

# Transition to gender equality

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## Background

Gender equality is a great concern in many countries; however, transition to gender equality requires major transformations in many aspects such as access to education, ownership of property, participation in decision making and access to employment. For instance, school age girls in some countries are not enrolled in schools or never complete their schooling due to early marriage or involvement in child labour compounded by household poverty unlike boys. Indeed, social traditions and culture confront transition to gender equality despite the advocacy for women empowerment through a number of policies such as education policy, employment policy and child development policy and many others. Lack of access to education inhibits young women from obtaining employable skills in turn aggravating socioeconomic difficulties among women. However, effective social protection through cash transfers can help many households to have income which supports child's needs like enrollment to schools. **Objective** Exploring factors influencing transition to gender equality. **Methods** The study employed qualitative research method by conducting a systematic literature review from general and special repositories on gender equality to highlight issues pertaining to gender equality. **Results** The study highlighted that gender inequality continues to impact women and girls from all sorts of walks of life such as limited access to social economic and political aspects. However, restriction on women from access to education aggravates all sorts of difficulties faced by women and girls. **Conclusion** The study concludes that governments and civil society should tackle the root causes that lead to gender inequality, and national resources be used to improve human capital including women and girls.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, gender inequality, empowerment, social inclusion

## Introduction

Gender equality raises a number of questions to state and civil society; however, the state which has institutions for political, and socioeconomic development is vested with the power to empower women in all walks of life. For example, Klenner & Leiber (2010) remarked that women are viewed as the losers of the transformation process since employment among women decreased markedly and women were particularly affected by growing

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social inequality and poverty.<sup>1</sup> In recognizing the value of women, in April 2019, the World Bank introduced the African Human Capital Plan aiming to improve human capital in the region, as of late 2020, the plan had managed to provide vocational training to almost 100, 000 women and trained 6,600 midwives (World Bank, 2020).<sup>2</sup> This is an indication that many African countries have devoted little resources to improve their human capital in different sectors. A gap exists between high levels of societal gender equality like in employment, and low levels of gender equality within the family leading to an extra burden on women (Goldscheider et al. 2010).<sup>3</sup> When housework is shared, couples are more likely to intend another child and to transit more rapidly to a second child (Mills et al. 2008; Tazi-Preve et al. 2008).<sup>4</sup> For childcare, intentions for another child are higher and the likelihood of having another child is greater with increasing father involvement (Fiori 2011; Kotila & Camp Dush 2011; Neyer et al. 2013).<sup>678</sup> Indeed, many families in developed countries try to balance housework and childcare which leads to equal participation on family matters unlike in developing countries. Decisions on the number of children couples can have may assist them to meet basic needs for their children like education, which imparts the children with employable skills needed in the labour market.

For example, Hafez (2021) stressed that the extent of women empowerment in the Arab community has been negatively perceived. Women joining Islamic movements and organisations parrot their male leaders, others maintain that Muslim activist women have

- 1 Klenner, C. and Leiber, S. (2010). Welfare states and gender in Central and Eastern Europe: Continuity and post-socialist transformation in the EU Member States. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute. <https://www.etui.org>.
- 2 World Bank (2020). World Bank Group annual reports 2020. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org>.
- 3 Goldscheider, F., Oláh, L. S. & Puur, A. (2010). Reconciling studies of men's gender attitudes and fertility: Response to Westoff and Higgins. *Demographic Research*, 22, 189–198. <https://www.demographic-research.org>.
- 4 Mills, M., Mencarini, L., Tanturri, M. and Begall, K. (2008). Gender equity and fertility intentions in Italy and the Netherlands, *Demographic Research*, 18, p.1 – 26. DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2008.18.1.
- 5 Tazi-Preve, I. M., Bichlbauer, D. and Goujon, A. (2004). Gender trouble and its impact on fertility intentions. *Yearbook of Population Research in Finland*, 40, p.5 – 24. DOI: 10.1.1.461.5787.
- 6 Fiori, F. (2011). Do childcare arrangements make the difference? A multilevel approach to the intention of having a second child in Italy. *Population, Space and Place*, 17(5), p.579 – 596. DOI: 10.1002/psp.567.
- 7 Kotila, L. E. and Kamp Dush, C. M. (2011). High father involvement and supportive co-parenting predict increased same-partner and decreased multipartnered fertility. New Jersey: Princeton University. <https://www.ideas.repec.org>.
- 8 Neyer, G., Lappégaard, T. and Vignoli, D. (2013). Gender equality and fertility: Which equality matters? *European Journal of Population*, 29, p.245 – 272. <https://www.ripeers.com>

access to leadership only under male supervision.<sup>9</sup> For instance, in Afghanistan, women are strongly opposed to work in turn they are exploited by males in form of housework and childbearing contrary to UN sustainable goal 5 which calls for equal representation in national political leadership. Generally, many countries have taken initiatives like establishing policies with a focus to promote gender equality, however, achievements have not been realized. For example, Jamaica achieved universal adult suffrage and granted women the right to be elected to parliament, a process that many thought would promote democracy and governance, and gender equality. But in the contemporary Jamaican society, gender remains an indicator of inequality and inequity (UN Women, 2010).<sup>10</sup> Culture and traditions prevailing in many societies have high impact on women despite the creation of social policies to empower women in terms of education, employment and representation in decision making institutions. By and large, the unpaid housework and traditional childbearing altogether aggravate gender inequality like leaving an employment in order to provide care of the children.

Heam (2021) pointed out that women's voices have long been and continue to be marginalized and subordinated across various public realms to include limit work, policy development and politics on gender and gender equality suggesting real change. Working for gender equality means changing repressive structures that oppress and hinder women from thriving, and it is not only the responsibility for women.<sup>11</sup> According to Walby (2009), men are key actors in both local and societal gender regimes.<sup>12</sup> Heam (2011) reported that different local, societal and transnational gender regimes vary in the extent of their engagement of men and masculinities in gender equality and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) policy processes.<sup>13</sup> Gender equality remains challenging because majority of people do not perceive it in actuality causing women continue to face many forms of discrimination as it is cited by Heam (2021) policies designed by to boost economic growth without considering the overall impact tend to benefit men more than women overall, not least in terms of resources allocated by governments, investments and priorities. Policies should be reformed with a focus to making men be real contributor to gender equality and women's empowerment. Heam remarked that there is a need to gender men and masculinities explicitly and critically, and develop gender strategies for changing men

- 9 Hafez, S. (2021). Gender roles and empowerment in women's Islamic activism. In C. Binswanger and A. Zimmermann (Eds.). *Transitioning to gender equality*. Basel: MDPI (p.53 – 66). <https://mdpi-res.com>.
- 10 UN Women (2022). Sustainable development goals report. New York: UN <https://www.unwomen.org>.
- 11 Heam J. (2021). Men and masculinities: what have they got to do with gender equality and women's empowerment? In C. Binswanger and A. Zimmermann (Eds.). *Transitioning to gender equality*. Basel: MDPI. p.67 – 83. DO: 10.3390/books978-3-03897-867-1-6.
- 12 Walby, S. (2009). *Globalisations and inequalities*. London: Sage. <https://www.akademika.no/pedagogikk-og-samfunnsvitenskap/sosiologi/globalization-and-inequalities/9780803985179>.
- 13 Ibid, p.3.

and masculinities that contribute to gender equality and women's development. Neyer et al (2013) said that gender equality has received insufficient attention. It needs to be conceptualized in a manner that goes beyond perceiving it as mere uniformity of distribution. It should include notions of gender equity and thus to allow for distinguishing between gender differences and gender inequality.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2021) remarked that the impact of the crisis on men and women is extensive and differentiated, and often can be traced along existing and persistent gender inequalities. Women are disproportionately affected due to their representation in sectors that were hit by unfavourable policies, their increased likelihood to be in lower paid, part time, informal and precarious jobs, as well as a significant increase in time spent on care duties. The crisis risks putting gender equality and inclusion efforts on hold and even reversing the gender equality gains made in recent decades, with significant costs to not only women, but also businesses and economies as a whole. The strategy for the promotion of gender equality was introduced with a focus to enhance access to inclusive and gender-responsive financial systems and business environments, skills, jobs and sustainable livelihoods, as well as inclusive and gender-responsive services and public goods.<sup>14</sup> Women in many countries are restricted in low level of both social inclusion like participation in leadership or decision making, and access to education and decent work. To this end, they find themselves lagging behind from development to ownership of resources like land for production, especially those living in rural areas. Seemingly, access to financial resources (credit) is instrumental for change making in order to lift women from all sorts of burden like high rate of unemployment and social exclusion. The US National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality prioritises a number of strategies towards promotion of gender to include improving economic security and accelerating economic growth; eliminating gender based violence; protecting and improving and expanding access to health – sexual and reproductive health; ensuring equal opportunity and equity in education; advancing full participation in democracy, representation and leadership (United States of America, 2021).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, women are subjected to a number of inequalities however, social, economic and political empowerment can promote women from the current vulnerabilities facing them.

The instability of women's work is compounded by current trends such as seasonal and forced migration, the feminization of agricultural labour, the lack of formal recognition for women as farmers, and the lack of health protections in the informal sector. Women entrepreneurs are also disproportionately represented in small enterprises by having less access to credit and loans, and in the micro and small informal sector. As feminists in the labour movement denounce, while working conditions in general are poor in many indus-

14 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2021). Strategy to promotion of gender equality 2021–2025. <https://www.ebrd.com%2Fpromotion-of-gender-equality-strategy-2021-25.pdf>.

15 United States of America (2021). National strategy on gender equity and equality. Washington DC. White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov>.

tries, they are often worse for women. (WEDO, 2016).<sup>16</sup> It is suggested by WEDO that it is crucial to build the capacities of female workers, and to ensure an inclusive work environment that provides, for example, childcare services, work-life balance and family friendly spaces.<sup>17</sup> Other relevant social services include ensuring an income in case of hardship, and giving money back to women who engage in multiple forms of labour, as is the case in Brazil. A study by UNICEF, UN Women, African Risk Society & IFRC (2022) mentioned that gender inequality to include persisting gender discriminatory norms, expose women and girls to higher risks of mortality and gender-based violence. According to the authors, many women in the African region are working in the informal sector, and/or as primary caregivers, and earn less and have no social safety nets.<sup>18</sup> Definitely, women's works are unrecognised right from their households and the informal sector or low status jobs. To this end, the situation leads to extreme poverty among many women. Jousse (2021) stressed that women are essential to a country's development and functioning, yet they still face a great deal of discrimination and violence because of their gender.<sup>19</sup> Africa has made significant progress towards gender equality, yet inequalities reached a critical level in West Africa. Inequalities are then flagrant in the provision of public services, for instance, about 70 % of the poorest girls in Niger have never attended elementary school. Niger has the lowest level of education in the world with an average schooling duration of only 18 months (Hallum & Obeng (2019).<sup>20</sup> African women are more likely than men to be in vulnerable employment and work primarily in the informal sector. In 2010, 85.4 % of non-agricultural jobs in the informal sector were held by women in Liberia and 62.2 % in Uganda (Africa Human Development Report, 2016).<sup>21</sup> UNDP (2016) reported that the annual economic losses caused by gender gaps in sub-Saharan Africa reached US\$95 billion between 2010 and 2014, peaking at US\$ 105 billion in 2014.<sup>22</sup> Despite efforts undertaken by the international community to promote gender equality, long inherited traditions and culture in many countries pose ob-

- 16 WEDO (2016). Gender equality and just transition. Discussion paper. Bonn: WEDO. <https://www.wedo.org/just-transition/89978449>.
- 17 Ibid, p.5.
- 18 UNICEF, UN Women, African Risk Society & IFRC (2022). Working with women and girls to centre gender equality in climate resilience: an advocacy brief from Eastern and Southern Africa ahead of the 66th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Nairobi: UN Women.
- 19 Jousse, L. (2021). Discrimination and gender inequalities in Africa: what about equality between women and men? Paris: Gender in Geopolitics Institute. <https://www.igg-geo.org>
- 20 Hallum, C. & Obeng, K.W. (2019). The West Africa inequality crisis: how West African governments are failing to reduce inequality, and what should be done about it. Dakar: Oxfam. DOI: 10.21201/2019.4511.
- 21 Africa Human Development Report (2016). Data extracted from maternity and paternity of work: law and practice across the world. Geneva: ILO. <https://www.ilo.org>.
- 22 UNDP (2016). Africa human development report 2016: Accelerating Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Africa. New York: UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/publications/africa-human-development-report-2016>.

stacles to gender equality. This study explored factors influencing transition to gender equality

## **Materials and methods**

This study employed a qualitative research method, which used systematic literature review of previous studies on transitioning to gender equality. Several studies were reviewed with a focus to obtain relevant results to justify issues pertaining to transitioning to gender equality. These include national, regional and international studies like those conducted by the European Commission, Oxfam (non-governmental organisation), United Nations, and its partners and individuals. The studies helped to have better understanding on the difficulties facing national, regional and international community to achieve gender equality globally, developing world in particular.

## **Results and discussion**

Literature has indicated that transitioning to gender equality is a serious issue globally as there a number of obstacles to women and girls. These include early marriage, child labour, denial to access to education and decent work, and excessive housework and childcare. Others include absence of access to financial resources (credit), lack of participation in democracy, representation and leadership. In line to this, a study by Jousse (2021) on discrimination and gender inequalities in Africa revealed that Africa is continent still strongly marked by gender inequalities in all forms, which has a strong impact on women. Whether from a social, economic or political point of view, women experience different forms of violence because of their gender in the social sphere. In West Africa, 44 % of women aged 20 to 24 were married before the age of 15. According to UNICEF (2019) approximately two out of three married girls were married to a partner at least ten years older in Gambia, Guinea and Senegal. These results significantly reveal that the root causes like traditions and cultural practices, as well as household poverty fuel gender inequality in the developing countries.<sup>23</sup> Currently, countries are implementing inclusive education, however, there is little evidence to what extent this programme is effective in terms of human capital, teaching and learning facilities which are friendly to children with disability. This is because many households hide children with disability to access education, and lack of resources aggravate social exclusion among these vulnerable children.

Diarra (2013) stated that the majority of underage marriages globally occur in West Africa, Niger and Mali are the most affected with a prevalence of 77 % and 61 % respectively. Africa, West Africa and Central Africa have been experiencing civil wars due to lack of governance, and existence of rebel groups like Islamic states and Boko Haram, which

23 UNICEF (2019). Teenage girls in West Africa and from the centre: Data sheet. <https://www.data.unicef.org>.

compound instability in turn women and girls have been vulnerable of terrorist activities including forced labour and marriage.<sup>24</sup> On side of political inequality, Poggi and Wattmann (2019) explained that it is essential to consider women as full-fledged political actors and that they must be able to have the same representation and participation as men and hence become female role models to inspire other young girls.<sup>25</sup> Musau (2019) found that progress on female representation is measured in micro-advances and several African countries have less than 10 % of women in mid-level politics such as Morocco (5.6 %), Nigeria (8 %) and Sudan (9 %) which is still far from the objective of 30 % desired by the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995.<sup>26</sup> In Jousses' point of view, fighting against social, economic and political inequalities demands a change of mentality in order the whole society to pay attention on the importance of valuing the status of women. Although African countries have made reforms like provision of social protection schemes to poor households and implementation of free education, not all targeted groups benefit from the initiatives. For instance, men's dominance over women can ruin these efforts, and young girls rarely complete basic education in some countries either because of early marriage or child labour, which is usually performed in town and large cities in order to support siblings or parents.

UN Women (2022) reported that globally, 26 % of ever-partnered women aged 15 and older (641 million) have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a husband or inmate partner at least once in their lifetime.<sup>27</sup> In response to meeting women's and girls' needs, UN Women is providing technical support to governments and UN partners to ensure national strategies achieve gender equality. For example, in Tunisia, the organisation works with the government in response to COVID 19. In Morocco, UN Women is working to encourage men and boys to share domestic and childcare work with women, including children's education. UN Women Malawi supports awareness raising and sensitization of influencers, youth networks, and faith-based and traditional leaders on cultural practices on social norms, sharing care work and stopping domestic violence. Seemingly, these initiatives can be fruitful in urban areas where people have good ideals or lesson learnt on the importance of education, and participation in childcare. The situation may contrary to rural areas in which inherited traditions and cultural practices are predominantly valued by men contributing to gender inequalities, and of course, civil societies have narrow penetration to promote gender equality and equity.

- 24 Diarra, P.A. (2018, November 29). Child marriages in Mali and Niger: how to understand them? *Le Monde*. <https://www.lemonde.fr/afriques/article/2018>.
- 25 Poggi, C. & Wattmann, J. (2019). The reproduction of gender inequalities in the world of work: from legal discrimination to empowerment. Paris: French Development Agency. <https://www.ilo.org>.
- 26 Musau, Z. (2019, April 8). African women in politics: miles to go before parity is achieved. *African Renewal*. <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2019>.
- 27 Ibid, p.8.

## Conclusion

Transitioning to gender equality has been promoted by many entities for decades, yet gender inequality still exists, and has impacted many women and girls worldwide. One question to be asked is *where does national, regional and international community go wrong on the promotion of gender equality?* Perhaps the current approach being used to promote or raise awareness on gender inequality has not involved key actors in gender streaming, such as political elite, religious institution and traditional leaders, and civil society. This is based on the facts that the mere root causes of gender inequality include traditions and cultural practices contributing to limited access to all social, economic and political opportunities. Of course, restrictions on women from access to education leads to lack of employable skills, knowledge and abilities, which are necessary for decent work, decisions on childbearing and participation in economic growth opportunities. It is concluded that transitioning to gender equality should clearly tackle the root causes aggravating gender inequality, and national resources should equally be used to eliminate all barriers to gender inequality, and improve human capital for change making.

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