

2023 GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT POLICY





Photo: USAID

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) affirms that gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment are fundamental for the realization of human rights and key to effective and sustainable development outcomes. For societies to thrive, women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals must have the agency, social support, and structures to make their own choices and live free from violence and abuse. They must have equal rights and opportunities, as well as equal and safe access to and control over resources. Achieving gender equality in society will improve the overall quality of life for all people throughout their lives.

This policy provides the vision for USAID's work to advance gender equality and women's empowerment around the world—establishing our strategic objectives and driving investments across our operations and programs in order to achieve these aims.

DELIBERATE ACTION IS REQUIRED TO ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY.

The promotion of gender equality is more urgent now than ever, yet progress has stalled as countries face compounding shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and conflict. Global threats to democracy contribute to backsliding on gender equality as anti-democratic nationalist and authoritarian movements foment anti-gender sentiment to mobilize public support. By some estimates, it will take more than 130 years to eliminate the prevailing gender gaps. The lesson for USAID is clear: progress toward gender equality is not inevitable. Yet the counterpoint is equally true: progress can be accelerated when gender equality is a priority. USAID is committed to being a leading investor, partner, and advocate for the achievement of gender equality.

GENDER EQUALITY IS A HUMAN RIGHT.

USAID prioritizes the advancement of gender equality because it is a fundamental right and foundational to a just society. Gender equality is more than parity in numbers and laws on the books. It is the equal ability to attain and benefit from human rights, freedoms, socially valued goods, opportunities, and resources by all individuals independent of their sex and gender identity. It means that women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals can meaningfully contribute and belong to their societies with dignity.

Gender equality has been a tenet of international human rights law since the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, with its recognition that all people are born free with equal dignity and rights, without distinctions of any kind. Over 75 years, the right to gender equality has been recognized through additional international legal instruments.

INVESTING IN GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT CAN UNLOCK HUMAN POTENTIAL ON A TRANSFORMATIONAL SCALE AND DRIVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

Societies with greater gender equality experience faster and more inclusive economic growth, increased agricultural productivity and water security, more sustainable and effective use of natural resources, and improved health and food security. Realizing these opportunities hinges on addressing the inequitable gender norms, discrimination, and barriers to empowerment and agency that are root causes of gender inequality. These dynamics affect everyone in society, but with differential impacts on women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals as well as within segments of each of those populations.

Gender refers to a socially constructed set of rules, responsibilities, entitlements, and behaviors associated with being a man, a woman, or a gender-diverse individual, and the relationships between and among people according to these constructs. These social definitions and their consequences differ among and within cultures, change over time, and intersect with other factors (e.g., age, class, disability, ethnicity, race, religion, citizenship, and sexual orientation). Though these concepts are linked, the term *gender* is not interchangeable with the terms *women*, *sex*, *gender identity*, or *gender expression*.ⁱ

USAID affirms that the empowerment of women is central to the realization of gender equality. Here and throughout this policy, this includes women and girls in all their diversity—including those of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, plus (LGBTQI+) community, as well as women and girls of every age, caste, disability, race or ethnic origin, religion, or belief. Women and girls across the globe are disproportionately affected by restrictive gender norms and other structural barriers.



Photo: USAID

And yet, nations, communities, and families are more secure and prosperous when all women can participate equally in all aspects of life and with the ability and agency to achieve their full potential. The full participation and leadership of women and girls in families, communities, economies, and civic and political domains results in processes and institutions that are more resilient and effective. Moreover, increasing women's and girls' education, access to resources, and freedom from violence enables them to meet their own aspirations and improves the health, well-being, and economic potential of the next generation.

USAID affirms that men and boys benefit from gender equality and are crucial to engage as stakeholders, partners, and potential positive agents of change for gender equality. Here and throughout this policy, this includes men and boys in all their diversity—including those of the LGBTQI+ community as well as men and boys of every age, caste, disability, race or ethnic origin, religion, or belief. It is most evident that rigid gender norms negatively affect women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals. But these norms can also negatively affect men and boys, potentially leading to harmful behavior—including greater likelihood of engaging in violence—poor health outcomes, lower enrollment in higher education, and other gender-based disparities. Adopting gender-equitable norms and behaviors enables men and boys not only to reach their own full potential, but also to contribute to the rights, well-being, and positive development of their partners, families, communities, and societies at large.

USAID affirms that the promotion of the rights of gender-diverse individuals—those with a gender identity beyond the binary categories of man or woman—is integral to the advancement of gender equality. People who do not fit within the gender binary may be perceived to be breaking gender norms and, as a result, become targets of gender-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence. Societies that promote human rights protection for all citizens, including gender-diverse individuals, not only enjoy greater levels of gender equality but are also more democratic and resilient.

ⁱ Other key gender terms can be found in [ADS 205](#).

Box 1. A Brief History of USAID's Work on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

USAID has a 50-year history of addressing gender equality and women's empowerment. The passage of the 1973 Percy Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act was an early milestone, recognizing the key role that women play in advancing development. A year later, USAID established the Women in Development (WID) Office. Early guidance came from a 1982 Women in Development Policy Paper, followed by a 1996 Gender Plan of Action that included requirements for gender integration in policy, personnel, procurement, performance monitoring, and evaluation. USAID's Automated Directives System (ADS), which describes mandatory Agency procedures, mentioned gender by the early 2000s and established a more comprehensive approach to gender integration in its 2009 revision (ADS 201). Other changes to Agency systems and activities included the following: gender analysis added as one of two analysis requirements; introduction of gender key issues as new budget attributions, along with a set of standard gender indicators; expansion of the gender architecture and leadership in the Agency; and renaming of the WID Office to the Office of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GenDev).

In 2012, USAID leadership recognized that the Agency needed a coherent, relevant, and up-to-date policy on gender equality; the Agency launched the first version of the Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy that year and released a second iteration in 2020. Building on the existing evidence base and best practices of USAID and other donors, both versions provided an overarching framework for gender integration throughout all aspects of the Agency's work, including a series of new mandatory requirements that remain in force today. In 2013, USAID issued the first-ever standalone ADS chapter dedicated to gender equality ([ADS 205](#)), detailing the Agency's understanding of gender analysis and step-by-step instructions on its application in country strategies, project and activity designs, solicitations, and monitoring and evaluation.

From 2012 onward, USAID and the U.S. government have issued a series of policy and strategy documents that address specific aspects of women's empowerment and gender equality (see Box 2). The passage of the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act (WEEE Act) in 2018 was a watershed moment for gender equality work at USAID, transforming good practice into law by requiring that gender analyses inform USAID strategies, projects, and activities and that gender equality be integrated across the USAID Program Cycle. Since then, Congress and USAID have moved to further enable gender equality work, including through the expansion of Agency gender training opportunities, the establishment of dedicated women's economic security funding in 2018, the first-ever USAID global conference on gender equality in 2019, and the 2023 launch of a new website—GenderLinks—that will bring together USAID's diverse assets and guidance on gender equality across sectors.



Photo: Sam Phelps / Catholic Relief Services

USAID IS BUILDING ON ITS LONGSTANDING COMMITMENT TO ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT.

As a brief history of USAID’s commitment to gender equality makes clear (see Box I), the 2023 USAID Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Policy (“Gender Policy”) builds on decades of foundational work, on-the-ground experience, strong evidence from global research, and key legislative and policy advancements. The Gender Policy reflects promising approaches, the most recent and relevant evidence, and organizational learning to direct USAID’s priorities and work in advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment across our Missions and Operating Units (OUs).

Effectively deploying USAID’s resources and relationships in support of this policy requires a commitment to listening, reflecting, and learning and an embrace of complexity and systems thinking. The policy also requires a commitment from all USAID staff and partners to ensure that programming addresses the distinct needs of women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals so that all can contribute to the sustainable development of their communities and countries. USAID must be as humble as we are determined, so that we can continue iterating and adapting to achieve the greatest impact for those most affected by gender-based inequalities and ensure we do no harm.



Photo: Dave Cooper / USAID

Box 2. Key Policy and Strategy Priorities

U.S. government law, policies, and strategies address aspects of gender equality and women's empowerment that provide a foundation for the concepts and approaches outlined in this document. These include the following:

LAWS

- The [Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act \(WEEE Act of 2018\)](#) calls for the integration of gender equality and women's empowerment throughout USAID's Program Cycle and promotes women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in developing countries.
- The [Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 \(WPS Act\)](#) promotes the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts.

STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

- The [U.S. Global Women's Economic Security Strategy \(2022\)](#) provides high-level guidance on four key lines of effort: promoting economic competitiveness and reducing wage gaps through well-paying, high-quality jobs; advancing care infrastructure and valuing domestic work; promoting entrepreneurship and financial and digital inclusion, including through trade and investment; and dismantling systemic barriers to women's equitable participation in the economy.
- The third iteration of the [U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally \(2022\)](#) commits to strengthening the work of the U.S. government to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) through foreign policy and development efforts, including by highlighting evidence-based approaches and prioritizing equity and inclusivity.
- The [U.S. National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality \(2021\)](#) is the first-ever U.S. national strategy to provide a roadmap to close pernicious gender gaps both domestically and globally and advance a world with equal opportunity for all people, especially those who belong to underserved and historically marginalized communities that have long been denied full opportunities.
- The [U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security \(2019\)](#) responds to the WPS Act, outlining the U.S. government's approach to advancing women's meaningful participation in preventing and resolving conflict, countering violent extremism and terrorism, building post-conflict peace and stability, increasing women's physical safety and access to humanitarian assistance in areas experiencing conflict or disaster, and working with partner governments to adopt policies and build capacities that support these objectives. These goals are further advanced by the U.S. Strategy to Support Women and Girls at Risk from Violent Extremism and Conflict.
- The [U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls \(2016\)](#) brings together four U.S. government agencies, including USAID, to tackle barriers that keep adolescent girls from achieving their full potential.
- The [USAID Vision for Action: Promoting and Supporting the Inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender \(LGBT\) Individuals \(2014\)](#) (currently being updated as a policy) reflects USAID's commitment to protect the human rights of LGBTQI+ individuals in all programming and provides guidance to the Agency to that end.
- [Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action \(2012\)](#) reaffirms USAID's commitment to ending child marriage and provides guidance to USAID staff on how best to prevent child marriage and address the needs of the more than 50 million children who are already married.



Photo: USAID

VISION

USAID's vision is of a prosperous and peaceful world in which women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals, throughout their lives, enjoy equal rights; have the agency to secure better lives for themselves, their families, their communities, and their countries; have equitable access to high-quality education and health care, as well as justice and economic opportunity; accumulate and control their own assets and resources; exercise their own voices; and live free from restrictive gender norms, beliefs, and practices including intimidation, harassment, discrimination, and violence. In this world, power differentials have been transformed to advance the well-being of individuals in all their intersecting identities.





Photo: Baibol Group of Companies LLC, USAID Future Growth Initiative

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Seven principles guide the Agency's work to advance gender equality and the empowerment, protection, and participation of all women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals in their societies.



INTEGRATED

All USAID programming has the potential to advance gender equality and/or leverage the benefits of greater equity to drive sector-specific impact. To do so requires integrated, evidence-based approaches and intentional actions to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls throughout USAID's Program Cycle and in every sector. This includes considerations of gender equality in the development and revision of Agency policies and strategies; the design and implementation of projects and activities that engage a wide range of stakeholders; and in the monitoring, evaluation, and learning stemming from all of the above.



INTERSECTIONAL

Many aspects of a person's identity affect how they experience the world. Women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals are shaped by their sex and gender identity as well as a range of other characteristics including age, marital status, class, ethnicity, race, disability status, geographic location, and sexual orientation. This is particularly relevant for individuals who experience overlapping marginalized identities, and therefore experience overlapping inequalities. For example, GBV disproportionately affects women and girls worldwide, with even higher rates documented among specific groups, such as lesbian or transgender women and women and girls with disabilities. Similarly, Indigenous women and women from racial and ethnic minorities often experience higher maternal mortality rates than women on average.

Incorporating an intersectional gender lens improves our programming by identifying—and strategically addressing—the ways in which gender and other inequalities can limit certain people’s access to, participation in, and benefit from development interventions. This lens can also help USAID better address the context-specific root causes of such inequalities.



TRANSFORMATIVE

For all people to have the opportunity to realize their full potential, the norms, behaviors, relations, structures, and systems that sustain and perpetuate gender inequality must be transformed. USAID will engage key actors to address prevailing power dynamics and enhance gender equality. USAID programming will contribute to this goal with a holistic and multilevel approach that critically examines gender roles, norms, power dynamics, and inequalities; strengthens norms, laws, policies, and other systems that support gender equality; and manages the risks associated with shifting power dynamics.



LOCALLY LED

USAID prioritizes locally led efforts to dismantle systemic inequalities and power imbalances in the contexts in which we work. This commitment aligns with USAID’s broader effort to redefine its relationships with local communities and institutions by prioritizing investing in and elevating local capacity and leadership to advance development solutions.

Across our global development and humanitarian work, USAID will emphasize direct engagement with, funding of, and support for local organizations, particularly those led by women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals and those dedicated to promoting gender equality. USAID also supports governments at all levels, along with local private-sector and other local and Indigenous organizations that are working to dismantle gender barriers, catalyze sustained systems change, and advance development outcomes. Locally led development efforts will include attention to addressing power dynamics within and between local actors and networks that may perpetuate gender-based inequalities.

Box 3. Driving Decision-Making and Results Using Evidence and Data

USAID is committed to data-driven and evidence-based approaches to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. Gender analyses include qualitative and quantitative data on the drivers of gender inequality and recommendations for the design of context-specific programs to address, target, and eventually close the identified gender gaps. Data and analysis disaggregated by sex—the designation of a person as male, female, or intersex based on a cluster of anatomical and physiological traits known as sex characteristics—and/or gender identity—a person’s deeply held sense of self and what they call themselves, including woman, man, or gender diverse—provide a starting point for understanding the populations in the countries in which we work. Additional data, such as that based on other identity factors (e.g., ethnicity; sexual orientation; caste; disability status; age; etc.), socioeconomic status, and geography, as well as data grounded in local, Indigenous, and traditional knowledge, play a critical role in designing and implementing gender-sensitive and transformative programs.

Qualitative data, including but not limited to key informant interviews and focus groups, are also crucial to sustaining results, adapting effective approaches, and communicating the effectiveness of our work. Standard foreign assistance indicators and gender-sensitive quantitative and qualitative indicators enable the Agency to implement rigorous monitoring, including performance and impact evaluations to assess whether USAID’s programming is achieving intended results and closing gender gaps.

USAID integrates ethical standards across data collection and use, particularly for those who might be targeted because of their identity.



COLLABORATIVE

USAID is committed to fostering more flexible, adaptive, and creative approaches to engaging new and diverse partners to advance gender equality. This includes, but is not limited to, organizations and movements focused on gender equality, governments at all levels, private-sector actors, civil-society organizations, locally led networks and collectives, academia, local researchers, and faith-based organizations. We recognize that no single organization or sector can dismantle gender inequalities. These partners should include those that represent and comprise marginalized, vulnerable, and underrepresented populations, including women's and girls' rights and LGBTQI+ human rights organizations. To support these partnerships and robust programming, we will work collaboratively across sectors.



ACCOUNTABLE

All USAID staff—from the USAID Administrator, senior officials, Mission Directors, and Bureau leaders, to program, technical, human resource, financial management, and acquisition and assistance staff—are responsible for advancing the Gender Policy's objectives and applying its guiding principles through their roles. OUs are supported by USAID's technical leads on gender equality, who provide expertise and guidance to facilitate efforts to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. The roles and responsibilities for USAID's OUs in implementing this policy appear in [ADS 205](#).



DO NO HARM

Closing gender gaps and supporting women's empowerment involves challenging entrenched roles, norms, and practices. When confronted with changes to the status quo, some can react in harmful ways. USAID addresses this risk by striving to mitigate any potential unintended consequences of our assistance that could inadvertently harm the people and communities we seek to support and empower. For example, USAID consults key local stakeholders about the potential for harm and works with communities to design projects and activities that reinforce the value of gender equality and women's empowerment. In addition, the Agency monitors for and addresses unintended consequences throughout our development and humanitarian assistance programs, supporting the goal that sector interventions do not inadvertently exacerbate, deepen, or further entrench gender gaps and inequalities, including GBV or other human rights violations.

Box 4. Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

As outlined in the Agency's [Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(PSEA\) Policy](#), [Sexual Misconduct Policy \(AAPSM\)](#), and [Child Safeguarding Standards](#), USAID works to ensure partners and program participants have safe access to USAID-funded services and activities and that allegations of sexual misconduct, including harassment, exploitation, or abuse of any kind among staff or implementing partners, are reported and addressed as appropriate. USAID also recognizes that when allegations of sexual exploitation or abuse arise, responses must be survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and restorative, and that insights from incidents will be used to improve safety for participants and their communities. Sexual misconduct of any kind strikes at the very heart and credibility of development and humanitarian assistance.



Photo: USAID

OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

Under the Gender Policy and consistent with the Women’s Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act of 2018 (WEEE Act), USAID investments in support of gender equality and women’s empowerment aim to achieve four strategic objectives. USAID will advance these objectives through investments across all sectors in which USAID works, as outlined in the [Why Gender Matters to USAID Programs](#) section. The outcomes associated with each objective are not exhaustive, but are illustrative of the changes USAID expects to achieve as a result of this Policy.

USAID’S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES TO ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

1. REDUCE GENDER DISPARITIES

2. STRIVE TO ELIMINATE GBV AND MITIGATE ITS HARMFUL EFFECTS

3. INCREASE WOMEN’S AND GIRLS’ AGENCY

4. ADVANCE STRUCTURAL CHANGES AND EQUITABLE GENDER NORMS

OBJECTIVE 1: REDUCE GENDER DISPARITIES IN WHO ACCESSES, CONTROLS, AND BENEFITS FROM ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, POLITICAL, LEGAL, EDUCATIONAL, HEALTH, AND CULTURAL RESOURCES, AS WELL AS WEALTH, OPPORTUNITIES, AND SERVICES.

All people must have the opportunity to realize their full potential. But the status quo has not worked for all those who experience gender-based discrimination—especially those who also face additional and compounding forms of inequality—curtailing their full opportunity to participate in economic, social, civic, and political life and creating structural barriers to equality. In addition to the

millions of women and girls worldwide who are denied access and opportunity, the lack of progress toward parity compromises future societies, economies, and communities. Deliberate action to close gender gaps is therefore both a moral and strategic imperative of development assistance.

Illustrative outcomes:

- Improved access of women and girls to all levels of education.
- Increased women’s land rights and resource tenure.
- Increased women’s agricultural productivity.

- Expanded access to affordable and high-quality childcare services.
- Expanded participation by women in the labor force, including through entrepreneurship and well-paying, high-quality jobs.
- Improved access, quality, and use of health care for all individuals across the life course—including gender-diverse and LGBTQI+ individuals—with a particular focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

OBJECTIVE 2: STRIVE TO ELIMINATE GBV AND MITIGATE ITS HARMFUL EFFECTS ON INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES, SO ALL PEOPLE CAN LIVE FREE FROM VIOLENCE.

GBV is a manifestation of structural gender inequalities, patriarchy, and power imbalances that imposes direct and indirect costs on individuals, communities, public health, and human and global security. As a systemic and global

issue, GBV takes place in all settings, from workplaces to the home to digital spaces—no country or level of society is excluded. Some individuals face intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression that place them at greater risk of GBV, including Indigenous peoples, LGBTQI+ individuals, persons with disabilities, informal sector workers, migrants and displaced peoples, and other historically marginalized populations. Addressing these risks and taking action to transform the gendered power dynamics that are the root cause of GBV are critical for achieving core development and security objectives and, fundamentally, a matter of basic human rights.

Illustrative outcomes:

- Strengthened community-based and survivor-led organizations addressing GBV.
- Enhanced social safety-net systems to prevent and address GBV.

Box 5. Women’s Empowerment

Women’s empowerment is when women and girls act freely, claim and exercise their rights, and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. All individuals have power within themselves; however, cultures, societies, and institutions create conditions that facilitate or undermine the possibilities for empowerment. Women’s empowerment is also a process by which the state of empowerment is achieved.

USAID recognizes that its role in women’s empowerment is to support those addressing the environmental and systemic factors that enable or impede people’s abilities to exercise their inherent power and agency. This kind of structural change requires engagement with an ecosystem of local actors, including individual women and girls themselves. The Agency is not suggesting that it, or any other entity, can “bestow” empowerment upon others.

USAID continues to reference women’s empowerment explicitly because women (and girls, who are implicitly included in this phrase) are most widely and disproportionately affected by gender-based inequalities. The deliberate focus on inclusivity within this policy recognizes that all people have a stake in the realization of gender equality and that women and girls are not the only group affected by gender-based discrimination. The widening of the aperture of the Agency’s programming does not, however, obviate the continued need to focus on women and girls in USAID’s work.

Women and girls are by no means a homogenous group. As noted elsewhere in the policy, women and girls with disabilities, transgender women, Indigenous women, and other historically marginalized women, for example, experience multiple and intersecting forms of systemic discrimination. Approaches to women’s empowerment must therefore be nuanced enough to recognize and address the ways in which gender and other identity factors disproportionately affect specific groups of women and girls.

- Expanded efforts to address GBV affecting marginalized groups, including child, early, or forced marriage and unions; female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); conflict-related GBV; transphobic and homophobic violence; and technology-facilitated GBV.
- Strengthened GBV prevention and response programming in USAID's humanitarian response.

OBJECTIVE 3: INCREASE THE CAPABILITY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS TO FULLY EXERCISE THEIR RIGHTS, DETERMINE THEIR LIFE OUTCOMES, ASSUME LEADERSHIP ROLES, AND INFLUENCE DECISION-MAKING IN HOUSEHOLDS, COMMUNITIES, AND SOCIETIES.

Gender inequality skews decision-making within households, communities, and national governing systems in a way that reduces the voices of women and girls and perpetuates the status quo. Women are dramatically underrepresented in critical fora, from elected office to peace processes, international climate negotiations,

and global economic convenings. Women's movements, which often are rooted at the community level, are severely underfunded. Yet the evidence is unequivocal that women's participation and leadership in civil, political, and economic spheres supports greater gender equality and political and economic security for societies more broadly. Supporting the agency of women and girls is necessary to advance gender equality and achieve core development objectives.

Illustrative outcomes:

- Expanded pipeline of civic-minded and/or politically interested women and girls.
- Increased meaningful participation and active leadership of women and girls in climate action.
- Shifted funding, influence, and decision-making power to girls and women within humanitarian response systems.
- Increased young people's rights, agency, and competencies to improve health for themselves and their communities.

Box 6. Boys, Men, and Masculinities

Gender constructs shape the lives of men and boys across their life courses. This includes power relations and societal expectations of what it means to be a man or boy in a particular society, community, and family. Some of these expectations can encourage the development of positive attributes; however, they can also negatively affect men and their families and communities. Harmful norms around masculinity create vulnerabilities for men and boys that limit their well-being as well as drive behaviors that harm women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals, including GBV and limitations on education and economic opportunities.

Men and boys who do not adhere to masculine gender stereotypes within their local contexts may face substantial risk of stigmatization, harassment, abuse, and GBV. Age, class, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, and sexual orientation also influence how gender norms govern behaviors and influence the level of agency men and boys have to address such risks. These expectations may also hinder overall development related to health, education, and experience of violence for men and boys.

On the other hand, positive representations of masculine behaviors can both decrease the likelihood that men engage in risky behaviors and perpetration of violence as well as encourage better relationships and improved outcomes for themselves, their partners, their children, and their communities. USAID will address the unique needs of men and boys, and encourage positive forms of masculinity, while partnering with them to address the disproportionate impacts of gender inequality on women and girls and LGBTQI+ individuals.



OBJECTIVE 4: ADVANCE STRUCTURAL CHANGES THAT ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF GENDER INEQUALITY AND PROMOTE EQUITABLE GENDER NORMS.

Advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment requires reforming political, social, and legal systems that perpetuate entrenched inequalities. Such systemic change helps to address the root causes of gender inequality, together with approaches to shift inequitable and harmful norms that serve as a fundamental barrier to the full realization of human rights. Structural changes are critical to scale and sustain advances toward gender equality and social justice and secure the resultant returns on development investments.

Illustrative outcomes:

- Supported youth and their influencers to challenge inequitable gender roles and norms.

- Strengthened laws, policies, and regulatory frameworks in support of gender equality.
- Supported communities to adopt norms recognizing the value of girls.
- Improved safe environments for women and girls to participate freely in politics and public life, including in conflict and crisis contexts, peace processes, and democratic transitions.

USAID will target these objectives and outcomes across countries and regions and across sectors. The [Why Gender Matters to USAID Programs](#) section provides an overview of promising approaches across sectors to advance gender equality, in line with USAID’s vision and objectives. USAID will develop an implementation plan for this policy that will prioritize actions to advance the objectives and further articulate prioritized global outcomes.

Box 7. LGBTQI+ Individuals and Gender Equality

Regressive gender norms, gender inequalities, and associated power differentials constrain the lives of LGBTQI+ individuals. Discrimination, stigma, criminalization, and violence negatively affect millions of LGBTQI+ individuals around the world and contribute to poverty and social instability. They are often excluded from social benefits systems; lack protections in anti-discrimination legislation; and are not afforded legal recognition of their relationships and families. These factors limit their rights and access to essential services such as education, employment, and health care and prevent their meaningful inclusion in broader development efforts. Moreover, coalitions of anti-democratic, anti-rights actors have sought to further marginalize LGBTQI+ individuals by pursuing campaigns that spread misinformation.

LGBTQI+ individuals, particularly gender-diverse, transgender, and intersex individuals, must contend with expectations that they comply with gender binary roles, and they are subject to negative repercussions if they do not. Similarly, the presumption that everyone is heterosexual legitimizes social and legal institutions that devalue, marginalize, and discriminate against people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Rigid norms may create negative restrictions on LGBTQI+ women's mobility and participation in public life. In addition, intersex individuals—an umbrella term for people whose sex characteristics at birth do not all correspond to a single sex—are also negatively affected by misunderstandings and pathologization of their bodies, resulting in medically unnecessary surgeries on intersex infants and children. This often results in long-lasting trauma, medical complications, and mistrust of medical services.

The intersection of additional marginalized identities (e.g., ethnicity or disability status) may compound the negative experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals. As USAID seeks to advance gender equality for all people, it is imperative to ensure that Agency programming recognizes and addresses the ways in which gender-based discrimination affects the LGBTQI+ community in all its diversity.



Photo: USAID / Kashish Das Shrestha



Photo: Ivana Ferriziger / USAID

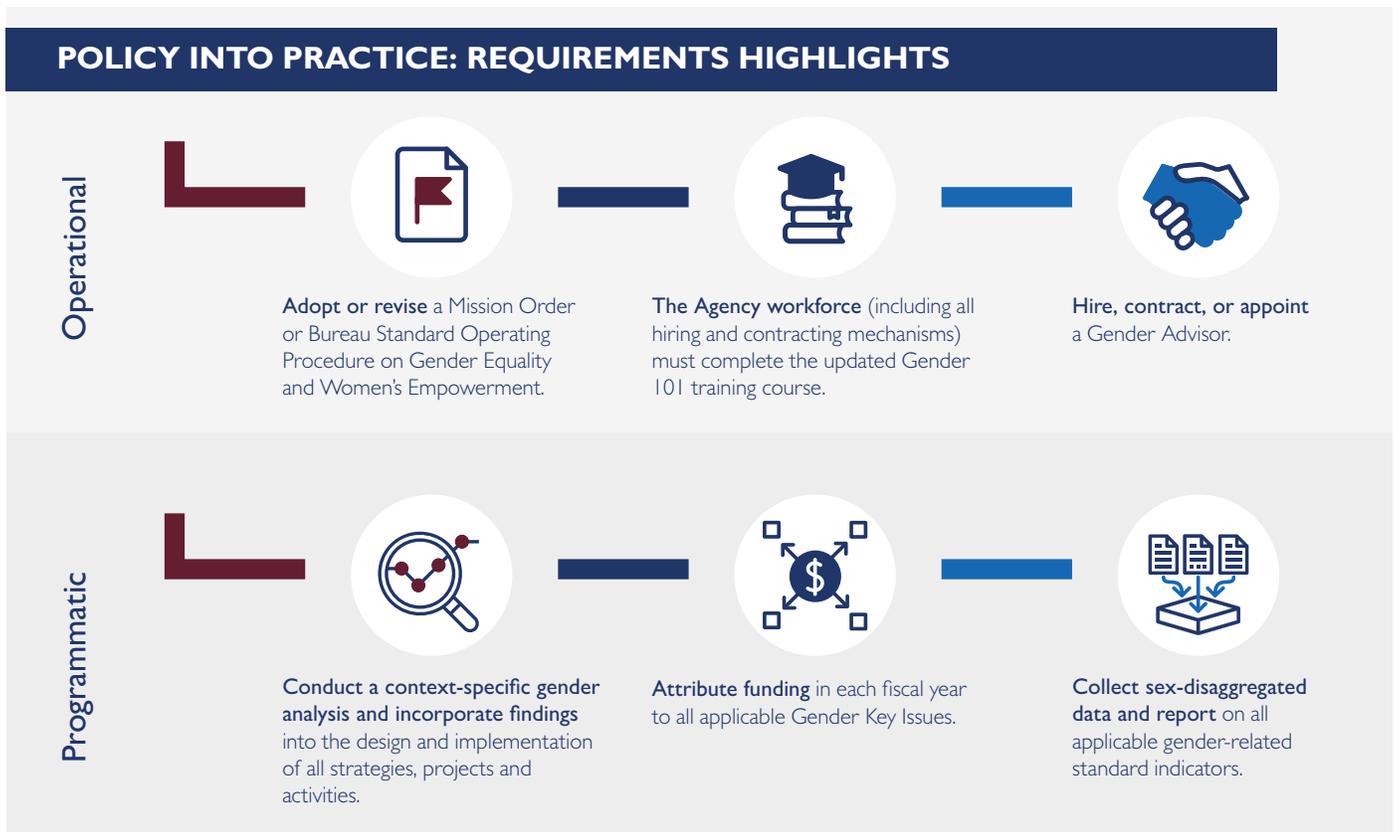
POLICY INTO PRACTICE

Delivering on the Gender Policy’s ambitious vision, principles, and objectives is a shared Agency responsibility that depends on the contributions and collective commitment of the entire workforce and proactive Agency leadership. To advance gender equality and make our development interventions more effective, USAID must strengthen the Agency’s systems, tools, and resources and consistently leverage these assets. This section outlines how USAID will do so, through its operations, programs, and assessments, building on the foundation established at the Agency over time.

Most of the requirements below have been in place from previous iterations of the Gender Policy and/or are Congressionally mandated through the Women’s Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment (WEEE) Act of 2018. The WEEE Act requires that: (1) strategies, projects, and activities of the Agency are shaped by a gender analysis; (2) standard indicators are used to assess such strategies, projects, and activities, if applicable; and (3) gender equality and female empowerment are integrated throughout the Agency’s program cycle and related processes for purposes of

strategic planning, project design and implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The requirements outlined below support USAID’s implementation of the WEEE Act.

A concerted effort has been made to streamline all requirements and recommendations. Any new requirements were added after a rigorous process weighing the value of the requirement to deliver better programming outcomes against additional reporting or other bureaucratic burdens.



MISSION ORDER AND BUREAU STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES ON GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT.

Requirements

Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices: Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices must adopt or update a Mission Order (MO) on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment within one year of the release of this policy and every five years thereafter.ⁱⁱ

Washington Bureaus: Washington Bureaus must develop or update Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) within one year of the release of this policy and every five years thereafter, addressing the same components covered by MOs.ⁱⁱⁱ

USAID MUST BUILD WORKFORCE CAPACITY ON GENDER EQUALITY.

Requirements

Gender Advisors: All Bureaus, Missions, Regional Missions, and Country Offices must hire, contract, or appoint a Gender Advisor with a minimum allocation of their overall time (i.e., level of effort [LOE]) dedicated to work on gender equality and women's empowerment, including GBV, tiered by the annual program budget of the Bureau, Mission, or Regional Mission.^{iv} Gender Advisors must have the necessary technical skills, competencies, and experience, with responsibilities explicitly included in their job descriptions. To alleviate the administrative burden of every Mission determining the roles, responsibilities, and qualifications of Gender Advisors, HCTM has pre-classified [Standard Position Descriptions](#) for Mission Gender Advisors, which are available on ProgramNet and on HCTMs SPD page with a guidance document. OUs will have three years from the date the policy is released to meet the minimum LOE requirements for Gender Advisors.

Training: The Agency workforce, including all hiring and contracting mechanisms, must complete the updated Gender 101, an introductory online course on gender equality and women's empowerment, within one year of the release of this policy, and new hires within a year of start date.

All Gender Advisors and POCs are required to take a minimum of two additional gender courses beyond Gender 101 over a five-year time period starting either from the release of this policy or the date they were hired.

Missions, Bureaus, and Independent Offices are required to incorporate specific content on gender equality, women's empowerment, GBV, and intersectionality into broader technical or sectoral training they manage.

Recommendations

Additional Staff and Coordination: Offices or teams within OUs are strongly encouraged to appoint one or more staff members to serve as a gender advisor or point of contact to support the integration of gender considerations across different sectors; OUs are encouraged to have a Gender Working Group.

Training: The Agency strongly encourages everyone in our workforce to take a USAID-facilitated course on gender integration. Missions, Bureaus, and Independent Offices are strongly encouraged to establish and provide opportunities for gender training for all their workforce.

USAID MUST CONSISTENTLY IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS GENDER INEQUALITIES.

Requirements

Conduct gender analysis:^v USAID must conduct a context-specific gender analysis prior to or during the design of all country strategies, projects, and activities, to determine and identify steps to address gender inequalities and thereby improve the lives of women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals. The analysis may be conducted by the USAID workforce or contractors, who can draw on recent data and findings from credible sources when producing the analysis.^{vi} Additional guidance is available in [ADS 205](#) to support streamlined analysis.

Incorporate gender analysis findings in USAID processes and documents: Technical teams and program offices in all OUs must reflect the findings of these gender analyses in key processes and documents or their successors across the different levels of program strategy, planning, and design with which they are involved.

ii To facilitate a streamlined process, a simple template for MOs can be found on [ProgramNet](#).

iii To facilitate a streamlined process, a simple template for SOPs can be found on [ProgramNet](#).

iv LOE tiers by program budget are available in [ADS 205](#). Country and Independent Offices are exempt from the minimum LOE requirement.

v A detailed description of a gender analysis is available in [ADS 205](#).

vi Per [ADS 540](#), responsible USAID staff must post final gender analyses to the Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC) website.

These include: Regional or Country Development Cooperation Strategies (R/CDCS),^{vii} Project Development Documents (PDD), Activity Approval Memoranda (AAMs), and solicitations (including Broad Agency Announcements). Additional guidance is available in [ADS 205](#) to support effectively and efficiently incorporating findings of gender analyses in key documents.

For solicitations, activity design teams must include a statement that clearly indicates how the solicitation incorporates the results of the gender analysis across its many components. If this statement is not in the request for a new acquisition or assistance action, the designated Contracting Officer or Agreement Officer is required to notify the planner that they are unable to take further action until the required documentation is received.

Recommendations

Incorporate gender analysis findings in other agreements: Technical teams and program offices in all OUs are also strongly encouraged to reflect relevant findings from gender analyses in any Public International Organization agreements, Development Credit Authorities, Memoranda of Understanding, and Government-to-Government agreements in which they are involved.

USAID MUST DEMONSTRATE HOW IT IS INVESTING IN GENDER EQUALITY.

Requirements

Attributions: All OUs must attribute funding in each fiscal year to all applicable Gender Key Issues, including the four Gender Linked Key Issues (Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE)-Primary, GE/WE-Secondary, GBV, and GBV-Child, Early, or Forced Marriage), the two data-only Sub-Key Issues designed to gather attributions to women's economic empowerment, and/or the Women, Peace, and Security Independent Key Issue.

Recommendations

Attributions: All OUs are also strongly encouraged to attribute funding to other Key Issues that may capture additional aspects of gender work, including the LGBTQI+ Key Issue.

Implementing Partner Action Plans: Activity design teams should strongly encourage implementing partners to submit a Gender Plan of Action, outlining how they are integrating attention to gender equality into the work plan and performance monitoring plan on the basis of the gender analysis.

USAID MUST TRACK GENDER EQUALITY RESULTS.

Requirements

Track progress annually: All USAID OUs must work with implementing partners to collect data and report on all applicable standard indicators that cover gender equality, women's empowerment, GBV, women's economic empowerment, and women, peace and security in the annual Performance Plan and Report (PPR).

In addition, all USAID people-level standard and custom performance indicators must be sex-disaggregated, in line with current policy. Recognizing that sex disaggregation does not capture the range of gender identities, USAID will explore disaggregation of data that more accurately track who is being reached and who benefits from USAID programming.

Assessment of Policy implementation: Per [ADS 200.3.8](#), approximately every five years after this Policy's release, the Agency will produce a progress report for the Administrator and the public, which will be shaped by an external evaluation and information furnished through USAID's systems.

Recommendations

Develop and adapt targets and indicators: All OUs should adapt targets and indicators for tracking and measuring progress toward the four Policy objectives during strategic planning and project design at all geographic levels. OUs are strongly encouraged to develop custom gender indicators with implementing partners that provide the quality and range of information necessary to thoroughly assess progress and impact on gender equality outcomes. Furthermore, recognizing that existing standard gender indicators focus on outputs, USAID will explore adopting standard outcome indicators related to gender equality.

^{vii} The gender analysis requirement for RDCSs is consistent with [ADS 201maz](#).

Incorporate gender equality into evaluations: All USAID OUs are strongly encouraged to assess in all performance and impact evaluations, across sectors and portfolios, whether and how the given activity contributes to gender equality and women’s empowerment outcomes, including to identify the differential impacts of said activities on women, men, and gender-diverse individuals, in all their diversity.

Learn and adapt to strengthen gender equality outcomes: Data collected through the Operational Plans (OP) and PPRs can be used to inform analysis of programming trends, prioritization of technical support to OUs, and opportunities to amplify the Agency’s gender equality outcomes. Data and information collected can also contribute to the Agency’s Learning Agenda. In addition, all USAID OUs are strongly encouraged to incorporate attention to gender equality and women’s empowerment as they apply a collaboration, learning, and adapting (CLA) approach, which would enable frequent feedback

loops to identify how programming is addressing gender gaps and to iteratively adapt programming to improve impact and mitigate risk. USAID OUs should do so across all sectoral activities, not only activities focused on gender equality and women’s empowerment as a primary objective. Learning should also integrate participant voices in the feedback loops, not just as the entities we extract data from but as key participants in designing the questions we are asking.

Use a gender marker: To improve gender equality outcomes, OUs are strongly encouraged to assess their portfolios annually using a gender equality marker—a tool that provides a simple scoring rubric to support program teams in any sector to engage in dialogue and learning, identify gender technical assistance needs, and improve integration of gender equality issues and objectives in the design, implementation, and evaluation of USAID activities.^{viii}

viii To facilitate a streamlined process, a simple template is available on [ProgramNet](#).



Photo: Hartz Rippe / USAID



Photo: USAID



Photo: USAID

WHY GENDER MATTERS TO USAID PROGRAMS

The following sector snapshots briefly examine gender gaps and opportunities across 14 sectors that are priorities for USAID:

Each snapshot presents illustrative data on how gender inequalities manifest in that sector, addressing key drivers of these disparities, their impacts on sector outcomes, and some of the promising approaches to mutually reinforce sector-specific and gender-equality objectives and impacts. Where available, this analysis has drawn on intersectional gender data, which shed light on the unique experiences and vulnerabilities of women, men, and gender-diverse individuals across different ages, races/ethnicities, geographies, and so on.

In aggregate, the snapshots highlight the many interdependencies and recurring gender inequalities across sectors. For example, the benefits of diverse and substantive leadership from women and girls—and the gaps in their representation—are raised across the snapshots, from climate to humanitarian assistance to science and research.

Nearly every snapshot notes the chilling effect of GBV on key goals for that sector, from effective natural resource management to equitable digital access to improved health, underscoring the GBV snapshot's analysis of the devastating and widespread negative impacts of GBV on individuals, families, communities, and countries.

The harmful effects of rigid gender norms are highlighted across the snapshots, from how such norms inhibit women's economic participation and limit their prospects to own land, to how they contribute to restricting women's opportunities to represent their communities in politics and peace processes or exercise bodily autonomy. Gender norms also result in women's time poverty (i.e., the disproportionate burden of unpaid caregiving and domestic tasks that falls on women and girls and shrinks their discretionary time),¹ which is a cross-cutting barrier that not only inhibits the well-being of women and girls but also impedes equitable economic growth, agricultural productivity, and inclusive democracies.



Agriculture and Food Security



Biodiversity, Conservation, and Natural Resources Management



Climate



Conflict and Insecurity



Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance



Digital Access and Technology



Economic Growth



Education



Energy, Mining, and Infrastructure



Gender-Based Violence



Global Health



Humanitarian Assistance



Land and Property Rights



Water Security, Sanitation, and Hygiene

While men and boys are more likely to benefit from prevailing gender norms, as highlighted across the sector snapshots, there are associated costs. For example, harmful gender norms affect men and boys in a number of ways, such as by encouraging risk-taking and limiting health-seeking behaviors, which can result in health inequities, such as higher rates of some diseases, increased risk of suicide, and lower use of health services.^{2,3} Also highlighted in the sector snapshots are sector-specific examples of how LGBTQI+ individuals or people who do not fit within the gender binary are targets of gender-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence, such as increased school-related gender-based violence, which in turn affects reading skills and other short- and long-term outcomes.⁴

Gender-related trends that are not yet visible or are only starting to be apparent across sector snapshots are also instructive. In the limited cases where available, this analysis has drawn on intersectional gender data, which shed light across sectors on the unique experiences and vulnerabilities of women, men, and gender-diverse individuals across different ages, races/ethnicities, geographies, and so on. More intersectional gender data are needed across the board, and their absence is more acute in some sectors than others.

Taken as a whole, these snapshots make a powerful case for the value of gender integration across all of USAID's work. When the Agency's programming takes gender disparities into account and actively leverages sectoral programming for the promotion of gender equality, the Agency is able to drive an agenda for equality and justice while multiplying the returns on development investments.

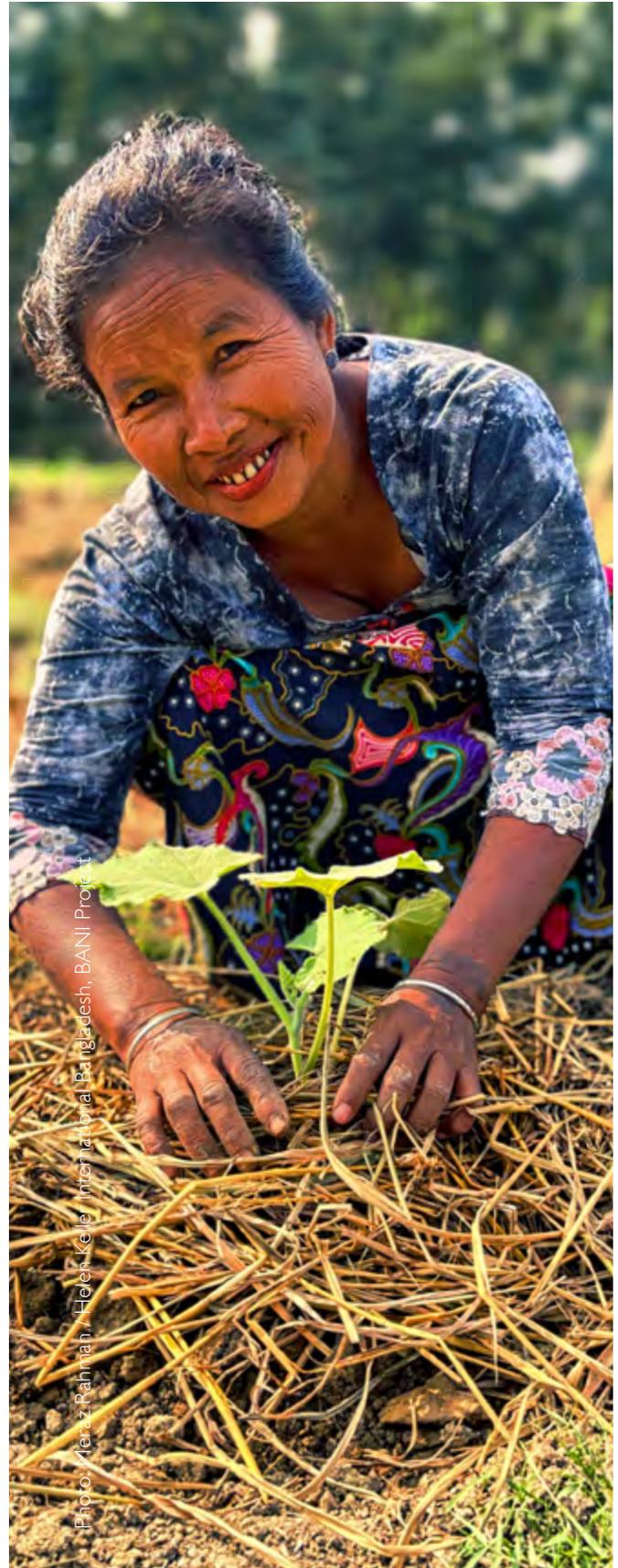


Photo: Menaz Rahmah / Helen Keller International Bangladesh, BANU Project



AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY

The multiple roles women play across agriculture and food systems place them at a critical nexus in food security, resilience, and nutrition. As women increasingly engage in food systems as entrepreneurs, women mostly remain concentrated in small-scale food processing and tend to serve local, often informal markets.⁵ Despite their important roles in food systems, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions across food systems and in government, collectives, research, and the private sector.

Youth and older adults, LGBTQI+ individuals, persons with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and Indigenous Peoples also face structural inequalities within food systems,⁶ and there is a need for more research to understand and address the ways that gender intersects with age, sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnicity, and other social and contextual factors to compound food insecurity for certain groups.

Food Security. Gender norms that influence access to resources and markets also affect how women and men participate in and benefit from agriculture and food systems.⁷ The difference between men and women farmers' agricultural productivity (measured by the value of crop production per unit of cultivated land) ranges from 4 to 25 percent.⁸ Drivers of the gap include women's lower access to education, land, labor, technology, productive assets, finance and risk management tools, and extension services, along with lower use of key agricultural inputs such as improved seeds and fertilizer. Partnership status, household composition, and social norms also drive the gender productivity gap in some contexts.^{9,10,11,12,13}

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index has shown that poor access to credit, limited group membership, and high workloads are among the most pressing

constraints for both women and men in agriculture, though women are more negatively affected.¹⁴ In addition, women spend three to seven times more time than men on unpaid domestic and care tasks, their disproportionate unpaid care burden resulting in more limited mobility and time dedicated to more remunerative work.¹⁵ Women are also more likely to have unmet demand for and limited control over financial tools and services.¹⁶ The gender gap in registered users of digital agriculture solutions ranges from 62 to 70 percent.¹⁷

Women could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30 percent if they had the same access to productive resources as men, reducing the number of hungry people by 12–17 percent globally.¹⁸ Addressing the restrictions faced by women-owned and -led formal and informal businesses and tackling the gender norms and power imbalances in household-level decision-making can improve the growth potential and profitability of their businesses.¹⁹ Likewise, evidence suggests that applying transformative interventions that engage men and boys, affect gender roles and norms, and address gender-based discrimination in policies and practices in agriculture can yield gender equality outcomes alongside increased food security and economic well-being for both women and men.²⁰

Nutrition. Empowering women and engaging men in childcare can improve diets, hygiene, and use of nutrition services, contributing to a well-nourished population. As women's incomes rise and they have greater control over expenditures, child nutrition improves through better diets and health care.²¹ Women's empowerment, specifically their involvement with agricultural production and income decisions, is positively correlated with exclusive breastfeeding of children younger than six months (one of the most effective ways to ensure a minimum adequate diet), positively affecting child health and survival.^{22,23} Workplace support for breastfeeding is necessary when facilitating off-farm employment for women.²⁴

Engaging men in childcare and health may enhance bonds between fathers and their children, improve women's and children's well-being and nutrition, and increase couples' joint decision-making and men's well-being.^{25,26,27}

Resilience. Gendered roles and access to resources mean that women and girls have less capacity to reduce, mitigate, and manage risks and stressors such as natural disasters and outbreaks.²⁸ Women and girls frequently act as "shock absorbers" in times of crises, eating less to leave food for others in their households. Women who work in agriculture and food systems may be more exposed to risk than men for many of the same reasons that women's farm productivity is lower, i.e., fewer assets, less mobility, and more limited access to information and services.²⁹ Women who are forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms are exposed to further risks including GBV. LGBTQI+ individuals may face additional risks and stressors and greater challenges mitigating and managing them because in many contexts they have weaker legal rights and protections, are excluded from family and social networks, and have more restricted access to social safety programs.

PROMISING APPROACHES

1. Promote women producers' improved access to extension services, finance and financial services, seeds, fertilizers and irrigation (among other climate-resilient agricultural technologies and innovation), and markets through bundled programming.
2. Enable women's participation in diversified off-farm economic activities as processors, entrepreneurs, traders, and wage workers for more resilient and remunerative livelihoods in agriculture and food systems.
3. Address discriminatory gender norms to promote more equitable decision-making over household and community resources, allocation of household financial resources, and roles in caregiving and workloads. Engage both women and men to promote positive nutrition behaviors, women's education, and allocation of household financial resources to nutritious foods.
4. Promote group-based approaches and women's collective action, which enables them to attain greater access to financial resources, increased income earning opportunities and social benefits, and greater confidence and self-esteem.
5. Promote women's engaged leadership in decision-making, governance, research, and food-systems organizations at all levels, as well as in managing and governing land, freshwater, marine, and other natural resources.





BIODIVERSITY, CONSERVATION, AND NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Changes to ecosystems affect women and men in different ways. Gender inequalities rooted in social and legal norms shape roles and responsibilities related to natural resources, which in turn affect how women and men, respectively, can access and benefit economically from them.³⁰ Control over and access to natural resources can also be a source of conflict and lead to forms of exploitation such as GBV, which can be a key mechanism for maintaining power.³¹ Supporting women's leadership and meaningful inclusion of women in biodiversity conservation and natural resource management can lead to more sustainable resource use, reduce conflict, and generate more equitable benefits for all users.³²

Natural Resources Management. Natural resources management spans multiple, cross-cutting sectors, including fisheries, forestry, and wildlife. The fisheries sector plays a key role in food security, as an estimated one billion people depend on seafood as their primary source of protein. Women make up the majority of the world's industrial and small-scale processors, so many women's livelihoods directly rely on a sustainable supply of high-quality fish.³³ Women can improve enforcement of regulations when they are engaged as stewards of fishery resources. Women's access to processing technology has reduced losses, increased value of products, and improved livelihoods without resulting in overfishing.³⁴

In forestry and natural resource supply chains, women smallholders typically focus on the quality of their crops to a greater extent than their male counterparts do. However, exclusionary practices in natural resource value chains can lower productivity and have a negative impact on the health and well-being of communities.³⁵

Women are not as well represented as men in forestry governance bodies and often lack access to higher-value timber, which men control.

Biodiversity and Conservation. Women around the world, particularly Indigenous women, are often the first to experience the impact of biodiversity loss. However, they are underrepresented in conservation efforts and leadership. An International Union for Conservation of Nature analysis in 2021 revealed that women held only 15 percent of top jobs as ministers of environmental sectors.³⁶ Indigenous women face multiple, intersecting barriers to their safe and equitable engagement in natural resources management, but they are also significant holders of knowledge of sustainable Indigenous land and resource practices that are key to achieving food security and climate adaptation and mitigation goals.

Women are powerful agents of biodiversity conservation because of their unique roles and possession of knowledge on natural resources, particularly within rural and Indigenous communities.^{37,38} Women's engagement and leadership can play a significant role in delivering sustainable results across biodiversity, conservation, and natural resource sectors, including increased food and economic security and improved health. Many data gaps remain, as do mechanisms that could help us better understand and systematically map the roles of women and girls in biodiversity, conservation, and natural resources management, especially through an intersectional lens. When resources are destroyed or depleted, women and girls are forced to travel greater distances to collect water, wood for fuel, and animals and plants for food and medicine.

PROMISING APPROACHES

Promising approaches to addressing gender-based barriers within the biodiversity, conservation, and natural resource management sectors include:

1. Promote women's secure access to and use and ownership of land and property.
2. Promote women's leadership, particularly Indigenous women, in fisheries cooperatives, natural resource management associations, and conservation efforts, including supporting women and women-led conservation organizations through training, capacity building, and direct funding.
3. Advance programs and policies to protect the rights of women environmental human rights defenders, including a focus on programming and policies that address the heightened risk of women environmental human rights defenders to GBV.
4. Expand access to finance, financial services, training, and innovative technologies for women-led conservation organizations, women entrepreneurs, business leaders, and workers in natural resource management sectors.
5. Consider people's intersecting identities and experiences, and how complexities of the inequalities women face might be exacerbated or alleviated through biodiversity conservation and natural resource management programming.



Photo: Juan Pablo Moreira / Fauna & Flora International



CLIMATE

Climate change is not gender neutral in its impacts.³⁹ The dire effects of climate change disproportionately affect groups that already experience marginalization because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, age, and ability, among other things.⁴⁰ Women and girls, on average, are significantly more likely than men to die from natural and climate disasters.⁴¹ Women's roles within food and water systems, along with their frequently limited access to resources and information, increase their risk exposure and ability to adapt to the impacts of climate change.⁴² Compounding these effects, mechanisms for coping with climate stressors often come at the expense of women and girls, such as increased rates of GBV, including resource constraints leading families to push girls into child, early, and forced marriage.^{43,44} Yet women are also climate leaders in their communities, contributing unique skills, knowledge networks, and community needs. Women are decision-makers, stakeholders, educators, and experts key to producing more equitable and sustainable solutions to climate change.

Mitigation. It is essential that mitigation activities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions consider women's important role as leaders of mitigation efforts. This includes ensuring that financing mechanisms, technological developments, and legal frameworks associated with infrastructure development are gender-equitable and reflect women's priorities and needs.⁴⁵

Adaptation. Empowering women as leaders and including women's priorities and needs in climate change adaptation measures is key to reducing exposure and vulnerability and building the resilience of all people to the effects of climate change.⁴⁶ Robust and meaningful gender integration into adaptation interventions will prevent activities from exacerbating existing inequalities—which risks contributing to increased levels of GBV—and will ensure that the contributions and needs of those most vulnerable to climate change are incorporated into activities.⁴⁷

Food Security. Women farmers rely more heavily on traditional food sources and subsistence agriculture, which are severely affected by climate change. Yet, women are underrepresented recipients of climate-smart agricultural support. To improve food security for all, it is essential that women farmers gain equal access to resources, information, and risk management tools to lead on food-security solutions.⁴⁸



Photo: Hanz Rippe / USAID

The success of climate action requires diverse and substantive women's leadership, including through direct funding for women-led and gender-equality organizations. Climate interventions must also mitigate the risk of contributing to women's time poverty. In compliance with the Lima Work Programme on Gender and its Gender Action Plan,⁴⁹ governments must integrate a gender lens into their national policies, action plans, and other measures to combat climate change.

PROMISING APPROACHES

Promising strategies to advance gender equality, empower women, and mitigate risks in the context of climate mitigation and adaptation include:

1. Integrate a gender lens in climate mitigation and adaptation programs and policies to address women's vulnerability and advance their important role as leaders of climate mitigation and adaptation solutions.
2. Increase financial and technical resources for women-led and gender-equality organizations leading climate action, especially through direct, flexible, and core funding.
3. Create economic opportunities for women in climate mitigation and adaptation-related industries by supporting an enabling environment for equitable access to jobs in this sector, including through education, training, and capacity building for both the workforce and management.
4. Support behavioral-change programming that addresses harmful gender norms and time poverty, advances gender equality, and increases acceptance of women's participation in and leadership on climate actions at all levels, including through engagement with men and boys to champion women's leadership.
5. Address and mitigate the risks of GBV arising from women's increased access to land rights, participation in the workforce, management of natural resources, and leadership in environmental protection efforts.

Box 8. Gender Equality and Emergencies

Decades of experience and evidence have shown that there is a bidirectional relationship between gender inequality and crises, disasters, and pandemics. Underlying gender inequalities and the effects of emergencies exacerbate one another. Natural disasters, war, violent political transitions, forced displacement, and disease outbreaks result in negative impacts on health, education, access to food and water, and economic and personal security. Women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals are affected differently during and following emergencies, even within the same household. Women's mortality from disasters tends to be higher than that of men; girls are more likely to drop out of school during prolonged drought; and forced displacement and natural disasters place women and girls at increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.⁵⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increases in women's vulnerability to food insecurity and malnutrition, widened gender poverty gaps, increased incidence of GBV, exacerbated burdens of unpaid work, increased risk of COVID-19 for frontline workers, hindered access to sexual and reproductive health services, and intensified gendered forms of violence and discrimination.^{51,52,53,54,55,56} Greater awareness of the interaction between gender inequality and the multiple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic can inform and strengthen immediate responses. It can also inform medium- and long-term recovery and development strategies and serve to improve our preparedness and response to future crises.



CONFLICT AND INSECURITY

Conflict, instability, and insecurity reinforce and exacerbate gender inequality.⁵⁷ Though women and girls are disproportionately affected, they remain underrepresented in efforts to mitigate conflict and support post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery. Conflict and instability often lead to increases in other forms of violence and exclusion experienced by individuals of marginalized groups, particularly ethnic and Indigenous women, youth, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ individuals. Moreover, belonging to more than one of these groups can create compounding vulnerabilities that further affect a person's access to opportunities, services, and benefits during and post-conflict.

State Insecurity. Equality and the security of women and girls is closely linked to state stability.⁵⁸ Higher levels of gender equality are associated with a lower risk of conflict between and within states.⁵⁹ Insecurity exacerbates structural inequalities, further reinforcing economic, political, social, educational, legal, civic, and wealth disparities. Moreover, sexual violence is used as a weapon by state actors, security forces, paramilitaries, criminal entities, and peacekeeping forces primarily against women and girls, but also against men, boys, and LGBTQI+ individuals. States that fail to address gender inequalities and prevent, mitigate, and respond to GBV during peacebuilding and recovery risk a return to violence.⁶⁰

Peacebuilders. Despite evidence of women's critical contributions to stability, women remain significantly underrepresented in peace and security decision-making and peace processes. Efforts to prevent conflict and promote peace are significantly undermined when women are deterred from participating for fear of reprisals and violence.⁶¹ Supporting and protecting the integration of women

with diverse identities, perspectives, and experiences in these processes enables innovative approaches to peacebuilding. Between 1992 and 2019, women constituted, on average, only 13 percent of negotiators, 6 percent of signatories, and 6 percent of mediators in major peace processes.⁶² However, research shows that when women meaningfully participate in peace processes, the resulting agreements are 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years because women's participation broadens the range of conflict drivers and potential solutions under discussion.⁶³

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism. Women and girls are frequently overlooked in efforts to counter violent extremism, despite their roles as survivors, preventers, peacebuilders, policymakers, and security actors, as well as supporters and perpetrators.⁶⁴ The systematic rape, enslavement, and trafficking of women and girls is entrenched in the ideology and practices of certain violent extremist organizations (VEOs), while men and boys, particularly members of the LGBTQI+ community, are often subjected to sexual violence and forced recruitment.⁶⁵ Efforts to address violent extremism are more effective and sustainable when women and girls are co-leaders in the response and when they have the opportunities and resources to mitigate it.⁶⁶

Women play many different, active roles as perpetrators, victims, and mitigators. Some women are leaders, informants, recruiters, or enforcers in VEOs, joining for a complex range of socioeconomic, political, religious, and psychosocial reasons.⁶⁷ They may participate directly and/or encourage their relatives or social connections to join. Others work to counter the ideology and actions of these groups by influencing their families and communities to identify and resist VEO influence, working with local and national authorities and participating in early-warning response systems.



Photo: USAID

Emerging Priorities. Competition over resources is expected to worsen as the climate crisis results in more insecurity, shifting patterns of human movement, and more pronounced inequitable power dynamics.⁶⁸ Compounded impacts of crises, including conflict, often have a disproportionate impact on women's and girls' food security as reflected by their reducing diversity of diets or abstaining from food consumption to make more food available to others in the family. At the same time, women and girls also have unique challenges dealing with the impacts of food insecurity and climate change due to gender norms and gendered access to resources.⁶⁹ Climate change and conflict are inextricably linked as compounding crises that undermine past development gains while threatening future outcomes. In situations of conflict and crisis, during which affected populations rely on humanitarian assistance and other aid to meet their basic needs and begin the challenging process of recovery and resilience, USAID must design our efforts to address the distinct needs of women and girls.

The meaningful participation of women stakeholders in conflict prevention and resolution efforts enables a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers of conflict and facilitates more effective and inclusive negotiations and agreements. Women can play a critical role in building the foundation for a political solution to the conflict and can provide crucial insights on the gendered effects of the conflict that require specific attention in negotiations and peace agreements. The participation of women in all phases of the solution development and negotiations can enable the creation of comprehensive, effective agreements and lay the groundwork for more inclusive implementation that contributes to lasting peace and security.

PROMISING APPROACHES

Promising approaches to bolster women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention and mitigation efforts include:

1. Encourage the inclusion of women leaders and organizations in preventing conflict and promoting stable, lasting peace around the world, including through support for women-led initiatives to prevent and fight extremism.
2. Address the distinct challenges women and girls face in conflict- and disaster-affected areas.
3. Promote the protection of women's and girls' access to humanitarian assistance and their safety from violence, abuse, and exploitation.
4. Promote the integration of women into security and governance mechanisms, including disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration processes.
5. Recognize and address the relationship of gender inequalities—such as GBV—with violent extremism and conflict, and support researchers and/or investigative journalists to collect information and empirical data.
6. Increase traditional media and social media's narratives and stories on the distinct experiences of women and girls in conflict- and disaster-affected areas.

Box 9. Women, Peace, and Security

Recognizing that countries are more peaceful and prosperous when women have full and equal rights and opportunity, the United States enacted the [Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017](#), and the [U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security \(WPS Strategy\)](#), supported by [USAID's Women, Peace, and Security Implementation Plan](#). Investing in women's empowerment and leadership helps break cycles of conflict and instability that threaten global security and undermine countries' abilities to thrive. To work toward this, the WPS Strategy identifies three separate, yet interrelated, strategic objectives:

1. Women are more prepared and increasingly able to participate in efforts that promote stable and lasting peace.
2. Women and girls are safer, better protected, and have equal access to government and private assistance programs, including from the United States, international partners, and host nations.
3. U.S. and partner governments have improved institutionalization and capacity to ensure WPS efforts are sustainable and long-lasting.





Photo: International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) Indonesia



DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE

There is a direct link between the health of any democracy and the ability of all members of a society to participate freely in politics and public life without suffering discrimination or reprisal, regardless of their gender identity. This includes the participation of women and girls in formal political and peace processes and informal avenues (e.g., participation in labor associations, civic activism, the media, and defending human rights). Research demonstrates that women's political empowerment is essential to building and sustaining strong, non-corrupt, and inclusive democracies.⁷⁰ Formal political institutions are more democratic and responsive to citizens' needs when the institutions include meaningful women's representation.⁷¹ New data also reveal that increased women's mobilization in civil society tends to align with positive trends in democratization; the reverse is also true.⁷² This shows that increasing gender equality is not only a crucial human rights issue, but an imperative for global democratic resilience.⁷³ Furthermore, although research on linkages between LGBTQI+ inclusion and democracy is nascent, there is a clear link between higher levels of human rights protection for all citizens and democracy.⁷⁴

Corruption. Corruption is a key factor in the disproportionate harms that women and girls face. Corruption creates a lack of equitable access to services (as women are often less able to pay bribes when required to do so to access services), increases sexual exploitation (as "sextortion" is used as a form of corrupt abuse of power), allows greater impunity for GBV (where law enforcement and judicial systems are captured and allow perpetrators to go free in exchange for a bribe), is a barrier to women's economic empowerment (as women and other new entrants to the economy struggle to compete in economies dominated by oligarchy and

collusion), and is a barrier to women's political leadership (as "pay to play" systems reward entrenched power structures and male-dominated parties).

Women and Girls in Politics and Public Life. The rights of women and girls have advanced in the quarter century since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, but progress has been slow and increases in women's leadership have been met with backlash. The rate of representation of women in national parliaments around the world gradually increased from 15 percent in 2002 to 23 percent in 2021.⁷⁵ For candidates with intersectional marginalized identities, however, including minority LGBTQI+ candidates, gains have been smaller due to several layers of stigma derived from their gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and racial identities.⁷⁶ For example, of the 45,913 parliamentarians in office in the world as of September 1, 2020, only 245 (0.5 percent) identify as LGBTQI+. While surveys consistently show that women constitute the largest proportion of the LGBTQI+ population, women only make up 26 percent of the LGBTQI+ national parliamentary cohort.⁷⁷ Furthermore, increased women's representation within these institutions does not automatically translate into increased political power, as women's leadership is often hampered by the patriarchal norms and rules of the institutions within which they sit.⁷⁸ In addition, women are still overrepresented in "social" ministries and parliamentary committees and inadequately represented in security, economic, and defense bodies within governments, which tend to be seen as men's purviews.⁷⁹

Women's leadership in social movements has expanded significantly, which has proven to be an important catalyst for democratic change.^{80,81} Unfortunately, a high degree of gender equality within movements does not always lead to the same level of representation in negotiated settlements or ensuing governing structures.⁸²

As a result, women remain grossly underrepresented in decision-making worldwide at the local, national, and international levels and across all branches of government and the security sector.^{83,84} Women continue to be marginalized in peace negotiations and face significant obstacles as media professionals and civic activists. Their mobilization is often met with harsh resistance, including violence both in the physical world and online.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing economic and social barriers to women's political participation, emboldening anti-democratic leaders to close political space and roll back hard-won gains in gender equality.^{85,86} This backlash is often part of a concerted effort to control political outcomes and maintain patriarchal power hierarchies that benefit autocratic leaders and illiberal governance.^{87,88}

PROMISING APPROACHES

The disempowerment of women and girls in politics and public life is rooted in entrenched societal norms that are codified in political, legal, and financial institutions resulting in systemic gender inequality.⁸⁹ Promising approaches to advance gender equality and empower women:

1. Address the causes and consequences of patriarchal power structures within political organizations that limit, deter, and/or exclude women's full political participation within these institutions.
2. Address barriers to women's and girls' full and meaningful participation in politics and public life across the entire political ecosystem, including those at the individual, institutional, and societal levels.
3. Build the pipeline of civic-minded and/or politically interested women and girls, while simultaneously working to create a favorable environment to facilitate their representation, leadership, and agency.
4. Transform harmful gender norms by working directly with male political and traditional leaders to encourage and build their support for women's political empowerment and gender equality in politics and public life.
5. Address violence against women in politics and public life in both the physical world and online.
6. Reduce corruption by building the capacity of women leaders to advocate for open governance; adapting reporting mechanisms that make it easier for women to report corruption; and disrupting the links between illicit finance and anti-gender-equality movements.

Box 10. Barriers to the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Politics and Public Life

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL BARRIERS can include a lack of access to necessary skills, such as a basic education or political experience. These barriers can also take the form of freedom of movement and time poverty.

INSTITUTION-LEVEL OBSTACLES include discriminatory legal frameworks and electoral practices that make it more difficult for women to run for office and participate in public life. In addition, legal requirements surrounding proof of identity to vote can pose insurmountable challenges for women, including trans women, who often do not have a form of identification that matches their gender identity.

AT THE SOCIETAL LEVEL, gender norms and attitudes regarding women's and men's roles in public life and decision-making benefit pre-existing power structures in which men are the majority decision-makers. These gender norms are intentionally upheld, including through violence directly targeting those who deviate, and are manipulated to drive illiberal political agendas.



DIGITAL ACCESS AND TECHNOLOGY

The rapid development and adoption of digital technology is transforming how people gain access to information, goods, and services. Digital technology has the power to spur economic growth, improve development outcomes, and lift millions out of poverty. Evidence shows that digital technology can facilitate greater access to markets for women entrepreneurs. For example, the increased availability of mobile money has enhanced women's use of a range of financial products and services that they were not previously able to access.⁹⁰ However, women and girls do not have equal access to the transformative benefits of digital technology. Even where there is physical access, harmful online norms may create virtual exclusion from digital spaces, as digital technologies amplify pre-existing forms of GBV through their scale, speed, and reach. These contribute to a gender digital divide that, if not addressed, promises to exacerbate gender inequality further as fewer goods, services, opportunities, and information become available from non-digital sources.^{91,92,93} Furthermore, as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) proliferates, the inequitable design, use, and impact of AI-enabled tools reinforces harmful or discriminatory gender norms, creating a double digital divide.

The Gender Digital Divide. Women and girls are further marginalized when they are excluded from the benefits of fair and safe digital technology access and use. This is especially true for women and girls with intersecting marginalized identities (e.g., Indigenous, disabled, living in poverty, living in rural communities, refugees, and migrants). Although efforts have been made to close the gender digital divide, progress has been slow. According to a 2021 Alliance for Affordable Internet report, the gender digital divide has only decreased by half a percentage point since 2011, dropping from 30.9 percent to 30.4 percent.⁹⁴

Moreover, there is growing evidence of algorithmic amplification of discrimination and harmful norms.⁹⁵ Men are adopting digital technologies at a faster rate than women, and this trend has accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁶

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV). Women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals disproportionately face online threats and harassment. TFGBV is carried out using the internet or information and communication technologies by one or more people to harm others based on their actual or perceived sex or gender identity. This can include, but is not limited to, online harassment, cyberstalking, child sexual exploitation and abuse, online gendered disinformation and misinformation, and non-consensual image-based abuse.⁹⁷ In addition to causing harm, TFGBV can discourage women, girls, and gender-diverse persons from engaging in the digital ecosystem.

PROMISING APPROACHES

Persistent and growing gaps in equitable access to and meaningful use of digital technology significantly hampers the ability of women and girls to take advantage of digital technology to improve their own lives and increase the stability and resilience of their families and communities.⁹⁸ It is therefore critical to address the key barriers women face in accessing and adopting digital solutions. Promising approaches to address gender-based barriers within the digital ecosystem include:

1. Foster social norms and cultural perceptions that are supportive of safe and equal access to digital technology.
2. Cultivate women's skills and confidence in using a range of digital technology.
3. Create offline networks for women engaged in digital work or commerce.

4. Foster an equitable and inclusive digital ecosystem, including by dismantling gender biases embedded in the design and use of digital technology, including AI technology.
5. Support laws and regulations to hold technology platforms and individual perpetrators accountable for TFGBV.
6. Encourage technology companies to adopt safety-by-design practices that mitigate risk for TFGBV, protect privacy, reduce algorithmic bias, and enable reporting and response mechanisms for TFGBV.



Photo: USAID



ECONOMIC GROWTH

Gender inequalities run across economic systems, acting as barriers to the realization of individual human rights and aspirations and to poverty reduction and economic growth.

Prosperity through Gender Equality.

Gender equality improves the well-being of women and their families and advances inclusive economic growth.^{99,100,101} The most significant source of untapped economic growth potential is unemployed and underemployed women: closing the gender gap in the global workforce could add \$28 trillion to global GDP.¹⁰² Research also demonstrates the economic benefit of gender equality within companies, funds, and e-commerce trade activities.^{103,104} For instance, if women's engagement in e-commerce trade equaled men's engagement in Africa alone, the e-commerce market could increase by nearly \$15 billion from 2025 to 2030.¹⁰⁵

Gender-Based Barriers to Growth.

Evidence shows that gender inequality drives poverty and impedes economic growth.¹⁰⁶ Restrictive gender norms limit women's mobility, financial and bodily autonomy, labor participation, sense of self-efficacy, bargaining power, and access to education and credit.^{107,108} Barriers to economic opportunity include harmful practices and discriminatory social and gender norms, including child marriage, gender bias in lending practices, lack of access to markets, and GBV, including sexual harassment in the workplace.¹⁰⁹ The overall cost of intimate partner violence is an estimated 5.18 percent of global GDP, including medical and judicial expenses and lost productivity.¹¹⁰ research found that in Sub-Saharan Africa, a 1 percent increase in the share of women subjected to violence can reduce economic activity by up to 8 percent.¹¹¹

Worldwide, 2.4 billion women of working age still lack equal economic opportunities, and in only 12 countries do women have legal equal economic standing with men.¹¹² After losing ground during the COVID-19 pandemic—when women were disproportionately pushed out of the labor force—estimates suggest it will take 267.6 years to close the gender economic opportunity gap at the current rate of change.¹¹³

Women face numerous barriers to well-paying, high-quality employment and decent work. Women are disproportionately represented in the informal economy and low-wage occupations, including the care economy, and often in unsafe conditions without the protection of labor rights. Women are also vulnerable to external shocks such as conflict and migration, pandemics, and climate change, which exacerbate economic inequality: during such events, women and individuals who experience overlapping marginalized identities may face increased risk of losing jobs, livelihoods, businesses, and productive assets.¹¹⁴ Access to finance is a key obstacle to women's economic security; the credit gap for formal women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises across all regions is roughly \$287 billion.¹¹⁵ Another significant barrier to women's labor force participation is the lack of safe and affordable childcare options; the International Labour Organization estimates that 300 million jobs could be created in the care industry to address this need.^{116,117,118} Women and girls are also overlooked as key consumer or client market segments,¹¹⁹ and advertising can reinforce gender stereotypes.¹²⁰

PROMISING APPROACHES

1. Promote women's access to skills and training to participate in the economy; decent jobs in the formal economy; labor and social protections; and other support needed to compete and work safely.
2. Incentivize government and private-sector investment to expand access to care in the care economy, including child, elder, and health care, and universal early childhood education.
3. Strengthen protections for care workers in the informal and formal economy.
4. Invest in businesses that prioritize women's contributions as leaders, employees, entrepreneurs, and consumers.
5. Advance trade and investment opportunities for women-owned, -led, and -managed businesses.
6. Close gender gaps in the digital economy and in access to banking and financial services.
7. Address discriminatory social norms, laws and regulations, and employer policies and practices related to women's equal access to and control over assets needed to participate fully in the economy, such as land, property, and natural resources.
8. Prevent, mitigate, and reduce GBV and sexual harassment in formal and informal workplaces, as well as to and from the workplace.



Photo: USAID



Photo: USAID

Box II. Science and Research

Women scientists and researchers in low- and middle-income countries face many barriers to their full potential in academia and industry.¹²¹ Women are significantly underrepresented in science and research fields, comprising only 33 percent of all researchers globally and 12 percent of membership in national science academies.¹²² This varies by region: women account for 45 percent of researchers in Latin America and the Caribbean, 41 percent in Arab States, 31.8 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 23.8 percent in East Asia and the Pacific.¹²³ Obstacles in the workplace are similar to those facing women in other sectors: part-time and precarious work, sexual harassment, lower pay, higher teaching and/or administrative workload, and cultural restrictions with respect to mobility and family responsibilities. In addition, women are often pressured to take on additional responsibilities that have significant career costs without contributing to the likelihood of advancement.

The lower rates of women—as well as of gender-diverse individuals—in influential research, policymaking, and funding-related positions limits their contributions to scientific advances in international development and increases the risk of gender bias in international development research. Gender bias often results in research that does not provide evidence about how well policies, programs, products or services, and/or interventions meet the needs and affect the well-being of women and gender-diverse individuals. In addition, greater inclusion of women as participants in research is needed, so that data and analytic practices can better elucidate the unique needs and preferences of women and examine the outcomes of programs on these groups. Failure to do so can result in ineffective or even harmful programs and policies.¹²⁴



Photo: USAID



EDUCATION

Improve educational outcomes for women and girls. To overcome mounting global challenges such as climate change, crisis and conflict, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, all people must be supported to succeed in safe, equitable, and inclusive education systems; potential future leaders must not be denied their right to education on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Through education, children and youth gain the foundational knowledge, academic and social-emotional skills, and mindsets to advocate for themselves and others, challenge harmful gender norms, and create more just societies. All learners—especially girls—need powerful women role models who will advocate for their needs with high levels of influence. USAID supports women’s increased leadership in education systems at international, national, and individual institution levels.

Promote equitable gender norms. Despite progress, learners and educators continue to face gender-based discrimination and oppression, especially adolescent girls, girls and women with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ individuals.¹²⁵ Multiple aspects of a person’s identity, including SOGIESC, disability, race, and age, intersect with barriers to education, such as child, early, and forced marriage and unions, disproportionate responsibilities at home, GBV, and discriminatory policies, to decrease that person’s likelihood of benefiting from education systems. USAID promotes education that seeks to transform harmful stereotypes, attitudes, norms, and practices.^{126,127}

Eliminate gender disparities. Gender inequality in education is multidimensional and varies across and within countries. Globally, boys are more likely to be enrolled in primary school than girls,¹²⁸ but learning poverty rates (defined as the proportion of children unable to read and understand a simple text at ten years of age) are higher for boys than for girls in all regions and almost all countries of the world.¹²⁹

In secondary schools, the gender gap disadvantages girls in some regions, and boys in others.¹³⁰ Growing rates of secondary completion for girls have not necessarily led to an equivalent increase in workforce participation.¹³¹ In higher education, women are still only 35 percent of all students enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and medical fields.¹³² Women are overrepresented in the global teaching staff at lower education levels, while their presence is markedly lower in higher education faculty, school management, and education policymaking.¹³³

Most data about gendered educational outcomes do not reflect the experiences of minority language users, persons with disabilities, or LGBTQI+ individuals in USAID’s partner countries. USAID understands that education programs are most effective when they account for gender-related challenges in order to meet the unique needs of learners and educators in each context.

Eliminate GBV and mitigate its harmful effects. The relationships that learners form with peers and educators can be protective, particularly when there are high levels of



violence or instability in the community or home. Safe learning environments provide essential services such as school feeding programs and service referrals for survivors of GBV. However, research shows a prevalence of three types of school-related gender-based violence:¹³⁴ 1) bullying and other forms of non-sexual intimidation; 2) corporal punishment; and 3) sexual violence, including harassment and abuse. Minimum estimates indicate that more than 115 million children and adolescents experience school-related gender-based violence every year.¹³⁵ Data from 13 country-level studies showed the percent of learners who experienced school-related gender-based violence ranged from 8–45 percent of females and 9–54 percent of males. The same data showed females generally experienced higher rates of sexual violence than males, while males experienced higher rates of physical violence than females.¹³⁶ Globally, 42 percent of LGBTQI+ learners report being “ridiculed, teased, insulted or threatened at school” because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, primarily by their peers, and 37 percent report feeling rarely or never safe at school.¹³⁷ Of the many learners who experience violence in educational settings, few disclose their experiences, fewer seek services, and only a small proportion receive services.¹³⁸ The considerable range in the prevalence and types of school-related gender-based violence between countries underscores the importance of context-specific data and evidence-based violence-prevention policies and programs.¹³⁹ USAID recognizes that physical, emotional, and mental safety is a prerequisite for learning and works to ensure that all learners and educators are treated with dignity and respect.

PROMISING APPROACHES

Approaches for advancing gender equality in and through education¹⁴⁰ should be tailored to the local context and deployed in a manner that is appropriate for the age and development of the participants.

1. Address the cost of schooling.
2. Provide food in school or as take-home rations.
3. Provide accessible sanitation facilities and menstrual health and hygiene resources.¹⁴¹
4. Promote diverse women’s leadership in education.
5. Promote an educator workforce that reflects the diversity of the population and support educators to deliver pedagogy that seeks to transform inequitable gender norms.¹⁴²
6. Collaborate with diverse communities to create and promote safe and inclusive in-person and distance-learning environments.
7. Use preferred pronouns and other inclusive terminology and ensure that information related to self-identification, general health, sexual health, relationships, and family formation is inclusive of LGBTQI+ individuals.
8. Supply gender-equitable educational materials that are accessible to all, including persons with disabilities.
9. Work across sectors to ensure holistic support for adolescent girls, including efforts to counter child, early, and forced marriage and unions and provide evidence-based and age and developmentally-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education for all.



Photo: Morgana Wingard / USAID

Box 12. Gender Dimensions Across the Life Course

A life-course approach considers human needs across life stages, including the complex interplay of gender, sex, age, social norms, life events, and physical, emotional, and brain development. While experiences of life events differ based on culture, norms, and environmental factors, social expectations around gender shape people's experiences and outcomes.

For example, vast gender differences exist in employment opportunities, pay, expectations, and working conditions, which have different impacts at different ages, costing economies billions of dollars.¹⁴³ Similarly, becoming a parent is a significant life event that affects the development, opportunities, and life courses of parents in ways that often differ markedly based on their gender identities and life stages and leads to differential impacts on their children.

USAID's approach to programming analyzes the unique but intertwined experiences, challenges, and opportunities people experience during different ages and life stages (see USAID's [Youth in Development Policy](#)).¹⁴⁴ Understanding the changing implications of gender across life stages is a priority for USAID because it helps inform contextually relevant programming that minimizes risks and improves development outcomes.

Although stages of human development may look different depending on context, different life stages and gender dimensions can interact to affect outcomes. In the early years, sex and gender affect both physical development and cognitive, social, and emotional development of very young children. During adolescence, gender disparities in access to basic services, such as education and health care, may widen, particularly affecting adolescent girls and gender-diverse individuals. In the later years, age and the cumulative impacts of lifelong gender disparities lead to differences in poverty rates, health outcomes, access to needed care, and abuse of and violence against older adults.



Photo: USAID



Photo: USAID



ENERGY, MINING, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

A lack of access to energy can lock women and girls into poverty and affect all areas of their lives. A shortage of women's leadership in the clean-energy sector may undermine low-emission development goals.¹⁴⁵ Women's empowerment in artisanal and small-scale mining can contribute to poverty alleviation, national revenue generation, and foreign exchange earnings. Workforces tend to be male dominated in these sectors, with limited access to opportunities for women in formal employment, especially in technical and leadership roles. Corruption risk is particularly high, so it would be useful to acknowledge that for women to provide input during planning and project implementation stages, advocates (and USAID) will need to address the underlying corruption that perpetuates the exclusion of citizens' voices and the capture of natural resources for private or political gain.

Women play critical roles in transforming these sectors in their roles as entrepreneurs, innovators, and decision-makers. Numerous studies show the business benefits of diverse leadership and workforces. Increasingly, institutions recognize the value of integrating women into the formal energy workforce.

Yet, despite this recognition, women still make up only a small percentage of the workforce: 32 percent of the renewable energy sector's workforce and 22 percent of jobholders in the energy sector overall.¹⁴⁶ This is often because of restrictive, harmful gender norms and discriminatory policies and practices within energy, mining, and infrastructure organizations.

The following themes demonstrate how energy, mining, and infrastructure are closely intertwined with gender equality and women's empowerment:

Energy Access and Electrification. Improved access to energy, including electricity, leads to improved income, health, and education outcomes and can reduce poverty. Safety for women and girls also improves when their homes and public spaces are well lit and they have access to clean cooking and heating solutions. Women and girls can spend hours per day collecting firewood for cooking and lighting needs and to earn extra income for the family; during these trips, they are vulnerable to GBV. Household air pollution from inefficient cooking and lighting causes premature death in more than four million people per year. Women and girls are disproportionately affected, as they are primarily responsible in many countries for cooking in the home.¹⁴⁷



Photo: C. Gutierrez / USAID

Mining. Artisanal and small-scale mining techniques are used to extract a variety of minerals, including those for the clean-energy transition. Women are estimated to represent 30–50 percent of the global artisanal and small-scale mining workforce, but their needs, particularly the need for greater regulation and protection from unsafe working conditions, as well as more equitable pay structures, have been largely overlooked by governments and donors.¹⁴⁸ In addition, large-scale mining is not gender neutral, as women and girls experience disproportionately negative impacts and are often excluded from decision-making around mining projects. In the context of both industrial and small-scale mining, as with many large-scale extractive practices, women human rights defenders and women in surrounding communities also face higher risks of violence, particularly GBV. Furthermore, insecure or unrecognized land and natural resource rights, especially among Indigenous women, may restrict economic benefit to and benefit from mining activities and the clean-energy economy more broadly.

Infrastructure. Access to safe infrastructure for all people is key to a population’s health and overall socioeconomic well-being. Women and girls and gender-diverse individuals often face limited access to infrastructure (including roads, waste management, public transportation, etc.) because of poor design or social norms and laws that restrict their equitable use of infrastructure.

Including women, gender-diverse individuals, and youth in the design and planning phase of programs is essential to ensure that projects meet the needs of all people.¹⁴⁹

Economic programs can support gender equality by actively recruiting and training women and girls to take advantage of economic opportunities in traditionally male-dominated fields related to infrastructure projects. Finally, safeguards must be in place to prevent GBV and trafficking in persons that can emerge around infrastructure projects or from the poor design of public infrastructure.

PROMISING APPROACHES

1. Promote transformative policies that advance gender equality in the energy sector through organizational change management approaches that address recruitment, human resources policies, and training and education.
2. Create economic opportunities for women energy entrepreneurs, including through providing training, capacity building, and direct funding.
3. Design programs and policies addressing GBV in energy, mining, and infrastructure sectors.
4. Support behavioral change and communication campaigns that address harmful gender norms, advance gender equality, and increase acceptance of women’s participation in energy and mining sectors, especially through engagement with men and boys to champion women’s participation.
5. Promote women’s secure access to and use and ownership of land and property, including mining rights.



Photo: Power Africa / USAID



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

GBV is any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived sex, gender, gender identity or expression, sex characteristics, or sexual orientation, and/or lack of adherence to varying socially constructed norms around masculinity and femininity.¹⁵⁰ Although individuals of all gender identities may experience GBV, women, girls, and LGBTQI+ individuals face a disproportionate risk of GBV across every context due to their unequal status in society.^{151,152} GBV is rooted in structural gender inequalities, patriarchy, and power imbalances. Across its many manifestations, GBV is a human rights violation and a barrier to civic, social, political, legal, and economic participation. It is prohibited under international humanitarian law.

Types of GBV. GBV includes physical, sexual, economic, and psychological abuse; threats; coercion; arbitrary deprivation of liberty; and economic deprivation, whether occurring in public or private life, in person, or in a digital online space. Importantly, it is an umbrella category that encompasses different types of violence, including, but not limited to, child, early, and forced marriage and unions; child sexual abuse; female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); gender-related killing of women and girls, including “femicide” and female infanticide; so-called “honor”-based violence, including acid attacks and killings; some forms of human trafficking; intimate partner violence, including domestic and dating violence; reproductive coercion, including forced sterilization; sexual exploitation and abuse; sexual harassment; stalking; all forms of sexual violence, including sexual coercion, conflict-related sexual violence, rape (including marital rape; so-called “corrective” rape related to actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression; rape as a weapon of war), and forced or coerced physical examinations (including virginity testing); and all forms of technology-facilitated gender-

based violence (TFGBV), including gendered online harassment and abuse. Other types of violence that can be gender-based include: abandonment, bias-motivated violence or hate crimes; bullying; child abuse, including corporal punishment; elder abuse; and so-called “conversion” therapy practices that seek to change or suppress a person’s gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, or sex characteristics. GBV negatively affects the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities; impedes public health goals; thwarts access to education; contributes to economic instability, including lost household productivity and reduced income; and threatens security and democratic gains.

Prevalence and Risk Factors. GBV cuts across identity categories and social statuses, including but not limited to age, disability, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic class, religion, education level, and citizenship status. Perpetrators of GBV operate in a variety of social locations, including the family, the public sphere, workplaces, schools, religious institutions, and via digital technologies, with TFGBV often crossing from digital spaces to in-person experiences.

Despite decades of work by governments, civil-society organizations, multilateral organizations, and tenacious advocates, GBV remains a pervasive global problem, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating rates.^{153,154} The World Health Organization estimates that one in three women globally has experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime,¹⁵⁵ and in some communities the percentage can be much higher. Intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence experienced by women worldwide; women killed by intimate partners or family members account for 58 percent of all female homicide victims reported globally.¹⁵⁶ GBV rates, especially for men and boys, are often underreported due to harmful gender norms that dissuade them from reporting.¹⁵⁷

Members of some populations also face overlapping forms of discrimination that put them at even higher risk of GBV, including but not limited to Indigenous Peoples; marginalized racial, ethnic, and religious populations; displaced persons; LGBTQI+ individuals; persons with disabilities; sex workers; domestic workers; and persons in fragile and conflict-affected states.

LGBTQI+ individuals also face heightened risks for GBV.^{158,159} This includes the prevalence of corrective rape, forced anal examinations, nonconsensual disclosure of identity, and other forms of GBV. Violence is often directed at these groups because they are perceived as departing from norms that dictate gender expression and sexual behavior.

Children and youth are particularly vulnerable to violence, especially sexual abuse. More than one in ten girls under age 20, or approximately 120 million worldwide, have experienced forced sex, or other forced sexual acts, at some point in their lives.¹⁶⁰ A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) study found that girls and young women with a disability face up to ten times more GBV than their non-disabled peers.¹⁶¹ Global data show that boys are also at risk for sexual violence and are at higher risk for physical violence, including fights and peer bullying.¹⁶² Boys are also more likely to face physical punishment in households and

schools as a form of discipline. Both witnessing and experiencing violence can lead to intergenerational violence, with increased likelihood of perpetration of violence in adulthood, particularly as a means of discipline and control.¹⁶³

GBV against older adults is widespread, but it receives comparatively less research and public advocacy focus compared to GBV perpetrated against youth and younger adults. Perpetrators include intimate partners or spouses, family members, caregivers both in homes and institutional settings, and community members. Older women are more likely than their male counterparts to live in poverty, which increases their vulnerability to violence and limits their abilities to leave an abusive partner or household.¹⁶⁴

In the context of humanitarian crises, emergencies, and climate-related disasters, women and children are often the most vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and abuse because of their gender identity, age, and status in society.¹⁶⁵

PROMISING APPROACHES

Although statistics on the prevalence of GBV vary, the scale is tremendous, and the consequences for individuals, families, communities, and countries are devastating. Despite the scope of the issue, there are proven strategies to prevent, mitigate, and respond to GBV effectively.¹⁶⁶ These include:

1. Expand the provision of high-quality, survivor-centered GBV response services addressing health, psychosocial, shelter, economic, and legal needs in humanitarian and development settings.¹⁶⁷
2. Pursue structural interventions to improve the creation, implementation, and enforcement of laws and shift harmful gender norms and beliefs.^{168,169}
3. Reduce acceptance of GBV and promote more gender-equitable norms across individual, household, community, and institutional levels.^{170,171,172}
4. Engage local, women-led, and women's rights organizations, community influencers, and men and boys to achieve transformational change.^{173,174}



Photo: Power Africa / USAID

Box 13. A Global Issue: Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions

Child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU)¹⁷⁵ are forms of GBV that are enabled by gender norms, power imbalances,¹⁷⁶ the devalued status of girls, poverty, and lack of access to free and equitable education. CEFMU are a human rights violation that undermines efforts to address sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, food security, poverty eradication, HIV/AIDS, and gender inequality and women's and girls' empowerment.

- From 2008 to 2018, CEFMU among women and girls decreased by 15 percent.¹⁷⁷ Although the rate of CEFMU is declining, the absolute number of girls married before the age of 18 remains alarmingly high and continues to grow. Every year, one in five girls is married before the age of 18, equaling nearly 12 million girls annually around the world.¹⁷⁸ Eighteen of the twenty highest-prevalence countries globally are in Sub-Saharan Africa, whereas the countries with the absolute largest numbers are in South Asia. Family and social structures can be particularly vulnerable in conflict-affected and fragile states, as well as during mass migration and resettlement. In times of political and social uncertainty and humanitarian crises, family, social, and legal networks tend to break down. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened earlier gains achieved to decrease CEFMU.¹⁷⁹ During such times of precarity, families may feel added financial pressures to marry off their children, with young girls being married off at disproportionately higher rates than boys. LGBTQI+ children are also victims of forced marriages by families who do not accept their gender identity or sexual orientation.^{180,181}
- Globally, 115 million boys and men were married before age 18.¹⁸² Although child grooms face different challenges, early marriage can lead to reduced education or economic opportunities. It can also force the child groom to face fatherhood at an earlier age, increasing the pressure of performing masculine norms of protection and economic provision for the household and perpetuating these norms for future generations.¹⁸³
- Married girls are at a higher risk of domestic violence and social marginalization than their unmarried peers. Married girls are less likely to complete their education, have access to health care or information, or opportunities for skills building and employment. On average, the likelihood of a girl marrying as a child is six percentage points less for every additional year she stays in secondary education.¹⁸⁴ These negative outcomes affect not only the girls but also their children and households.
- A large percentage of adolescent pregnancies occur in the context of CEFMU. Child brides often experience pressure to become pregnant quickly and are at increased risk for adverse maternal and newborn outcomes (e.g., obstructed labor, obstetric fistula, preterm birth, hypertension in pregnancy, infection, sepsis).¹⁸⁵ Children born to adolescent mothers are more likely to die during or after childbirth, or to be small for gestational age.



Photo: USAID



GLOBAL HEALTH

Over recent decades, significant strides have been made in improving health and well-being, particularly in life expectancy, fertility, and mortality. However, gender inequality continues to constrain positive health outcomes for all individuals. Gender-related power imbalances limit women's and girls' health decision-making and their access to and use of health services, contributing to excess female morbidity and mortality. Men and boys also experience health inequities, such as higher rates of tuberculosis and gender-related disincentives to utilize health services. Harmful gender norms affect men and boys by encouraging risk-taking and limiting health-seeking behaviors. Norms that sanction gender inequalities and GBV increase risks for unplanned pregnancy, childbirth complications, maternal mortality, transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and poor mental health outcomes.¹⁸⁶ These and other challenges persist and worsen the health and well-being of women and girls, men and boys, LGBTQI+ persons, persons with disabilities, Indigenous populations, and families across the life course. The examples below demonstrate the strong links among gender equality, women's empowerment, and health outcomes.

Family Planning and Reproductive Health (FP/RH).¹⁸⁷ Internationally agreed principles established at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development have centered sexual and reproductive health (SRH) programming, including voluntary family planning, on the rights of individuals and couples to decide their family size and avoid unintended pregnancies.¹⁸⁸ Access to voluntary family planning reduces maternal mortality and improves women's and young people's opportunities for education, employment, and full participation in society. The broad benefits of family planning and reproductive health services enable advancements in health, economic well being, human rights, and civic and political participation.

Despite significant improvements, some 218 million women worldwide would like to avoid pregnancy but are not using a modern contraceptive method. This lack of access to family planning, may lead to unintended pregnancy, complications from unsafe abortion, delayed antenatal care, and poor pregnancy outcomes.¹⁸⁹ Inequitable gender and power dynamics limit women's and girls' access to high-quality voluntary FP/RH information and services and their agency to decide whether and when to have sex, with whom, and/or whether and when to have children and how many.¹⁹⁰ Harmful gender norms and GBV can also limit couples' communication and cooperative decision-making. Furthermore, approximately 12 million girls aged 15–19 give birth each year in developing regions, and many lack access to education and economic opportunities, agency around the conditions of marriage, contraceptive use, or the timing of pregnancy and access to high-quality voluntary family planning services.¹⁹¹

Gendered barriers also prevent men from using and/or supporting women's use of contraception. Negative attitudes rooted in perceptions about men's and boys' role in reproductive health can also prevent men from seeking and receiving full care. In addition, inequitable gender norms act as barriers to men and boys supporting their partners' reproductive goals.¹⁹² Using rights-based and developmentally appropriate approaches to address gendered barriers across the life course helps to promote safe, healthy, and equitable relationships; ensure access to high-quality voluntary family planning services; and support all individuals to make and act on informed choices about their reproductive lives without fear or violence.

Maternal and Child Health. Inequality between women and men contributes to increased levels of female morbidity and mortality across the lifespan. Adolescent pregnancy, especially among very young adolescents, is associated with significant risks for both mother and child (see Box

13).¹⁹³ Women who experience intimate partner violence in pregnancy are 16 percent more likely to suffer a miscarriage and 41 percent more likely to have a preterm birth,¹⁹⁴ and are more likely to experience depression and anxiety disorders. Injuries from sexual violence, including labor and delivery complications, can contribute to reproductive tract fistulas, which profoundly undermine a woman's health, well-being, employment, education, and social status. In addition, disparities persist in maternal health: specifically, complications from unsafe abortion remain among the leading causes of maternal morbidity and mortality globally.

Nutrition. The nutrition and food-security needs of women and children are often neglected at the household level because of social, cultural, and economic inequalities between men and women. Women are more likely than men to be affected by hunger. In societies that favor sons, girl children receive less or lower-quality food.¹⁹⁵ Some countries hold traditions in which women eat last, after all the male family members and children have been fed. Women are more likely to suffer from nutritional deficiencies than men, due in part to low social status and inequalities in income and education. Burden of household work and other sociocultural disparities can also increase women's chances of being malnourished.¹⁹⁶ Worldwide, 50 percent of pregnant women are anemic, and at least 120 million women are underweight, which is associated with increased risk of illness or death.¹⁹⁷

HIV/AIDS. Structural barriers to HIV epidemic control are rooted in gender inequality, unequal power relations, and unrelenting stigma and discrimination. Adolescent girls and young women face an increased vulnerability for HIV acquisition when compared to their peers; globally, there are 20 million women living with HIV, and young women ages 15–24 are 2 to 14 times as likely to acquire HIV as males of the same age.¹⁹⁸ Boys and men are less likely than girls and women to know their HIV status, initiate or remain on lifelong treatment, or attain viral suppression. Additionally, members of key populations and gender and sexual minorities, including LGBTQI+ individuals and men who have sex with men, experience high levels of gender-related stigma, discrimination, and violence that affects HIV outcomes. Research has shown that exposure to, or perpetration of, violence is a proximate determinant of HIV acquisition and transmission,¹⁹⁹ and exposure to GBV, particularly intimate partner violence,

is associated with lower use of antiretroviral therapy; 50 percent lower odds of self-reported adherence to treatment; and significantly worsened viral suppression among women.²⁰⁰ Holding gender-inequitable beliefs—particularly norms sanctioning violence against and control of women—decreases the odds of antiretroviral therapy use among people living with HIV.²⁰¹ Advancing gender equality and ending GBV, including violence against children, is essential to achieving sustained HIV epidemic control.

Infectious Diseases and Pandemics. Biological differences between males and females affect vulnerabilities to infectious diseases; for example, pregnancy increases the risk for morbidity and mortality associated with malaria and zika.²⁰² Cultural and societal gender norms surrounding workplace and caregiving roles have a differential impact on the transmission of infectious diseases such as Ebola and Neglected Tropical Diseases.²⁰³ The impact of stigma-related barriers associated with tuberculosis diagnosis also differs between men and women because of their effects on health-seeking and treatment-retention outcomes.²⁰⁴ During pandemics, as seen with COVID-19, women can experience exacerbated inequalities, job losses, economic stress, GBV, and unmet health care needs.^{205,206}

Health Systems and the Health Workforce. For health systems to remain responsive and effective,²⁰⁷ they must evolve to ensure equitable access to respectful, client-centered health care for all people. This includes addressing restrictive gender norms and inequalities within the health system, tackling systemic barriers blocking full participation of women in the health workforce, and addressing the specific health needs of LGBTQI+ communities. This includes expanding pathways to formality and professionalization of informal health cadres, including community health workers key to advancing health goals and women's economic security.

Globally, women comprise up to 70 percent of frontline workers in formal and informal health care delivery. Therefore, women are disproportionately at risk of exposure and the deleterious effects of shortages of sanitary medical supplies, personal protective equipment, hygiene supplies and facilities, and livelihood support for health care workers. Women health workers carry a high burden of unpaid work and face safety concerns including harassment, GBV, and other gender-related barriers that negatively

affect the workforce and service quality. Addressing GBV and discrimination through worker protections paves the way for leadership opportunities and career advancement among women.

PROMISING APPROACHES

Health programs that address gender-based barriers to access and utilization of care as well as other sociodemographic factors for individuals, couples, and communities should integrate transformative and culturally sensitive approaches into social and behavior change (SBC) interventions and health systems and policies, while applying evidence and technical experience across multiple societal levels. These efforts should be implemented by and in collaboration with local organizations and stakeholders and should leverage community knowledge and expertise.

Promising approaches to address gender-based barriers within the health ecosystem include:

1. Implement transformative SBC and service delivery interventions that engage women, men, and gender-diverse individuals in mutually reinforcing ways to shift inequitable gender norms, increase health decision-making agency, and encourage healthy behaviors.

2. Strengthen health services to provide integrated, client-centered, respectful, gender-affirming, and high-quality care.
3. Strengthen the health workforce through gender-equitable decent work, fair remuneration, and workplace safety from abuse and other forms of violence.
4. Prevent and respond to GBV and violence against children within households and communities.
5. Promote and support health-related laws, policies, and accountability mechanisms to advance gender equality and reduce violence within communities and institutions.

These efforts can help ensure that all people, especially the most marginalized and underserved, can exercise their rights; live free from violence, stigma, and discrimination; utilize high-quality health services; practice healthy behaviors; build equitable relationships; and, ultimately, live in a healthier and more equitable world for all.



Photo: USAID



Photo: ©WFP / Cesar Lopez Balan



HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

In 2022, 274 million people needed humanitarian assistance and protection, a significant increase from 235 million in 2021, already the highest figure in decades.²⁰⁸ Disasters and crises amplify existing gender inequalities and exacerbate other vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls and those who are part of the LGBTQI+ community; children; persons with disabilities; Indigenous, ethnic, and religious minorities; and older people. To fulfill the humanitarian mandate of targeting and providing services to those most at risk, humanitarian actors must look to address these multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities in program design and implementation.

Gender Inequality in Emergencies. On average, natural disasters result in the deaths of more women than men.²⁰⁹ For women and marginalized populations, crises can result in exclusion from lifesaving care and lead to underrepresentation in decision-making processes related to relief and recovery. Girls, especially adolescent girls, experience increased risks of various forms of violence, exploitation, and abuse; their needs are often unmet by interventions designed for children and adults.

Harmful gender norms also adversely affect boys. During humanitarian crises, boys are vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups and to trafficking for the purposes of sex or labor exploitation. If labor needs increase, boys are more likely to be taken out of school.

In emergency settings, women and girls—particularly adolescents—are more likely to experience acute food insecurity. Women and girls represent more than 60 percent of people facing chronic hunger.²¹⁰ When food is scarce, women and girls bear the brunt of negative coping mechanisms, including child marriage, sex-selective feeding, child labor, and transactional or survival sex, as well

as increased risks of trafficking and sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers.

In addition, unpaid and underpaid care work is further exacerbated during humanitarian emergencies, with increased demands placed on women and girls. Coping mechanisms for care in crises can lead to increasingly vulnerable situations for women and girls, including girls having to leave school to tend to home responsibilities, increased physical and mental burden on women and girls, and higher rates of GBV. Emergencies also tend to disproportionately disrupt women's livelihoods, with women-led businesses being particularly affected, as women often operate with lower margins, carry unequal care burdens, and experience more tenuous access to resources.²¹¹

Women and girls in crisis situations face inequitable or unsafe access to health services, including voluntary reproductive and maternal health care, and water, sanitation, and hygiene support, including menstrual hygiene materials. Reproductive health problems are a leading cause of death and ill-health among women and girls of childbearing age globally. During conflict and natural disasters, access to health services often decreases while reproductive health needs increase. As an essential component of humanitarian health response, addressing reproductive health is critical to saving lives and improving the well-being of these crisis-affected populations.

GBV in Emergencies. GBV is a daily reality in all contexts, but the risk of GBV increases exponentially in times of crisis. Women and girls are at risk of multiple forms of GBV, including intimate partner violence; sexual violence; sexual exploitation and abuse; and child, early, and forced marriage and unions. Rates of intimate partner violence perpetrated against women and girls in conflict-affected settings are consistently higher than rates of non-partner sexual violence, and one in five women in humanitarian settings is likely to experience sexual violence.^{212,213}

These forms of GBV consistently and undeniably occur during all emergencies, from the earliest days of a crisis through decades of protracted displacement. However, GBV remains underreported because of exposure to secondary risks, stigma or fear of retaliation, limited access to trusted service providers, impunity for perpetrators, and lack of awareness of the benefits of seeking care. GBV risk mitigation and response are critical interventions in all humanitarian emergencies.

Women's and Girls' Leadership in Crisis. Despite their heightened vulnerability in disasters, women often serve as first responders and play a central role in the survival and resilience of their communities. Research indicates that women's engagement in disaster risk reduction strategies often helps focus attention on the needs of vulnerable groups, such as young children and persons with disabilities, in sudden-onset emergencies.²¹⁴ When women and girls are at the center of humanitarian aid and crisis responses, they can contribute to the assessment, design, implementation, and monitoring of assistance. When they are prioritized in strategies and approaches, their specific needs and potential vulnerabilities are understood and supported.

PROMISING APPROACHES

Humanitarian responses may perpetuate barriers to women's meaningful participation, offering them few opportunities to engage in decision-making and leadership and exposing them to amplified risks, violence, abuse, and discrimination. While humanitarian assistance is typically not designed to address the underlying causes of women's and girls' exclusion, recent interventions demonstrate promising approaches to enable transformative work and women's meaningful participation. They include:

1. Center women's and girls' specific needs and priorities in all humanitarian planning and programming processes through meaningful and systematic consultations with women and girls.
2. Involve local and national women-led organizations in humanitarian decision-making through participation in the Humanitarian Country Team, clusters, and other coordination platforms.
3. Create enabling systems for women-led organizations to access funding as directly as possible, including through Country-Based Pooled Funds, to ensure their abilities to deliver lifesaving aid to their communities.

4. Prioritize the safety of women and girls by funding and programming GBV prevention and response interventions and ensuring the prioritization of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse from the start of all humanitarian responses.
5. Utilize an intersectional approach to consider how people's identities and experiences exacerbate marginalization and affect their abilities to respond to and recover from crises. Embed relevant programmatic and mitigation measures to address these considerations.



Photo: Jake Lyell / MCC



LAND AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

Globally, women are often the primary laborers and users of land, yet their rights to land and resources such as forests, livestock, and trees are often not recognized, and women's rights to property, such as housing, moveable property, or inventories, may likewise not be recognized. This is despite the fact that rural women's equal rights to own, manage, use, and dispose of land are recognized by international human rights law.²¹⁵ When these rights are secure, the results include higher economic gains, improved access to markets, new entrepreneurial opportunities, increased empowerment to make household decisions, more efficient and sustainable land use, increased agricultural investment and production, and improved food security.²¹⁶ In some contexts, women's secure and documented ownership of land may also improve their access to credit or to commercial supply chains.²¹⁷

Women's secure access to—and use and ownership of—land and property is particularly important in cases of divorce and widowhood to support children and prevent loss of housing and land. When inheritance or family laws and gender norms create barriers to women and girls securely owning marital or family property, they are vulnerable to forcible displacement, GBV, and land-grabbing from in-laws and others.²¹⁸ Research also shows that the next generation of women experience larger benefits from gender-equitable inheritance rules.²¹⁹ Given the continued relevance of customary governance systems in many areas where USAID works, it is important to engage with traditional leaders and their communities to affect change related to women's land rights.

Women, Land Rights, and Food Production.

Women's secure rights to land are essential for food production and sustainable, more stable livelihoods. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization reports that “[f]ewer than 15 percent of agricultural landholders around the world are women and 85 percent are men. The largest gender inequalities in access to land are found in

North Africa and the Near East, where only around 5 percent of all landholders are women.”²²⁰ More recent research on the topic of women's land ownership finds significant differences in levels of ownership. These range from a reported low of 2 percent in the Middle East and North Africa to a high of 54 percent in three countries: Burundi, Cambodia, and Rwanda.²²¹

Globally, land rights are often dependent on natal and marital affiliations. At least 60 percent of countries still discriminate against daughters' rights to inherit land and non-land assets in either law or practice.²²² The resulting insecurity undermines economic and social benefits, as land rights provide economic access to key markets and social access to non-market institutions, such as household and community-level governance. Land rights can support women's economic independence and bargaining power and reduce vulnerabilities to harmful behaviors, such as transactional sex.²²³

PROMISING APPROACHES

In many countries, persistent gaps in the equitable control, ownership, and decision-making regarding land, natural resources, and property remain. However, recent interventions offer lessons about what can work to secure women's land tenure and property rights as well as improve land and resource governance. Promising approaches include:

1. Support efforts to draft and adopt gender-equitable land and natural resource laws and policies and develop gender-responsive guidelines and methodologies to implement them.
2. Strengthen women's participation in land and natural resource governance institutions and in spaces where land-related decisions are made.
3. Work with the private sector to support women's land rights and bring more women landholders into supply chains.
4. Take steps to mitigate potential backlash, including GBV, associated with shifting power dynamics as women gain more influence and resources.



Photo: USAID



WATER SECURITY, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE

As of 2020, an estimated one in four people lacks safe drinking water in their homes, nearly half the world's population lacks safely managed sanitation, and three in ten people cannot wash their hands with soap and water at home.²²⁴ By 2050, more than 5 billion people will lack sufficient water at least one month per year, up from 3.6 billion today.²²⁵ Increasing water insecurity disproportionately affects women and girls, including Indigenous women, who are the primary managers and users of the resource. These conditions compromise dignity, menstrual health and hygiene, and nutrition and create vulnerability to GBV.²²⁶ Lack of access to water security, sanitation, and hygiene also affects women's and girls' educational and employment opportunities, physical and psychosocial health, and agency.

Globally, women and girls are largely responsible for water collection in households due to inequitable division of household labor and a lack of agency.²²⁷ Poor sanitation creates additional care work and affects their health, safety, education, and livelihoods.^{228,229} Norms that target hygiene promotion exclusively to women add to their caregiving burden, perpetuate inequitable gender roles,²³⁰ and limit the positive health impacts of handwashing by excluding members of a household.²³¹

Improved water, sanitation, and hygiene in health facilities is a leading demand of women worldwide,^{232,233} but nearly two billion people use a health facility that has no access to water or sanitation.²³⁴ Approximately 540 million children attend schools without drinking water or basic sanitation, while 802 million cannot wash their hands with soap and water at school; this contributes to school-related gender-based violence, poor menstrual health and hygiene, absenteeism, and drop-out.²³⁵ Sex-segregated latrines are the global norm

but may exclude gender-diverse individuals or put their safety at risk—these potential harms can be mitigated by including them in program design and implementation. Women and girls with disabilities may also find increased difficulty accessing or using water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities that are not designed with their needs in mind.

Women make up only 18 percent of employees in water utilities on average, both because of gender norms and legal barriers.^{236,237} This highlights an opportunity to improve both women's economic empowerment and the capacity of service providers by creating job opportunities in the sector.²³⁸

PROMISING APPROACHES

Water security, sanitation, and hygiene services have a proven positive impact on gender equality and women's empowerment. Households with piped water spend 80 percent less time collecting water, instead spending this time tending to kitchen gardens, caring for children, or working outside the home. These households also report improved psychosocial well-being.²³⁹ Promising approaches include:

1. Strengthen national, municipal, and local system capacity to deliver equitable water and sanitation services, including through governance and financing reforms.
2. Engage women and gender-diverse individuals alongside men in planning and managing inclusive water policies, programs, and institutions, and collaborate with water and sanitation service providers to improve their abilities to train, hire, retain, and promote women and other underrepresented groups.
3. Collaborate with local organizations led by and for women and LGBTQI+ persons to develop latrine design and location recommendations that increase accessibility, affordability, and safety.

4. Work with national and local governments to incorporate universally accessible basic and safely managed sanitation requirements into laws, policies, regulations, and standards, and establish enforcement mechanisms.
5. Provide puberty, menstruation, reproductive health, and menopause education and training.
6. Support women and gender-diverse individuals to access credit and banking services needed to start their own water, sanitation, and hygiene products and maintenance enterprises.
7. Support inclusive and accessible social and behavior change messaging on water, sanitation, and hygiene, and on confronting menstruation stigma and cultures of silence on menstruation.
8. Raise awareness of the GBV risks associated with water, sanitation, and menstrual health and hygiene and provide training to water security, sanitation, and hygiene partners in GBV first-line response and referral.

Box 14. Menstrual Health and Hygiene

Approximately 500 million people worldwide face barriers to managing their menstruation in a safe, healthy, and dignified manner. These barriers include insufficient or inaccessible knowledge, information, menstrual hygiene and pain management products, latrines, water for washing, and social support. Insufficient access to menstrual hygiene products increases the risk of transactional sex for menstrual hygiene supplies.²⁴⁰ Poor menstrual health and hygiene has significant psychosocial impacts, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and self-efficacy, loneliness, disengagement from class or training, difficulty sleeping, and withdrawal from public life.^{241,242,243,244}

Up to 80 percent of adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries report limited knowledge and understanding about menstruation prior to reaching menarche.²⁴⁵ Women report that insufficient or inaccessible latrines and lack of an enabling environment for menstrual health and hygiene in workplaces leads to lower productivity and higher absenteeism.²⁴⁶ Holistic menstrual health and hygiene interventions in workplaces and a supportive environment from male colleagues and supervisors have been shown to increase job satisfaction.²⁴⁷

Menstruator- and disability-friendly latrines, which include lights and locks for safety and privacy, unobstructed access, waste bins for disposable pads, water, soap, and space for washing or changing clothes, are essential to enabling menstrual health and hygiene. Evidence indicates that latrine upgrades may account for a significant portion of the benefits to businesses of workplace menstrual health and hygiene initiatives²⁴⁸ and mitigate school-related gender-based violence and girls' absenteeism and drop-out,²⁴⁹ in addition to protecting health and dignity.

Holistic approaches to menstrual health and hygiene contribute to self-efficacy, education, psychosocial well-being,²⁵⁰ economic empowerment of menstruators, positive youth development, and environmental protection objectives. Promising approaches are outlined in detail in [USAID's Menstrual Health and Hygiene \(MHH\) Technical Brief](#).



Photo: USAID



Photo: © ICCA Project/ Bimala Rai Colavito

CONCLUSION

USAID reaffirms that gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment are fundamental for the realization of human rights and key to effective and sustainable development programs. The Agency seeks a world in which women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals all enjoy equal rights. To achieve this vision, USAID is committed to fostering more flexible, adaptive, and creative approaches to engaging new and diverse partners. Strengthened systems, tools, and resources will help the Agency to advance gender equality and women's empowerment across all sectors in which USAID works. Doing so depends on the contributions and collective commitment of our entire workforce and leadership across the Agency.

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