



## **Education & Female Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Greater Global South**

*Project for Audiopedia by Global Research and Consulting – Columbia University*

*December 15th, 2020*

Victoria Tereshchenko, Deborah Ornelas, Anna Flieder, Hongyu Pan

## Contents

### Contents

<b>ABSTRACT AND PROBLEM STATEMENT</b> .....	3
<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	4
<b>SOCIAL ATTITUDES TO FEMALE EMPOWERMENT</b> .....	4
<b>Introduction to female empowerment</b> .....	4
<b>The general outlook of female empowerment and gender equality in Sub-Saharan Africa</b> .....	5
<b>Gender-based violence in the region</b> .....	8
<b>The relationship between female empowerment and education</b> .....	9
<b>EDUCATION AS A RESOURCE FOR FEMALE EMPOWERMENT</b> .....	10
<b>Class and Gender Inequities in Education</b> .....	10
<b>Language of Instruction</b> .....	11
<b>Current Literacy Programs</b> .....	12
<b>HEALTHCARE POLICIES, SEXUALITY EDUCATION, AND GENDER INEQUALITY</b> .....	14
<b>General Overview</b> .....	14
<b>Comprehensive Sexual Education(CSE)</b> .....	15
<b>Healthcare: Infrastructure, Services, and Policies</b> .....	16
<b>CLIMATE CHANGE, DISEASE, AND GENDER INEQUALITY</b> .....	18
<b>Climate Change in Africa and the Global South</b> .....	18
<b>Weather Shocks</b> .....	19
<b>Epidemics and COVID-19</b> .....	20
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	23
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	25

## **ABSTRACT AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

This White Paper analyzes the problem of female empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Global South at large from four distinct angles: (1) Social Attitudes; (2) Educational Policies; (3) Healthcare Policies and Sexuality Education; (4) Climate Change and Epidemics. The research showcases how social relationships contribute to gender inequality in the region and makes suggestions about reducing these effects through methods that address the specific needs of the local communities. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the reasons behind the higher drop-out rates of school-going girls when compared to boys and looks at the pitfalls in the educational policies that prioritize investment into educating the wealthy over poor households. Based on the recent finding, the paper establishes that girls and women in poverty also face familial and societal pressure to work in the home and often cannot attend school while also supporting the family. Apart from the aforementioned gender barriers, the paper considers the problem of European language use by the educational systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, concluding that the use of these unfamiliar languages (as opposed to local languages) makes learning even more difficult for the school-going children. The paper also analyzes the trends in the regional healthcare policies and the accessibility of sexuality education, revealing several ways, in which they contribute or propagate gender inequality. Finally, the paper considers the adverse effects of climate change and epidemics on the professional and educational advancement of girls and women in Africa.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This White Paper utilizes peer-reviewed papers and publications for the purpose of outlining the difficulties in the process of female empowerment based on recent data. All sources deal directly with the subjects of social attitudes, educational policies, healthcare policies, sexuality education, climate change, and epidemic in Africa and the greater Global South.

## **SOCIAL ATTITUDES TO FEMALE EMPOWERMENT**

### **Introduction to female empowerment**

Women's empowerment can be defined in simple terms as “the process of increasing women's access to control over the strategic life choices that affect them and access to the opportunities that allow them fully to realize their capacities” (Chen and Tanaka 2014). Because of its positive connotations, the word “empowerment” has become a comfortable and indisputable term, which has led to a wide range of institutions, organizations, and governments to adopt it as something they aspire to work towards (Papart, Rai, and Staudt 2003, 3). Papart, Rai, and Staudt point out that, because of its widespread use, the definition of the word has become imprecise. Organizations and institutions alter the definition of empowerment to what best suits their private goals, limiting the effectiveness of their actions in actually empowering women, which is why it is so important to clearly define women's empowerment and take into account all relevant considerations when working towards it.

Female empowerment shouldn't be seen as an item on a long list of things to achieve by a certain year or as yet another unattainable goal that organizations just pretend to do something about. Instead, it should be approached in such a way that fully puts women at the forefront of the action being taken, the policy being implemented, or the initiative being launched, and in such a way that adequately understands what empowerment really entails. Papart, Rai, and Staudt propose

four different aspects that should be considered when approaching women's empowerment: (1) it should be analyzed in global, national, and local terms; (2) the analysis of power should be more nuanced since empowerment "involves the exercise rather than possession of power;" (3) the empowerment process should take place "within the structural constraints of institutions and discursive practices;" (4) empowerment should be both a process and an outcome (Papart, Rai, and Staudt 2003, 3-4). In order to empower women, we must reconsider how we think about empowerment and widen the scope of the application of the term. Particularly, empowerment should be acknowledged as something that is fluid, both a process and an outcome, that changes depending on time and place. Consequently, its definition ought to be adapted to specific contexts.

Scholar Naila Kabeer suggests another way of understanding female empowerment. According to her, empowerment can be better understood through the concepts of agency (the processes of making choices), resources (the medium through which agency is exercised), and achievements (the outcomes of the choices made) (Kabeer 2005, 14). There are three key resources through which gender equality and women's empowerment can be achieved: education, employment, and political participation (Kabeer 2005, 13). Kabeer claims that "the social relationships that govern access to the resource in question" (Kabeer 2005, 13) are what determine the success in improving the conditions of women's lives, and thus that work in female empowerment should focus on those relationships rather than solely on the resources. In practical terms, attempting to improve the educational system, employment opportunities and methods of political participation is not enough. In order to truly empower women, the issue should be attacked at the root; in order to empower women, efforts should be directed towards changing the social relationships that oppress them. Only this way will women actually become able to exercise agency and make their own decisions, which is essential to female empowerment.

### **The general outlook of female empowerment and gender equality in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Female empowerment is often thought of as a critical aspect of achieving gender equality. Gender equality has been one of the UN's greatest priorities for a few decades now: the organization has given it strong consideration in the Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda, in

the Millennium Development Goals established in the year 2000, and in the still relevant Beijing Platform for Action from 1995. Worldwide, progress has been made, but Sub-Saharan Africa still remains one of the regions further behind in terms of gender equality and related issues affecting women. According to a recent report by the UN, the region has the highest rates of child marriage (35%) and the average marrying age of women is one of the lowest in the world, at 22 years of age (United Nations 2020). Decision-making is a big issue in some countries: in Mali, Niger, and Senegal, less than 10% of married or in-union women can make their own decisions on sexual and reproductive health care (United Nations 2020). Education is one of the areas where inequality is the most evident: on average, 44% of women have never attended school while only 30% of men in the region have never attended school (United Nations 2020). There are also significant gender inequalities in literacy: the region has the widest gender disparities in adult populations, in which the literacy rate is 73% for men and 59% for women (United Nations 2020). There has been some progress in other areas, but it has not been significant and varies from country to country. At a regional level, sub-Saharan Africa is still far from achieving gender equality, as the aforementioned statistics illustrate.

When it comes to gender equality, tradition and societal norms in the region make progress a daunting task. Moreno Ruiz suggests some of the aspects of sub-Saharan African society that hinder gender equality. In regards to reproductive health, she argues that there is a widespread lack of economic and educational empowerment that stems from the shortage of quality and affordable family planning services and poor sexual and reproductive health education (Moreno Ruiz 2020, 377). These are things that, through effective government and grassroots action, could potentially be solved. Data shows that more advanced countries in terms of gender equality experience greater declines in fertility ([Kritz & Gurak](#)), suggesting that the aforementioned measures would be effective in empowering women and progressing towards equality. Other issues that prevent gender equality, however, are deeply rooted in sub-Saharan African society and are harder to address, for example, gender-discriminatory family codes (laws), child and forced marriages, female genital mutilation, criminalization of abortion, victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence, and social pressure to endure mistreatment from intimate partners (Moreno Ruiz 2020, 377).

Cultural norms around the family structure are of special concern to women's empowerment since they determine many of the opportunities women are able or unable to have, whether that is in decision-making, education, employment, or other issues. In comparison to women in southern or western Asia, women in Sub-Saharan Africa benefit from a relatively higher economic status (Kritz & Gurak 1989, 100). Women in Sub-Saharan Africa enjoy some economic independence that stems from "the traditional practice of wives receiving land from their husbands' lineage to grow [...] crops" (Kritz & Gurak 1989, 100) and from the fact that many women trade items, earning an additional income. However, when it comes to reproduction, African women have less autonomy than most Asian women due to patriarchal social structures. African women don't see family-size decisions as one of their rights due to the traditional African family system where the husband and his lineage make those decisions. This lack of say in decision-making is not limited to reproductive matters. It is present in all aspects of family life, as Dibie & Dibie comment: "in general women have become the victims of society while men play the role of political control and major decision-makers of the state and family" (Dibie & Dibie 2012, 97). Family structures also come into play in the economic disempowerment of women. Women are the pillars of the African family and are seen as essential for the wellbeing of all family members (Dibie & Dibie 2012, 107-108). As Moreno Ruiz suggests, their role within the family is one of "altruistic family caretakers" (Moreno Ruiz 2020, 374). This narrative contributes to the type of opportunities most family-oriented women seek and obtain, often in agriculture and other poorly paid and valued occupations.

Although social and cultural dynamics certainly play a role in preventing female empowerment, the way NGOs and governments approach women's empowerment is also an issue in many cases. Oftentimes, international institutions or organizations based outside of Africa bring "female empowerment" to the region in a way that, although perhaps adequate for the so-called Western world, clashes with the cultural norms of Africa. Especially when it comes to NGOs, they often don't address the needs of grassroots women because they are dependent on external funding and have to respond to the ideas and solutions proposed by donors. Moreno Ruiz notes that modern notions of feminism are often rejected in African countries because they are deemed as associated with destructive radicalism or foreign ideologies (Moreno Ruiz 2020, 371). She also asserts that concerns about gender inequality are sometimes ignored because they are thought to be

“Westernized” concerns (Moreno Ruiz 2020, 371). The implementation of gender agendas by NGOs does not necessarily result in female empowerment if these agendas are not adapted to the specific needs of the communities served by the organizations (Jasor 2016, 695). Many development discourses and practices are guided by Western liberal views of empowerment that are not effective in some of the local contexts in which they are applied, such as those in Africa. Efforts and initiatives to empower women in Africa should be based on an understanding of women’s place within society and the cultural norms that rule the region, so that action and policies can be tailored to the specific context of the region. Just as Jasor suggests, NGOs should analyze the place-specific social relations of gender and transform their projects/ideas/organizing to “advance the feminist agenda but also decolonize civil society’s endeavors in the Global South” (Jasor 2016, 707).

In the context of contemporary Africa, some of the most important trends influencing gender relations, narratives, and action in the region are the following: (1) depoliticization and technocratization of debate and action around gender equality, (2) increase of identity politics and religious discourses opposing gender equality, (3) rise of hyper-masculinity and authoritarian models and discourses in global politics and (4) the hegemony of economic and economist imaginaries marginalizing other perspectives from the development and human development discourse (Moreno Ruiz 2020, 381). These have to be taken into account by government and NGOs in order for progress in gender equality to be achieved and for development practices not to be dominated by Western notions of empowerment. Action should also be oriented towards challenging and dismantling the damaging societal norms that hinder women’s empowerment, which was amply described before. However, since breaking down social dynamics and cultural tradition is not an easy task, the main focus of stakeholders interested in empowering women should be in adapting their initiatives to local needs and contexts, so they are more successful in actually empowering women.

### **Gender-based violence in the region**

Gender-based violence in Sub-Saharan Africa is a large issue that has not yet been adequately addressed. According to the UN, women in sub-Saharan Africa are at greater risk of

intimate partner violence than in most other regions of the world (United Nations 2020). The rates of intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa (22%) were above the global average, and fewer than 65% of countries in the region have laws specifically criminalizing domestic violence (United Nations 2020). A different study showed that more than two-fifths (44%) of women aged 15–49 years of age in Sub-Saharan countries experienced some form of intimate partner violence, and almost a fifth (14%) experienced non-intimate partner violence (Muluneh et al. 2020, 12). All three types of intimate partner violence (physical, sexual and emotional violence) are common in the region, but emotional violence is the most prevalent of the three (Muluneh et al. 2020, 13). Regardless of which statistic is the correct one, whether that is 22% or 44%, data shows that gender-based violence is a prevailing issue affecting women in the region, particularly in intimate relationships.

There are certain factors that serve as predictors of which groups of women are more vulnerable to gender-based violence. In Sub-Saharan Africa, educational status is one of the factors that stands out the most. Data shows that women with lower levels of education are more likely to experience gender-based violence (Akamike et al. 2019, 2). Younger women, married women, and women in families with low socioeconomic status (Akamike et al. 2019, 3) are also more likely to experience it when compared to older women, non-married women, and women of higher socioeconomic status, respectively. These statistics highlight which populations are more at risk of facing gender-based violence and thus towards which groups more action should be directed. Most importantly, the data reinforces yet another way in which improving access to education can empower women, as it may help reduce the prevalence of gender-based violence against women.

### **The relationship between female empowerment and education**

Many organizations and governments seek to achieve female empowerment through education. Although it is not the only means of achieving it nor the only one stakeholders should be focusing on, it is certainly an important aspect of female empowerment and a powerful tool for change, especially because it allows women to gain access to knowledge that will help them in the agency processes that play a big role in empowering women (Kabeer 2005, 16). Education as a tool for female empowerment has some limitations, however. Among the most relevant ones to

keep in consideration are the reproduction of social inequalities in school settings, the reinforcement of gender roles/stereotypes in academic curriculums, and the design of a school system that fosters the subordinate status of girls and women (Kabeer 2005, 17).

Stromquist believes that empowerment can be achieved through education if it fosters all four dimensions through which empowerment can be understood according to her: the cognitive, the psychological, the political, and the economic (Stromquist 2003, 23). An educational setting can foster the four dimensions if and only if the educational program is carefully designed with that specific purpose in mind (Stromquist 2003, 23). Governments around the world have intervened in their school systems to empower women in the classroom, but in general, they have been largely unsuccessful and oblivious to the previous point. Curriculum changes and pedagogical training for teachers are among the most common steps that have been taken, but the efforts have been superficial and inconsistent (Stromquist 2003, 23). Another failure that should be avoided is that in many developing countries girls' access to schooling is so low that their mere participation in the education system is considered empowerment, and that is not the case (Stromquist 2003, 24).

## **EDUCATION AS A RESOURCE FOR FEMALE EMPOWERMENT**

### **Class and Gender Inequities in Education**

Education has always been entwined with class, gender, and ethnicity. Nowhere is this relationship more prominent than Sub-Saharan Africa. According to a UNICEF study, Guinea, the Central African Republic, Senegal, Cameroon, Benin, Niger, and Rwanda are the countries that spend the smallest percentage of public education spending on the poorest households (Imchen 2020, 6). All of these countries spend 10% or less on educating the poorest households while dedicating 30% to 50% of their public education funds to the wealthiest households. Similarly, Ghana, Togo, and Tunisia spend relatively small amounts of public funding on the education of

the poor, as they prioritize the upper classes, essentially using the government as a tool to empower the elite and creating a vicious cycle of poverty and illiteracy in the poorest areas. The wealthy often have the means to finance their own education and ability to support their children's academic endeavors by helping them with homework, hiring tutors and rides to school, and exposing them to books at young ages. When public funds are directed towards people and systems which have no need for extra, the poor are abandoned. As, in these countries, the government consistently fails the poor, there is a glaring need for outside aid.

The class distinction is compounded by gender inequality. This same UNICEF study found that among the poorest quintile of adolescents, 44% of girls either never attended school or dropped out in primary schools as compared to 34% of boys in the same economic class (Imchen 2020, 3). Not only do efforts need to be concentrated on educating the poorest citizens, but also making education available to girls and boys equally. This 10% discrepancy between boys and girls is explained by geographic, cultural, economic, and safety factors. Women in countries of conflict are more than twice as likely to be absent from school (“Girls’ Education”). In times of need, girls are often the ones required to sacrifice their own dreams, futures, and education for the family. Whether it is nursing a sick family member, economic pressures, or simply helping around the house, girls are taught that education is not necessary for their lives. Without an impetus to remain in school and given familial pressures, thousands of girls have to forgo attending school to assume a traditional female role in the house. Additionally, violence is a huge barrier to women’s education. Long walks to school, which are often necessary for the poorest students who live in rural areas, expose girls to sexual and physical attacks (“Girls’ Education”). The fear does not end when these girls reach the school. There have also been instances of women and girls being abused by their teachers. When attending school is not safe, women must be provided with alternatives to educate themselves in a safe environment.

### **Language of Instruction**

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the language of instruction plays a major role in education outcomes. Formal education was introduced to the region through colonization. Missionaries brought Islam and Christianity to the continent, forever shaping these nations’ culture, religion,

and education (Heneveld 1996, 7). Female education was only used as a tool to spread these religions. It indoctrinated religious beliefs and imposed a new ethical, social, and cultural code derived from these unfamiliar religions. Then, European nations colonized Africa and took over formal education. Schooling in this colonial sense did not empower the citizens by teaching them about their history, the world, and skills that would make them successful in Africa or the Western world. Instead, it acted to fundamentally change their lives, and maintain European rule. Public schooling, controlled by the colonial government, was held in the official European language (“Colonial Languages”). Nowadays, the language of instruction remains a barrier to many Africans. African educationalist Pai Obanya argued that “the African child’s major learning problem is linguistic” (Brock-Utne 2001, 1). As local languages are used in daily life, children often have their first encounter with the European languages during the years of formal schooling. As a result, children struggle to learn both a new language and important new concepts all at once.

Language of instruction is the reason many minorities, girls, and underprivileged children drop-out. Linguist David Corson found that “the three groups most affected by unjust language policies and planning in education are women and girls, the poor, and groups with languages not represented in the formal structures. The injustice is clearly greatest for those who experience all three conditions simultaneously.” (Benson 2005, 2). Education, which is seen as a universal equalizer, is not even accessible when it is introduced in this colonialist, elitist fashion. Researchers have found that “girls who learn in familiar languages stay in school longer, are more likely to be identified as good students, do better on achievement tests, and repeat grades less often than girls who do not get home language instructions” (Benson 2005, 2). Audiopedia’s lessons are available in native tongues, so this education can effectively reach all women who listen. It can fill a major gap in African formal education now, where women (and particularly women in poverty) cannot even learn basic lessons due to the language barrier.

### **Current Literacy Programs**

While great strides have been made in the past decade to provide education to more Africans, there is still much more to be done. The World Bank conducted a study about the effectiveness of the Adult Functional Literacy Program in Uganda (Okech 2001). The goal was to

teach adult Ugandans (with little previous education) literacy and numeracy, functional skills, in addition to national awareness and a lifelong love of learning. They noted that the participants started many “income-generating projects” thanks to the course, and most of the students had attained a level of reading, writing, and numeracy higher than that of Primary 4 pupils. Overall, the participants did reap benefits. However, the report also points out some inadequacies in the program. They note that “the activities in which the learners and graduates are engaged are still at the bare subsistence level, although in some cases they may be more productive than before”. While certainly succeeding in the program, these people are still largely stuck in a cycle of poverty by being unable to break out of these occupations. Additionally, the literacy materials are of “variable quality, and their distribution is not as equitable as it ought to be,” and they are often not in the local languages. This returns to the problem of language of instruction in Africa, making these programs unattainable for those with no educational background at all. Additionally, the World Bank reports that “the monitoring and supervision situation is dismal in most places, especially in the government programs.” Compounding on the barriers to education, the lack of resources for these students will further discourage participation, particularly for women as unmonitored situations can be dangerous. Lastly, they note that the curricula do not seem to take into account what adult learners already know and what they wish to know. Especially to rural students, the knowledge acquired in these classes did not seem practical to advance their occupations. The World Bank suggests that people research adult learners’ needs and to improve the program. Notably, they also recommend that “the ministry should seek ways to enable the growing NGO sector to contribute even more to literacy education and lifelong learning.” In this context, Audiopedia fills many of the gaps that the Adult Functional Literacy Program leaves. Their instruction is in the local language, the lessons are curated for specific rural populations, and the education is readily available anywhere women would like and through many supported devices.

Investing in women’s education is a daunting task. Redistributing public education funds, building more schools, so poor rural areas have closer proximity to them, and protecting women on their way to school is expensive and practically complex. However, Audiopedia places education in each woman’s home, avoiding the dangers of schools and the commute, and making lessons convenient to access. Women do not need to choose between the family and education

when education occurs in the house. Additionally, Audiopedia offers instruction in many African languages, eliminating language barriers. Investing in women's education also benefits the country as a whole. UNICEF found that women's lifetime earnings increase, child and maternal mortality rates fall, and child stunting drops when women achieve a secondary education ("Girls' Education"). Additionally, family health and welfare, children's education, and agricultural productivity improve (Heneveld 1996, 2). By educating women, entire families, communities, and countries can become healthier, safer, and economically prosperous.

## **HEALTHCARE POLICIES, SEXUALITY EDUCATION, AND GENDER INEQUALITY**

### **General Overview**

Because of women's unique biological characteristics and unequal cultural and social status, they are exposed to various reproductive and maternal health problems. In the past decades, the health situation of Sub-Saharan African women has improved significantly but it still lags behind that of other countries. For example, during the period from 2000 to 2017, Sub-Saharan Africa achieved a reduction of 39 percent of maternal mortality (from 870 to 533 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births). However, it still accounts for 68 percent of all maternal deaths per year worldwide (Unicef Data 2020). Female genital mutilation, which involves partial or total removal of the female external genitalia, still exists in a few countries such as Burkina Faso (13% of FGM prevalence among girls from 0 to 14), Côte d'Ivoire (10%), Djibouti (43%), Ethiopia (16%), Gambia (21%), Mali (83%), Nigeria (13%), and Senegal (14%)(Unicef Data 2020). In addition, 3 in 5 new HIV infections among 10-19-year-olds are among girls, although the percentage of women living with HIV who receive regimens (78%) is about the world average (76%) (Unicef Data 2020). Sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest adolescent birth rate (102.8 births per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19), while the world's average is 44 (Unicef Data 2020). This section will be divided into two parts: sexuality education and healthcare. In each part, I will first consider the agreements, policies, and infrastructure created by the governments to improve women's health. Then, it will examine the deficiencies in this system in addressing the deep-rooted

social, religious, and educational problems, and how local NGOs like Audiopedia can help solve these institutional problems regarding women's health.

### **Comprehensive Sexual Education(CSE)**

With the help of international organizations, governments across Africa have been implementing sexuality education to better women's health and well-being. Comprehensive sexual education (CSE) is defined as “a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality” by UNESCO. It gives young people an understanding of sexual health and positive gender norms and empowers them to make better choices regarding their reproductive health. CSE was first brought to attention at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994, where 179 countries adopted a Programme of Action that set goals on sexual and reproductive rights as well as women's empowerment and gender equality (United Nations 2014). In 2012, UNESCO and UNFPA published a 10 country review of sexuality education in the school curricula in east and southern Africa, which analyzes the governmental efforts to implement CSE and the gaps in these curriculums. In 2013, countries from ESA committed to scale-up comprehensive rights-based sexuality education starting with primary school level: “We, the Ministers of Education, Health, Gender, and Youth and Senior Government Officials commit ourselves to step up efforts to ensure adolescents' and young people's access to good quality CSE and youth-friendly SRH services in the ESA region, and to work in partnership with young people, parents, civil society, and community and religious leaders to achieve the goals set out in the 2013 ESA Commitment” (Young People Today 2019).

The CSE programs have various gaps due to sociocultural factors. Although the curriculum covers such topics as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), safe sex, unwanted pregnancies, and abstinence, which is seen as the main method for contraception, there are problems in the implementation of material. Specifically, the program avoids culturally sensitive topics such as abortion, homosexuality, and contraceptive methods and takes a fear-based approach on the issue of sexual relationships. Sociocultural attitudes on these taboo topics prevent teachers from teaching

CSE effectively, compelling them to conform to traditional cultural beliefs. Parents also pressure teachers to conform to societal norms and convey their own beliefs to children (Wekesah, et al. 2019).

CSE programs are mainly carried out by the appointed government branches, but CSOs, NGOs, UN agencies such as UNESCO, and private organizations have also been involved in the design and implementation of CSE. For example, the organizations in Zambia have been working with government ministries to improve teacher capacity, prepare learning materials, monitor progress, and raise funds. Other than school-based CSE programs, the use of mass and digital media can also be an effective and influential tool in spreading information on sexual and reproductive health. The World Starts With Me (WSWM) is a sexuality education and AIDS prevention program that is implemented in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Malawi. It consists of a series of 14 online lessons that use virtual peer educators to guide young people. Audiopedia, with its open-source audio resources on women's health, is also supplementing the school-based sexuality education by adjusting to the need of young people in ESA (Wekesah, et al. 2019).

### **Healthcare: Infrastructure, Services, and Policies**

In terms of health infrastructure, services, and policies, African governments have also been recognizing the deficiencies in the current system and collaborating with various partners to improve women's health outcomes. Back in 2001, the African countries set a target of allocating 15% of annual budgets in the Abuja Declaration to improve the health sector, although this number was only around 10% ten years after. Committing themselves to further enhancing maternal and child health, the governments have adopted a series of strategies. These include the road map to accelerate the attainment of the MDGs related to maternal and newborn health in 2014, which called for the provision of skilled attendance and strengthening of the capacity of individuals, families and communities to improve maternal and newborn health. In addition, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Maputo Plan of Action of the African Union 2007-2015 and the newest 2016-2030 plan seek to help the continent progress towards the goal of universal access to

comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services in building on 9 areas(Maputo Plan of Action 2008). The African countries have increased the number of health experts and personnel, scaled up prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) and pediatric HIV care, and started recognizing the importance of family planning(United Nations).

However, health systems are affected by gender norms and sociocultural contexts. Specifically, these norms can influence the healthcare workforce, policies, and healthcare access across ESA. For example, research shows that the involvement of males, the general decision-makers in terms of health-related choices in the families, influences women's access to health services. In Nigeria, for example, women's access to prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) services is limited by the lack of male involvement. Few men accompany their wives to antenatal care or educational sessions on HIV. Time and financial constraints, the expectation that maternal health services are "women-only" spaces, as well as the flawed health system that requires long transportation and separate appointments for the couple all contribute to this lack of involvement. Numerous reviews have also shown that interventions that address these gender norms, such as empowerment projects for women, are effective at increasing women's access to healthcare (Morgan 2017). Moreover, these social norms can determine male and female employment in the healthcare workforce. A Zimbabwe case study found that the career development and opportunities of health workers are influenced by their gender. Men usually have more financial resources and fewer family obligations to pursue training. In contrast, women often follow their husbands during relocations, which prevents them from advancing professionally(Morgan, et al. 2018).

All of the aforementioned findings show that policy-makers need to integrate gender into their practice(Morgan, et al. 2018). One Tanzanian study analyzed five PMTCT policy documents and found that gender-related factors were mentioned in all, yet none of them were gender-transformative or intended to transform the harmful gender inequality that prevents women from accessing care. Consideration of gender was, to a large extent, confined to the promotion of couple voluntary counseling and testing (CVCT), but attempts at reducing harmful gender norms - such as the promotion of couple counseling and testing for HIV, women's economic dependence, lack

of decision-making power in sexual and reproductive health, masculine norms that encourage male dominance, and gender-based violence - were lacking (Nyamhanga et al. 2017).

International organizations such as WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank have been working with African governments to create plans and strategies, but local NGOs have also been making positive contributions to the health personnel, services, and information resources. For example, African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF), the largest NGO in health development in Africa, intends to increase health access to local communities in seven African countries through solutions in human resources for health, health services delivery and investments in health. Other than the NGOs that work directly with the government and local communities, there are some that use the media to spread knowledge about sexual and reproductive health (Amref Health Africa). Journalists Against AIDS (JAAIDS) Nigeria, a media-based NGO HIV/AIDS advocacy organization in Nigeria, has been organizing media activism, community participation in stigma reduction, and publications and roundtables on the topics of AIDS. Similarly, Audiopedia provides resources to individual women across sub-Saharan Africa, touching on topics of health, nutrition, family planning, child care, work, and more (Uridu).

## **CLIMATE CHANGE, DISEASE, AND GENDER INEQUALITY**

### **Climate Change in Africa and the Global South**

Although closing gender gaps and providing educational opportunities to women is a profoundly important task, today's state of the world makes it even more pressing than ever before. Challenges like climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic further complicate the lives of women in the Global South, resulting in an increase of gender-based discrimination on political, social, and educational levels. External pressure in the form of natural cataclysms or disease forces governments and households to adapt by making changes in resource distribution, often prioritizing male members of the society over their female counterparts. In these trying times, when mere survival becomes a concern, all progress towards gender equality stagnates, and female

empowerment is pushed aside or disregarded as a non-critical matter. However, such a line of thinking is inherently counterproductive, as it denies women their tools for advancement, consequently withholding them from aiding society in the most effective ways.

## **Weather Shocks**

Despite being a world-wide phenomenon, climate change is predicted to affect developing countries the most. According to the recent projections, developing countries will “experience a disproportionate share of extreme weather” and “suffer disproportionately in the future” due to “limited safety nets, widespread poverty, fragile healthcare systems, and weak governmental institutions” (Hanna and Oliva 2016, 115). Today, weather shocks already present a threat to the life, well-being, and financial stability of the African population. Annual decreases in rainfall and other temperature events, for instance, are associated with significant “income drops, famine and lower agricultural productivity of crop yields,” often resulting in severe damages to the mostly agrarian society of Africa (Mbaye 2020, 38). As financial losses associated with climate change accumulate, affected households modify their investments in ways that are unfavorable to girls’ education. Studies have linked rainfall variations to school enrollment, revealing that a “15% decrease in rainfalls lowers female enrollment by 5 percentage points” while having no negative effects on male enrollment (Mbaye 2020, 40). Instead of attending school, girls are kept at home and compelled to provide labor to “compensate for the adverse effects of weather shocks” (Mbaye 2020, 40).

While such a discrepancy stems from the local social attitudes that place little emphasis on women’s education and professional advancement, it is not limited to the academic field. Data sources establish an association between extreme weather, fertility rates, and child marriages in sub-Saharan Africa. As child labor is used to mitigate the uncertainty and risks brought about by climate change, fertility rates tend to increase with weather shocks in farm households. Specifically, “moving from the 10th to the 90th percentile in the rainfall variability distribution increases the fertility differential between farm and non-farm households by about 12%” (Mbaye 2020, 42). Although this finding contradicts other studies that indicate a female preference for childbirth delays in times of financial instability, it potentially speaks to the involuntary nature of

the increased fertility rates in farm households of sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, as in this region of Africa, marriage payments are collected from the parents of the groom, rising temperatures and drought are also linked to a spike in child-marriages. Here, bride prices become an appealing source of income to the struggling households, leading to a “3% increase in child marriages between the ages of 12-17” due to “reduced annual crop yields of 10-15%” (Mbaye 2020, 41). Such a change is statistically significant and has severe implications for the lives and livelihoods of the child brides who are often kept within the constraints of the household, encouraged to bear children, and denied possibilities of social advancement.

## **Epidemics and COVID-19**

Another adverse effect of weather shocks associated with climate change is the spike of epidemics. As in the tropics, increases in temperature have been linked to the spread of infectious diseases, waterborne illnesses, and epidemics, scholars are concerned about the projections of climate change expansion and their implications for the health and well-being of the local population (Archibond and Annan 2020, 20). The meningitis epidemic, for example, already affects “23 countries” in Africa, where “30,000 cases are reported each year” (Archibond and Annan 2020, 21). With the continuing deterioration of the climate crisis and the ensuing intensification of “higher temperatures, lower precipitation and humidity,” these numbers are expected to rise (Archibond and Annan 2020, 19). While such an outlook is troubling in the context of life preservation, economic prosperity, and the overall development of the region, it also has significant ramifications of undoing the progress in the field of female empowerment.

As outlined above, any negative changes to the household budget or the expectation of financial hardship due to the escalation of direct costs are linked to the further widening of gender gaps and household-imposed female oppression. A study of Niger’s 1986 meningitis epidemic estimated the relationship between epidemic years and gender-specific educational attainment, determining that “an increase in the mean weekly meningitis cases per 100,000 people is associated with a reduction of  $-0.044$  years of schooling (3–4% decrease in years of education) per case exposure, relative to the mean of female respondents of primary school-going age during the epidemic year” (Archibond and Annan 2020, 25). In this OLS regression, the dummy variable

“gender” has a substantially negative and statistically significant coefficient, indicating that the meningitis epidemic disproportionately affects females, while having little to no effect on males in the region. Furthermore, similarly to drought periods mentioned above, epidemic years are linked to a rise in child-marriage cases or a selling of child-brides to override the liquidity constraints associated with disease. Specifically, a regression on the same sample of data from 1986 outlined the relationship between the frequency of child-marriages and spikes of the epidemic, revealing that there are “significant negative associations (about  $-0.024$ ) between meningitis cases and age at first marriage for the female school-age sample at the time of the epidemic,” with no links between disease and age at first marriage for the male children in Niger (Archibond and Annan 2020, 28).

Furthermore, although the recent COVID-19 crisis is not associated with climate change, this disease can have similar effects to the ones outlined above. With the spread of the pandemic and the enforcement of quarantine periods, the economies inevitably suffer, the unemployment rates rise, and households experience income shocks. Apart from the financial difficulties and their immediate repercussions, “school closures and a reduction in health services can also interrupt the trajectories of adolescent girls at a critical juncture” (Copley and Decker 2020, 3). Quarantine and long-detainment at home could lead to a spike of gender-based violence (GBV), as well as an increase in the demand for “care-related tasks, which are more likely to impact women and girls, leading to reductions in time available for work and potentially a permanent exit from the labor market or education” (Copley and Decker 2020, 3).

Epidemics influence the lives of girls and women in Africa in ways that are not replicated for the male population of the region, as many females are compelled to make sacrifices for their households by either neglecting education and dedicating themselves to domestic labor or entering into marriage at a young age to secure their families a bride payment. As the temperatures continue to rise year after year, the impacts of weather shocks and epidemics are expected to worsen, bringing about financial difficulties, threats to health and wellbeing, as well as the potential subversion of academic and professional paths for women in Africa and in the Global South. These projections should serve as a sign to many organizations and NGOs concerned with the problem of insufficient female empowerment, compelling them to create supporting mechanisms for the

women and girls in the times of these newly-emerging struggles. Specifically, educational resources allotted to females who are compelled to discontinue their schooling due to financial hardships associated with climate change, epidemics, or other factors , can prove to be especially valuable in mollifying the impacts of natural cataclysms and disease. Without outside help, the confluence of socially accepted prejudices, various drawbacks of the educational and healthcare systems, and external pressures to household budgets can contribute to the perpetuation of the oppressive cycles that deny women their rights to learn and progress.

## CONCLUSION

Women in Sub-Saharan Africa face many barriers to education and literacy. In order to expand education and give women the tools they need to be successful and healthy, solutions must empower women, encourage social equality, support women who wish to attend school, protect them against gender-based violence, improve teacher capacity and content of CSE, integrate gender into the health system, and protect them from the effects of crises like climate change and epidemics. Family structure and social norms are deeply embedded in Sub-Saharan African society and present challenges to the empowerment of women and the advancement of gender equality. These are impossible to change overnight by organizations and governments, but there are things these stakeholders can keep in mind to increase the effectiveness of their gender agendas. Success in work and policy aimed towards empowering women should aim to be adapted to the specific time and place context of the region and should avoid imposing Westernized notions and practices of empowerment to a region that has very different social attitudes. This applies to work related to women's education as well as in other areas related to female empowerment, such as employment and political participation.

Public education practices in Sub-Saharan Africa do not take into account girls' needs. Funds are disproportionately allocated to educate the wealthy and familial responsibilities lead to many girls dropping out of school. Additionally, many Africans are forced to learn in European, non-native languages, which makes learning much more difficult and impractical. Audiopedia places educational lessons directly in the hands of African women, so they do not need to abandon their responsibilities in the home, risk their lives on walks to school, or deal with gender stereotypes in the classroom. Importantly, these women learn in their local languages, so this type of education is truly empowering them and giving them the tools to create their own success and make their own decisions. Finally, although governments have set goals with regards to women's health outcomes and improvements in sexuality education, these efforts are hindered by sociocultural factors. As a result, many taboo topics such as abortion and contraceptive methods are avoided in classrooms, and the decision-makers in the family, health centers, and governments fail to take women's disadvantaged position into account. NGOs, therefore, need to not only help build the services, curriculums, and infrastructures but also combat the harmful gender norms.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global struggle to combat climate change, it is especially important that organizations take action and set in place support mechanisms designed to empower women through education, since it is often the first resource that is taken away when a crisis strikes. It has been shown here that many African governments have failed women, and particularly poor rural women, in providing tools for empowerment, education, and health resources. It is imperative that governments enact the help of NGOs, since these organizations have the resources and expertise to create effective programs, making a real impact on women across the region. Organizations like Audiopedia provide women practical and successful educational resources that are catered towards them and their specific barriers. With an exhaustive knowledge of their lives and struggles, these NGOs can make greater impacts than large governments.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- (1) Akamike, Ifeyinwa C, Chigozie J Uneke, Henry C Uro-Chukwu, Ijeoma N Okedo-Alex, and Onyedikachi E Chukwu. 2019. "Predictors and Facilitators of Gender-Based Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Rapid Review." *Journal of Global Health Reports* 3: e2019076. <https://doi.org/10.29392/joghr.3.e2019076>.
- (2) Archibong, Belinda, and Francis Annan. "Climate Change, Disease and Gender Gaps in Human Capital Investment." *Women and Sustainable Human Development*, 2019, 15–35. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14935-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14935-2_2).
- (3) "Audiopedia Content." URIDU, [www.uridu.org/content](http://www.uridu.org/content).
- (4) Benson, Carol. *Advocacy Brief Mother Tongue-Based Teaching and Education for Girls*. Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO, 2005.
- (5) Brock-Utne, Birgit. "Education for All: In Whose Language?" *Oxford Review of Education* 27, no. 1 (2001): 115-34. Accessed December 8, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1050997>.
- (6) Chen, Yin-Zu, and Hiromi Tanaka. 2014. "Women's Empowerment." In *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, edited by Alex C. Michalos, 7154–56. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5\\_3252](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_3252).
- (7) "Colonial Languages." Exploring Africa. Michigan State University. Accessed December 8, 2020. <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/3061-2/>.
- (8) Copley, Amy, Alison Decker, Fannie Delavelle, Markus Goldstein, Michael O'sullivan, and Sreelakshmi Papineni. "COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Gender Lens," 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1596/34016>.
- (9) "Creating Lasting Health Change in Africa." Amref Health Africa, [amref.org/](http://amref.org/).
- (10) Dibie, Josephine, and Robert Dibie. 2012. "Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the Empowerment of Women in Africa." *African & Asian Studies* 11 (1/2): 95–122. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156921012X629349>.
- (11) "Early Childbearing." UNICEF DATA, 25 June 2020, [data.unicef.org/topic/child-health/adolescent-health/](http://data.unicef.org/topic/child-health/adolescent-health/).
- (12) "ESA Commitment." Young People Today, 2019, [www.youngpeopletoday.org/esa-commitment/](http://www.youngpeopletoday.org/esa-commitment/).
- (13) "Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Data." UNICEF DATA, 17 Feb. 2020, [data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/fgm/](http://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/fgm/).
- (14) Frederick Murunga Wekesah, Vivian Nyakangi, Michael Onguss, Joan Njagi, and Martin Bangha. 2019. *Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Nairobi, Kenya: African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC).
- (15) "Girls' Education." UNICEF, January 19, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>.
- (16) Hanna, Rema, and Paulina Oliva. "Implications of Climate Change for Children in Developing Countries." *The Future of Children* 26, no. 1 (2016): 115-32. Accessed December 7, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43755233>
- (17) Heneveld, Ward, and Adhiambo Odaga. *Girls and Schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Analysis to Action*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank Group, 1996.
- (18) Imchen, Achila, and Francis Ndem. "Addressing the Learning Crisis." UNICEF, January 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/media/63896/file/Addressing-the-learning-crisis-advocacy-brief-2020.pdf>.
- (19) "International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action." United Nations Population Fund, 1 Jan. 1970, [www.unfpa.org/publications/international-conference-population-and-development-programme-action](http://www.unfpa.org/publications/international-conference-population-and-development-programme-action).
- (20) Jator, Océane M. 2016. "Do Local Needs Matter?: The Relevance of Women's NGOs in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Gender, Place & Culture* 23 (5): 694–713. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1058757>.

- (21) Kabeer, Naila. 2005. "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal 1." *Gender & Development* 13 (1): 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273>.
- (22) Ketsela, Tigest. "Reproductive Health in the African Region. What Has Been Done to Improve the Situation?" United Nations, United Nations, [www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/reproductive-health-african-region-what-has-been-done-improve-situation](http://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/reproductive-health-african-region-what-has-been-done-improve-situation)
- (23) Kritz, Mary M., and Douglas T. Gurak. 1989. "Women's Status, Education and Family Formation In Sub-Saharan Africa." *International Family Planning Perspectives* 15 (3): 100–105. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2133198>.
- (24) "Maternal Mortality Rates and Statistics." UNICEF DATA, 11 Nov. 2020, [data.unicef.org/topic/maternal-health/maternal-mortality/](http://data.unicef.org/topic/maternal-health/maternal-mortality/).
- (25) Mbaye, Linguère Mously. "Weather Shocks and Women Empowerment." *Women and Sustainable Human Development*, 2019, 37–49. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14935-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14935-2_3).
- (26) McDonald, Laura, ed. "Girls' Education." World Bank. Accessed December 8, 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation>.
- (27) Moreno Ruiz, María José. 2020. "Facts, Narrative and Action on Gender Equality in Modern Africa: A Sociological Approach to Priorities and Omissions." In *Women and Sustainable Human Development: Empowering Women in Africa*, edited by Maty Konte and Nyasha Tirivayi, 369–88. Gender, Development and Social Change. Cham: Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14935-2\\_21](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14935-2_21).
- (28) Morgan, Rosemary, et al. "Gender Dynamics Affecting Maternal Health and Health Care Access and Use in Uganda." *Health Policy and Planning*, vol. 32, no. suppl\_5, 2017, pp. v13–v21., doi:10.1093/heapol/czx011.
- (29) Morgan, Rosemary, et al. "Gendered Health Systems: Evidence from Low- and Middle-Income Countries." *Health Research Policy and Systems*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2018, doi:10.1186/s12961-018-0338-5.
- (30) Muluneh, Muluken Dessalegn, Virginia Stulz, Lyn Francis, and Kingsley Agho. 2020. "Gender Based Violence against Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Cross-Sectional Studies." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17 (3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17030903>.
- (31) Nyamhanga, Tumaini, et al. "Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission of HIV in Tanzania: Assessing Gender Mainstreaming on Paper and in Practice." *Health Policy and Planning*, vol. 32, no. suppl\_5, 2017, pp. v22–v30., doi:10.1093/heapol/czx080.
- (32) Okech, Anthony, and Roy A. Carr-Hill. *Adult Literacy Programs in Uganda*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2001.
- (33) Papart, Jane L., Shirin M. Rai, and Kathleen A. Staudt. 2003. "Rethinking Em(Power)Ment, Gender and Development: An Introduction." In *Rethinking Empowerment : Gender and Development in a Global/Local World*, 3–21. Routledge.
- (34) Stromquist, Nelly P. 2003. "Education as a Means for Empowering Women." In *Rethinking Empowerment : Gender and Development in a Global/Local World*, 22–38. Routledge.
- (35) "The State of the World's Children 2017 Statistical Tables." UNICEF DATA, 5 May 2020, [data.unicef.org/resources/state-worlds-children-2017-statistical-tables/](http://data.unicef.org/resources/state-worlds-children-2017-statistical-tables/).
- (36) United Nations. "World's Women 2020: Sub-Saharan Africa." *World's Women 2020*. United Nations, 2020. <https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com/pages/sub-saharan-africa>.