Gender Strategies for Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview

It is increasingly recognized that development in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) requires the full participation of both men and women. Identifying priorities is critical to success in mainstreaming gender strategies. The World Bank’s Africa Region, in partnership with its clients and stakeholders, has developed a body of analytical and operational work on gender issues illustrating the direct relevance of specific gender characteristics of SSA to the economic and social development of the region.

Strategic Gender Issues and Objectives

Gender work in Africa suggests that priority be given to four interconnected priority issues and related strategic objectives.

Key Issue 1:
Women’s Central Economic Role, especially in Agriculture and the Informal Sector

Women are a key economic resource in Africa, comprising about 60 percent of the informal sector and providing about 70 percent of total agricultural labor. Women’s central position in economic production in SSA contrasts with the systematic discrimination they face in accessing basic technologies and resources needed for their economic role.

Key Issue 2:
Gender Bias in Access to Education, Health and other Basic Social Services

Gender differentials persist at all levels of education and the gap widens at the higher levels. Low levels of education and training, poor health and nutritional status, and limited access to resources depress women’s quality of life and hinder economic efficiency and growth. Female education is the investment with the highest social returns. It is the catalyst that increases the impact of other investments in health, nutrition, family planning, agriculture, industry, and infrastructure.

This gender-based discrimination limits economic growth. It markedly affects macro-economic policy and performance (supply response), and has important repercussions for economic efficiency and equity.

Strategic Objective 1: Invest in women’s economic capacity by improving the gender-responsiveness of macroeconomic and sectoral policies, increasing women’s effective access to financial services, with a particular focus on agriculture, and redirecting the priorities and programs of agricultural research and extension to the specific needs of Africa’s women farmers.
Female education is recognized as one of the critical pathways to promote social and economic development. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that although there have been improvements in female participation, girls' and women's access to education remains limited. Unless urgent action is taken to enhance female education, the ambitious goals set for education across the Region will remain out of reach.

Design of health interventions must take into account women's specific health needs, with a particular focus on reproductive health, AIDS, and gender violence, their multiple responsibilities, and the demands on their time.

Strategic Objective 2: Invest in women's human development by significantly raising female participation in education, and their access to appropriate health, nutrition, and family planning services.

Key Issue 3:
Time Poverty—A Critical Gender Dimension of Poverty in Africa

Poverty in Africa is pervasive and growing. Regional analysis recognizes that growth is necessary but that the pattern of growth is crucial for sustainable poverty reduction. Poverty in Africa has an important, if difficult to quantify, gender dimension. A key component of female poverty in Africa is "time poverty," as there are significant time allocation differentials between men and women. Women work longer hours than men (see figure 1) and their workload, derived from simultaneously carrying out multiple roles, imposes severe time burdens and harsh trade-offs, with important economic and welfare costs. Balancing competing time uses in a framework of almost total inelasticity of time allocation presents a particular challenge to reducing poverty in Africa.

Poverty in Africa is compounded by the complexity of household structures and relations in Africa. Evidence suggests great diversity in the structure and composition of households, where men and women have largely separate sources and uses of income and resources. This often leads to marked inequality in intra-household resource allocation.

Strategic Objective 3: Reduce women's time constraint by expanding effective access to rural water supply and fuelwood, to transport services and technology (including for domestic transport tasks), and to appropriate labor-saving technology for agro-processing and domestic tasks.

Key Issue 4:
Raising Women's Participation

Women in Africa are systematically under-represented in institutions at the local and national level, and have very little say in decision-making (see figure 2). Gender barriers limit women's participation and reinforce power gaps. As civil society emerges, women's organizations constitute an important social capital resource for strengthening the social institutions necessary for a market economy. Women constitute an important source of opinion (and opposition) on the subject of economic adjustment in Africa, and hearing their voices and listening to their needs is essential for endorsement of successful economic reform in Africa.

Figure 1: Cameroon—Weekly Hours of Labor by Activity and Gender

The time spent by an average household on domestic transport activities ranges from 1,150 to 1,490 hours per annum. These figures equate to a time input for an average adult female ranging from just under 1 hour to 2 hours 20 minutes every day. Water, firewood, and crops for grinding are transported predominantly by women on foot, the load normally being carried on the head. Village transport surveys in Ghana and Tanzania show that women spend nearly three times as much time in transport activities compared with men, and they transport about four times as much in volume.
Strategic Objective 4: Support the systematic participation of women at all levels (macro, sectoral, micro) in identifying the gender-differentiated impacts of policies and programs, and in defining and implementing ways to overcome gender barriers in access to economic resources, and in human development.

Synergy and Complementarity among Strategic Gender Objectives

Each of these strategic objectives has an important contribution to make to achieving the goal of sustainable poverty reduction. There are important interconnections and trade-offs among economic production, child bearing and rearing, and household/community management responsibilities that assume particular importance given the simultaneous competing claims on women’s labor time. From a gender perspective, intersectoral linkages, as between girls’ education and domestic tasks (especially water provision), rural development and transport, and the population/agriculture/environment “nexus,” are critical. The contribution of these strategic objectives to development and poverty reduction in Africa can be greatly amplified through concurrent actions in each of these areas, so that multiple and mutually reinforcing benefits can be achieved.

Institutionalizing and Operationalizing Gender Work in SSA

To mainstream gender systematically, the Bank will invest proactively in the development of capacity, tools, and techniques aimed at enabling staff to respond to both Regional and Bankwide gender commitments made to their partner governments and other stakeholders.

To ensure that gender issues are adequately and appropriately integrated into Bank interventions, the Africa Region intends to strengthen institutional recognition of operational responsibilities, and greater accountability, at three interconnected levels.

Level 2: Field Focus
A key priority is to support effective decentralization of many operational tasks and responsibilities to the field, as part of the intensified client orientation. Dialogue with grassroots women’s groups and NGOs is a critical activity here. This will include institutional responsibility for networking and fostering collaboration with women’s organizations and NGOs.

Level 3: Regional Focus
Gender concerns will be addressed as economic and institutional reform issues and not just as social (or social sector) concerns. Key tasks will be to:

- specify monitorable gender performance indicators for priority operations and sectors;
- develop operational procedures, tools, and techniques for mainstreaming gender into work programs;
- expand gender training for World Bank staff; and
- develop guidelines and good practice examples in key areas.

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Level 1: Country Focus
Country focus and ownership of the gender strategy by clients are central to success. Specific objectives and interventions will be tailored to the different needs and priorities of individual countries. Gender analysis will be included in the process of incorporating social analysis and participation into the Country Assistance Strategy (CAS), in operations identified as requiring more intensive social assessment (SA), and in addressing war-to-peace transition issues.

At the country level, institutional arrangements, will be defined for advocacy, reporting, and backstopping on gender. This country-level focus on gender (and poverty) issues will be closely integrated with efforts to address the full range of social development issues.

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For more information, and for copies of the Regional Gender Action Plan, please contact Mark Blackden, Regional Gender Coordinator, Room J-2-127, Institutional and Social Policy Group, Africa Region. Telephone: 202-473-7555. Email: MBLACKDEN@WORLDBANK.ORG


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