national resilience; and
- **Data on gender equality** : Given continuing gaps in national data on gender equality, and the growing threat to women posed by the shocks and crises facing Africa today, African countries should review their national statistical institutes from a gender lens, to identify hidden biases and to improve the generation of data, including on the gendered impacts of shocks and crises.

Annex 1 : Results of the Africa Gender Index 2023 and Component Indices

	Africa Gender Index (AGI) ^a	Economic and Business Dimension	Social Dimension	Empowerment and Representation
	Value	Dimension scores		
Algeria	0.393	0.351	1.216	0.142
Angola	0.614	0.803	1.012	0.284
Benin	0.427	0.535	0.873	0.167
Botswana	0.566	0.876	1.055	0.196
Burkina Faso	0.421	0.524	0.938	0.151
Burundi	0.580	0.637	1.048	0.292
Cabo Verde	0.686	0.737	0.801	0.546
Cameroon	0.470	0.641	0.685	0.237
Central African Republic	0.348	0.512	0.745	0.110
Chad	0.366	0.374	0.705	0.186
Comoros	0.394	0.612	1.113	0.090
Congo	0.438	0.479	0.857	0.205
Congo Democratic Republic	0.449	0.476	0.912	0.209
Côte d'Ivoire	0.422	0.552	0.891	0.153
Djibouti	0.425	0.445	0.980	0.176
Egypt	0.412	0.340	1.082	0.189
Equatorial Guinea	0.419	0.641	0.911	0.126
Eritrea	0.394	0.377	0.900	0.180
Eswatini	0.522	0.794	1.056	0.170
Ethiopia	0.473	0.395	1.057	0.253
Gabon	0.651	0.851	0.931	0.349
Gambia	0.389	0.475	1.024	0.121
Ghana	0.505	0.662	0.984	0.197
Guinea	0.377	0.443	0.712	0.170
Guinea Bissau	0.309	0.296	0.949	0.106
Kenya	0.590	0.819	0.975	0.257
Lesotho	0.824	0.753	1.482	0.501
Liberia	0.420	0.569	0.931	0.140
Libya	0.309	0.476	1.028	0.060
Madagascar	0.639	0.776	1.067	0.315
Malawi	0.588	0.757	0.804	0.334
Mali	0.426	0.566	0.812	0.168
Mauritania	0.322	0.426	1.062	0.074
Mauritius	0.594	0.636	1.276	0.258
Morocco	0.413	0.471	1.095	0.137
Mozambique	0.575	0.493	0.956	0.404

Namibia	0.883	0.841	1.268	0.645
Niger	0.352	0.371	0.837	0.140
Nigeria	0.336	0.612	0.670	0.092
Rwanda	0.795	0.604	1.042	0.800
São Tomé and Príncipe	0.621	0.597	1.046	0.384
Senegal	0.537	0.618	1.002	0.251
Seychelles	0.728	0.847	1.136	0.402
Sierra Leone	0.406	0.551	0.914	0.133
Somalia	0.394	0.373	0.958	0.172
South Africa	0.694	0.650	1.049	0.491
South Sudan	0.548	0.548	1.036	0.290
Sudan	0.361	0.428	1.032	0.107
Togo	0.481	0.540	0.947	0.218
Tunisia	0.534	0.723	1.154	0.182
Uganda	0.616	0.629	1.015	0.366
United Republic of Tanzania	0.523	0.532	1.011	0.266
Zambia	0.549	0.681	1.043	0.233
Zimbabwe	0.631	0.717	1.001	0.350

Notes :

- a. The index is constructed based on data mainly supplied by National Statistical Offices. In some cases, estimates from international data sources have been used or estimates made by the authors where data are missing.
- b. Data are the most recent available for the period specified

Annex 2 : References

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