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Gender and Growth: Africa's Missed Potential

In the study *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?* (World Bank 2000), we argued that Africa has enormous unexploited potential. It has hidden growth reserves in its people, especially its women, who now provide more than half the region's labor but lack equal access to education and factors of production. We concluded that gender equality can be a potent force for accelerated poverty reduction in Africa.

There is increased recognition of the relevance of gender for development work in Africa. In this region, we addressed the linkages between gender, growth, and poverty in the 1998 Poverty Status Report prepared for the Strategic Partnership with Africa (SPA) (Blackden and Bhanu 1999). This helped to frame the gender debate in terms of economic growth and productivity, that is important in terms of development effectiveness, and not just in terms of social equity—although equity considerations are important, too.

Men and women in African economies

A distinguishing characteristic of Sub-Saharan African economies is that both men and women play substantial economic roles. Much of African economies is in the hands of women—agriculture and

the informal sector in particular. But women in Africa have less access to productive assets, including land, and to such complementary factors of production as credit, fertilizer, and education. Women farmers receive only 1 percent of total credits to agriculture. Women are less likely to control the product of their labor than men, reducing their incentives to pursue productive, income-earning opportunities, despite the increasing evidence that income earned by women is more likely to be used productively for family needs: food, clothing, health, and education.

African women work far longer hours than men. On average, their workdays may be 50 percent longer, and their work is closely integrated with household production systems. Indeed, the boundary between economic and household activity is less well drawn in Africa than in other regions. In addition to their prominence in agriculture, women bear the brunt of domestic tasks: processing food crops, providing water and firewood, and caring for the elderly and the sick, this latter activity assuming much greater significance in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The time and effort required for these tasks, in the almost total absence of even rudimentary domestic technology, is staggering. Surveys of rural



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travel and transport patterns in villages in Burkina Faso, Uganda, and Zambia have found that African women move, on average, usually via headloading, 26 metric ton-kilometers a year (especially water and fuel wood), compared with less than 7 metric ton-kilometers for men. This, combined with women's contribution to agriculture, has led to estimates that women contribute about 2/3 of the total rural transport effort.

Gender inequality limits growth

Country case studies throughout Africa—and emerging macroeconomic analysis—consistently show that gender-based inequality acts as a constraint to growth and poverty reduction. They point to patterns of disadvantage women face, compared with men, in accessing the basic assets and resources needed to participate fully in realizing SSA's growth potential. Gender differences in access to assets limit the options of women farmers; differences in labor remunera-

tion lead to conflict and to sub-optimal labor allocation at the household level; and differences in labor (and other factor) productivity limit economic efficiency and output. These gender-based differences affect supply response, resource allocation within the household, and labor productivity. They have implications for the flexibility, responsiveness, and dynamism of African economies, and directly limit growth (see box). These differences are too important to ignore, and their impacts too severe, especially given Africa's chronic food insecurity and vulnerability.

Gender-inclusive growth

Africa is losing out on the productive potential of more than half its effective workforce. Measures to increase gender equality in Africa, in addition to their social and distributional implications, have considerable potential to accelerate growth and poverty reduction. More needs to be done to ensure gender equality in access to productive

assets and services. In addition, patterns of capital formation tend to be biased against investments, such as wells and fuel-efficient stoves, which have the potential to unlock more female time for high-productivity activities and education.

Public policy has a key role to play in promoting gender-inclusive growth and poverty reduction. Key policy measures to promote gender-inclusive economic growth in Africa include the following:

Promoting the increased participation of poor men and women in economic decision-making

One promising approach, related to economic management and priority-setting, is the development of "gender budget initiatives." South Africa has gone far in pioneering this work. Gender budgets examine the efficiency and equity implications of budget allocations and the policies and programs that lie behind them. This would encourage public spending priorities to focus on investment in rural infrastructure and labor-saving tech-

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nologies, as indicated below.

Investment in gender-inclusive growth

Agricultural growth strategies, especially policy, research, extension, and technology development, need to support the livelihood strategies of smallholder households. The key policy priority is to break through the asset poverty of women farmers. Agricultural institutions need to treat women farmers as priority clients, and develop outreach systems to them. The right mix of assets, including land, labor, technology, and financial services, is critical to ensure that women can fully contribute to Africa's growth and development. Policy needs to focus on the food crop sector where there is an urgent need for more women-focused integrated packages. This would give a different dimension to what agricultural technologies are developed, what crops/tasks are prioritized, what extension messages are created and delivered and by whom, what research priorities are pursued, and, most importantly, how all of these will be done in ways that really reach Africa's women farmers.

Investment in the household economy and in raising labor productivity

Efforts could include giving much higher priority in national poverty reduction strategies to investments which reduce the acute time burdens on African women. This could be done through providing clean, accessible water and fuel wood, and prioritizing labor-saving technology, to reduce the time burden of domestic work. Time savings in these activities will benefit women most. Transport interventions need

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Burkina Faso: Shifting existing resources between men's and women's plots within the same household could increase output by 10–20 percent.

Kenya: Giving women farmers the same level of agricultural inputs and education as men could increase yields obtained by women by more than 20 percent.

Tanzania: Reducing time burdens of women could increase household cash incomes for smallholder coffee and banana growers by 10 percent, labor productivity by 15 percent and capital productivity by 44 percent.

Zambia: If women enjoyed the same overall degree of capital investment in agricultural outputs, including land, as their male counterparts, output could increase by up to 15 percent.

Macroeconomy: Gender inequality in education and employment is estimated to have reduced SSA's per capita growth during 1960–62 by 0.8 percentage points per year.

Source : Various studies, cited in Blackden and Bhanu 1999.

to reflect the different needs of men and women, to improve women's access to transport services (including intermediate means of transport), commensurate with their load-carrying responsibilities. Improvements in rural infrastructure can raise the incomes of the poor, particularly women, through several mechanisms: a) *Reducing the time spent collecting water and fuel wood.* The time freed can be used for leisure or for productive purposes such as education or agricultural activities. There is evidence that a significant portion of time saved is used productively. b) *Increasing crop production.* Agricultural output can benefit, particularly where bulky, low-value crops are involved. For example, trucks can be hired to move bulk harvests, fertilizer can be moved to villages and stored in local facilities, and hired farm labor can move more readily to the fields. c) *Improving marketing opportunities.* Isolated rural communities have great difficulty marketing their crops. Crops can be moved in bulk by trucks, but also in smaller quantities by cart or bicycle if adequate roads or paths are available. d) *Expanding access to social services and non-*

agricultural income-generating activities. These include health clinics, for which travel time can be reduced, and travel from peri-urban locations to work in services and construction in the urban informal sector.

In parallel, it is critical to invest in girls' education, to ensure gender-inclusive land policy and legislation, and to build women's skills and capabilities aimed at enabling their greater participation in household, community, and national decision-making, where investment priorities and resource allocations are defined. At present, only one in four rural girls attends primary school, let alone completes it.

Making gender issues visible in data and analysis

Statistics and indicators on the situation of women and men in all spheres of society are an important tool in promoting gender-inclusive growth. Gender statistics have an essential role in eliminating stereotypes, in formulating policies, and in monitoring progress. Key tasks are the systematic sex-disaggregation of data, including economic

production data, integration of intra-household and gender modules in statistical surveys and poverty analysis, expanded use of gender budget initiatives, greater use of country-focused time budget surveys, and the inclusion of the household economy and home-based work in national accounts.

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