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FOCUS

Empower women

In many places, female humans face oppression and discrimination. With harmful impacts on the common good, their right to self-determination is neglected. Women must be empowered in every sphere of life. Education and employment are good starting points for challenging outdated gender stereotypes. The goal is to set in motion virtuous cycles, with self-assured women serving as role models – and ultimately increasing opportunities for society as a whole.

Title: Women's rights activist in Lima, Peru.

Photo: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com / Carlos Garcia





 **Our focus section on women's empowerment starts on page 17 and pertains to the UN's fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG5): Gender equality. It also has a bearing on all other SDGs.**

faster than expected. India's government recently reported that its nation's women now only have two children on average, which is slightly below the reproduction rate. India's population will thus probably peak in three decades at around 1.6 billion people rather than ten years later at 1.7 billion.

Declining birth rates correlate with better health care, better education and, of course, better access to contraceptives. Women must be able to take their fates into their own hands, so access to abortion matters too.

Education is a good starting point for empowering women, but more must happen. In the 20th century, pioneering women launched successful careers in politics, business, academia, the arts and other spheres of life. Girls around the world thus have role models who have proven that women can achieve as much as men. Nonetheless, many still face intimidation. While boys still tend to get more opportunities, girls are more exposed to sexual harassment and shaming. Women's rights activists want to improve matters – and the common good depends on their success.

Promoting the common good

Gender justice is not an issue only women should care about. It concerns society in general.

Where women are excluded from – or marginalised in – political life, relevant views are not expressed and the talent pool, from which leaders are recruited, is diminished. Where women do not take part – or only get minor roles – in economic life, productivity is low and too few people generate incomes. Where, by contrast, girls have equal opportunities in education, they normally do at least as well as boys – and often outperform them. Every human being must be empowered to tap her or his potential.

Around the world, gender stereotypes still tend to be oppressive, though progress is evident. Currently, the top leaders of the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization are women. Women lead the governments of Bangladesh and Tanzania, and Honduras has just elected a female president. In Germany, eight of the 17 new cabinet members are women. Our previous cabinet was led by one.

Many cultures restrict women's role to taking care of family and household matters. The background may be the fundamental biological difference between men and

women. Only the latter can give birth and breastfeed. Women's reproductive health is more complex than men's, and they are particularly vulnerable when pregnant or nursing a baby. Ideas of male dominance are probably rooted in women's particular need for protection and men's on average greater physical strength. Major religions, including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, reinforced such ideas. Vulnerability, however, does not justify oppression.

Norms change over time. What may have been useful in the past, can become dysfunctional. It made sense to have many children when child mortality was high. Things look different where life expectancy is high, and every baby will probably grow up to be an adult. It becomes less attractive to have many children, but there are more incentives to invest in them early on – both in emotional and financial terms.

Around the world, birth rates have gone down as life expectancies went up. This trend is of crucial global relevance. Most likely, the world population will grow to 11 billion people by the end of this century. In environmental terms, fewer would be better, while more would mean disaster. The good news is that the growth rate may be decreasing



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Around the world, quite a few men know that gender justice does not only concern women, but society in general. Mabingué Ngom is one of them. His job is to represent the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to both the African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa. We take pride in his essay on why the future of the Sahel region depends on women's empowerment and in what sense gender stereotypes make its multi-dimensional crises worse.

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► You'll find all contributions of our focus section plus related ones on our website – they'll be compiled in next month's briefing section.





Anti-coup rally in Khartoum in mid-November.

SUDAN

Uncertain journey

Sudan's civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok is back in office after an attempted military coup. Civil-society activists, however, are unhappy with the agreement Hamdok struck with the generals.

By Roli Mahajan

In late October, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan tried to seize control of Sudan. He dissolved the government, imposed a state of emergency and had several ministers arrested, including the prime minister. That looked like the end of the power-sharing agreement according to which the military and civilian policymakers were supposed to cooperate on a long-term transition to free elections.

Burhan apparently wanted to return to the past. The military dictator Omar al-Bashir ran the country for 31 years until the spring of 2019. Bashir's rule ended because of a popular uprising. In view of mass protests, military leaders toppled him and, after considerable manoeuvring, struck the deal to establish a hybrid government with civilians in the summer of 2019.

When news of the new coup spread in October, thousands of people took to the streets in the capital Khartoum. Once more,

the military was unable to suppress the pro-democracy movement. Even violent repression did not intimidate the opposition. After more than 40 people were killed, Hamdok was set free in late November, and Burhan signed a new power-sharing agreement with him.

Several of Hamdok's former ministers, however, refused to rejoin the cabinet. Most likely, some of them would not have been allowed to stay on. Critics point out, this agreement gives the military a stronger role than the previous one did. Ministers must now be technocrats, not politicians. In contrast to the initial deal, moreover, a general is still overseeing the hybrid government. For these reasons, many civil-society activists say they do not appreciate Hamdok's decision. The prime minister can no longer claim to represent those who want democracy. It is uncertain how Sudan's journey towards that goal will end. Attempts to establish elected governments proved short-lived in the past. That was so after Sudan gained independence from Britain in 1956 and again in 1964 and 1986. Every time the military took control. From 1989 onwards, Bashir's rule proved to be particularly brutal. His reign of terror included:

- a bloody civil war against South Sudan's independence movement,

- genocidal atrocities in the Darfur region and
- support for Osama Bin Laden's extremist al-Qaeda Islamism.

The International Criminal Court's prosecutor indicted Bashir in 2008, accusing him of rape, murder and extermination. The ICC even issued an arrest warrant. He was the first – and so far remains the only – serving head of state or government with that kind of infamous international exposure.

The cruel autocrat eventually lost South Sudan, which became a sovereign state in 2011. Important oil resources are there. Bashir was never popular in Sudan, but he led the country during a long oil boom. In spite of western sanctions, oil revenues helped him to create a powerful network involving the armed forces and, to some extent, accommodate urban middle classes.

TOPPLING BASHIR

By 2018, the economy was in tatters. Fuel, food and even bank notes were in short supply. Sparked by the soaring bread price, a peaceful opposition movement arose, with young people, women and young professionals in particular expressing their frustration.

The military top brass saw that Bashir's days were numbered and deposed him in a bloodless coup in April 2019. After some machinations, General Burhan was sworn in as the new interim president. He promised to root out the military government, prosecute crimes done during its rule and hand over power to civilians.

Bashir was sent to the notorious Kobar prison and several of his leading supporters were arrested. However, all members of the top military leadership had been involved in the regime in some way, and many of them remained in positions of power. Probably the most prominent one was Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who is known as "Hemeti" and leads the brutal paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In spite of his formally junior role in the junta, many people believed that he was pulling the strings.

The protests, however, did not subside. In early June 2019, security forces killed more than 100 peaceful demonstrators, including 19 children. Shooting, looting and raping indiscriminately, Hemeti's RSF proved especially reckless.



Despite the massacre, the demonstrations did not stop. A month after the bloodshed, the generals struck an agreement with the newly-formed Forces of Freedom and Change, a coalition of civil-society activists. A joint “constitutional declaration” was supposed to pave the way to civilian rule.

It stated that power-sharing would continue for 39 months. For the first 21 months, a general would head the “sovereign council” composed of five representatives of the military, five representatives of the FFC and one civilian jointly chosen by both sides. Then a civilian leader would take over for another 18 months. Elections were promised for November 2022. As chairman of the sovereign council, Burhan became Sudan’s

de-facto president. Hamdok, an economist, who had worked for multilateral institutions such as the ILO and the African Development Bank, was appointed prime minister.

Life remained difficult in Sudan as economic hardships kept mounting. However, people now enjoyed civic freedoms. For example, women’s dress code was liberalised.

Bashir was taken to court in Sudan and was found guilty of corruption and money laundering in 2019. However, his opponents were appalled because he was not sentenced for his acts of violence. He still faces charges relating to the coup of 1989. The former dictator has not been handed over to the ICC, and observers think the main reason is that the top tier of the military fear that he might deliver evidence of their crimes to the ICC.

Families who lost members in the Khartoum Massacre, moreover, did not get justice. It is true that a few members of the RSF were sentenced to death, but their top leader Hemeti still enjoys impunity. He is probably the country’s most powerful warlord.

Economic hardship, however, is the most common grievance today. The Ham-

dok government undertook tough economic reforms, including the slashing of subsidies. Sudan thus qualified for debt relief from the International Monetary Fund, but inflation is very high and people are desperate. This summer, protest rallies expressed discontent over Hamdok’s economic policies.

In this context, the military tried to stage the October coup. It is impossible to tell what the role of Hemeti was – and what it is today. It is obvious, however, that Hamdok’s credibility has suffered a serious blow. As long as the economy does not improve, things will remain volatile. That thousands of people kept risking their lives by openly opposing the October coup shows that they are fed up with the military leadership.



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HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Tackling climate-related displacement

The climate crisis is forcing people all over the world to leave their home. A report published by the IFRC provides hands-on examples on how to manage disasters and – even more important – prevent them in the first place.

By Jörg Döbereiner

One of the worst impacts of the heating climate is that it forces people to leave their home. In a report published in October 2021, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) addresses this issue. With 192 national branches and around 14 million volunteers, the IFRC

claims to be the world’s largest humanitarian network. For at least three reasons, its report “Displacement in a changing climate” is relevant reading:

- It illustrates how climate-related displacement is happening all over the world, both in low- and high-income countries.
- It points out that crises overlap, worsening the suffering humanitarian agencies must deal with.
- It showcases specific measures taken by staff on the ground to tackle climate-related displacement in different contexts and world regions.

At the heart of the report are 11 case studies on work done by National Red

Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Australia, Fiji, Germany, Honduras, Iraq, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Samoa, Tuvalu and Yemen. The list shows that climate-related displacement affects low-income countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia as well as high-income countries like Australia and Germany. In Australia for example, from September 2019 to March 2020, bushfires drove tens of thousands of people out of their homes, including indigenous communities. In Germany, torrents caused by heavy rainfall killed at least 184 people and damaged thousands of houses in 2021.

Scientists agree that the climate crisis is increasing both the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Such events are actually causing more displacement than violent strife. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 30 million people were forced from their homes by disasters like storms, droughts, flooding or wildfires in 2020. By comparison, 9.8 million fled from violence.

MUTUALLY REINFORCING CRISES

Climate-related displacement is a global challenge, but things are particularly bad in low- and middle-income countries where, as the report points out, people are especially vulnerable. Moreover, many people face multiple crises, with natural disasters, diseases and violent conflict becoming mutually reinforcing.

Yemen, for example, has been devastated by an armed conflict for years (see Tamuna Sabadze in the Opinion section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/04). Covid-19 put the country's health system under further pressure. In both 2020 and 2021, extreme flooding further compounded the humanitarian crisis. It affected hundreds of thousands, many of whom were internally displaced persons (IDP) and were forced to flee once more. Thousands of houses were destroyed. Among other things, according to the report, volunteers from the Yemen Red Crescent Society had to:

- provide first aid,
- distribute food and hygiene items,
- assist evacuation operations and
- lend psycho-social support.

Both IDPs and host communities need support, as the report emphasises. The humanitarian intervention is therefore expected to continue for several months in Yemen.

More generally, the report states: "Community engagement has been fundamental to managing tensions in circumstances where both host and migrant populations are in situations of acute humanitarian need." For example, drought caused hundreds of Angolan citizens to cross the border to Namibia in March 2021.

They fled to areas familiar with food insecurity themselves. The case study sees a potential for conflict, especially as it is uncertain how long the Angolans will stay. To reduce tensions, the Namibia Red Cross Society has cooperated closely with the government. While the former supported the Angolan migrants, the latter provided food items and seed to the host community. Moreover, the Red Cross has been engaged in awareness raising among local people.

PREVENTIVE ACTION

The report emphasises that preventive action is important. The point is not simply to prepare to help displaced people, but to

keep the numbers of displaced people as small as possible. The small island state of Tuvalu, for example, is prone to drinking water shortages. Droughts are likely to make things worse. To facilitate timely action, the Red Cross is monitoring meteorological forecasts in order to predict the extent of water scarcity on seven islands. The goal is to understand current and likely impacts on health and livelihoods, the IFRC reports.

Disaster management is complex and usually involves many parties, including different government authorities and civil-society organisations. If they are to respond well, the law must empower them to do so. The implication is that prudent legislation is essential for effective and efficient action. The responsibilities of different parties must be defined well. Moreover, laws and regulations can provide a basis for covering the needs of everyone, including host communities, refugees and IDPs. Case studies on Malawi and Fiji show how Red Cross National Societies and IFRC's disaster law unit advised countries on how to update their disaster laws.

A core recommendation of the report is to deal with climate-related displacement in national legislation, policies and strategies. Moreover, governments should scale up action to avert climate-related displacement.

The report also recommends what donors should do. The list includes:

- providing climate-related funding in flexible and accessible ways,
- linking climate finance to humanitarian aid, development spending and disaster-risk reduction and
- supporting local communities and local organisations.

The IFRC report provides a testimony of the devastating impacts the climate crisis has on people's livelihoods, but it also inspires hope. The case studies illustrate that, by enforcing coordinated and well-prepared action at the grassroots level, governments and civil-society organisations are capable of mitigating the impacts of climate-related disasters. As global temperatures are rising, their work has only just begun.

LINK

IFRC, 2021: Displacement in a changing climate.

https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/IFRC-Displacement-Climate-Report-2021_1.pdf



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Red Cross staff prepare to distribute aid to Cyclone Idai survivors in Mozambique, 2019.

NEW FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Headline mentions “sustainability”

Germany has a new Federal Government, led by Olaf Scholz. Svenja Schulze is the new Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development. She too belongs to the Social Democrats. Scholars from the German Development Institute (DIE – Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik) have assessed the outlook.

By Hans Dembowski

DIE director Anna-Katharina Hornidge considers Schulze a promising choice. The think tank leader appreciates the new minister's international experience and involvement in sustainability issues. After all, she was the environment minister in the previous cabinet of Angela Merkel.

Hornidge also finds it reassuring that the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) will not be merged with the Foreign Office or the Ministry of Defence, as some had proposed. Hornidge argues that the BMZ is geared towards global solidarity, and this orientation must not be diluted with concerns of diplomacy or security.

Hornidge finds several things to like in the new coalition agreement. For example, the term sustainability has made it into the headline “Mehr Fortschritt wagen – Bündnis für Freiheit, Solidarität und Nachhaltigkeit” (Daring more progress – alliance for freedom, solidarity and sustainability). The scholar adds that climate awareness permeates the agreement, which is a good start, even though other dimensions of sustainability are not emphasised as much.

The development scholar appreciates that the new coalition is committed to a values-based foreign policy with a strong focus on multilateralism. The principles of democracy, human rights and diversity are coherently endorsed throughout the agreement, she says, with both the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Goals serving as points of reference. Obviously, it remains to be seen how this will translate into tangible policy-making. The DIE has a long history of endorsing both sus-

tainable development and multilateral policymaking (see Hans Dembowski in Monitor section of D+C Digital Monthly 2021/09).

According to the coalition agreement, Germany will keep its expenditure for of-



As Federal Minister of the Environment, Schulze represented Germany at the Glasgow climate summit.

Official development assistance (ODA) above 0.7% of gross national income, with 0.2% earmarked for least-developed countries. That means that either other countries will get less support or ODA must increase, Hornidge points out. The new government also states that climate finance is additional to ODA, but Hornidge admits that it is not clear how things will play out.

The DIE is a tax-funded think tank. As a tenured professor of Bonn University, Hornidge nonetheless enjoys full academic independence. Her deputy at the DIE is Imme Scholz, who is not related to the new chancellor, and will soon move on to lead the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which is close to the Greens. (Full disclosure: She is also a member of D+C/E+Z's advisory board.)

Policy coherence is difficult to achieve for any government, Scholz says. Germany's new federal government would do well to adopt a cross-departmental foreign strategy. That would help to coordinate policy-making within the EU, and it would also be useful in regard to development cooperation. Scholz argues that climate partnerships with developing countries are promising, and could be linked to the European Green Deal.

Scholz praises the coalition agreement for its evidence-based approach. Not only development efforts abroad, but military missions too will be evaluated. Further good intentions, according to her, include gender justice, international action against tax evasion and support for a new international regime for dealing with sovereign default.

Scholz points out that most federal ministries are involved in some kind of cross-border cooperation, but only the Foreign Office and the BMZ have specialists with a deep understanding of foreign nations. She stresses that international affairs must be handled with great sensitivity. While authoritarian governments must hear clear statements regarding democracy and human rights, cooperation on issues such as climate and biodiversity must not be jeopardised, she argues.

DIE director Hornidge hopes the new government will focus on issues related to sustainability, which is not a special interest issue. Since appreciation of science provides a good basis for multilateral policy-making, she says, German support for building of scientific capacities in low- and middle-income countries can help to achieve results. Respect for facts, she adds, is closely related to respect for democracy.

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FIGHTING POVERTY

Setting “fair” prices

To fight poverty at its roots, governments must ensure that employees and farmers earn decent incomes with the work they do. As market prices are often distorted, it makes sense to change pricing mechanisms.

By Ruud Bronkhorst

Many people in developing countries do not earn enough money to feed themselves and their families properly. Reasons include the low wages workers get and the low prices smallholder farmers can charge.

To fight poverty at the roots, it would make sense to change the way prices are set. Prices for agricultural produce and industrial products should be set at levels that ensure fair incomes to those who make them come about. Generally speaking, a “fair” price must cover the minimum a producer needs to cover all production costs including wages, plus a margin for investing.

Debates on pricing usually revolve around market prices, which are determined by supply and demand. In conventional economic theory, the market price is the price at which the supply of and demand for a product reach equilibrium. In practical life, however, market prices are determined by a wide range of other factors that have nothing to do with supply and demand. Indeed, market prices often diverge from equilibrium prices for several reasons:

- Some markets are imbalanced because they have only a single buyer or a few buyers.
- Prices can be distorted by subsidies, import/export restrictions and other government interventions.
- Demand of impoverished consumers, who lack purchasing power, does not figure in the equilibrium-price calculation.

Considering these distortions, policymakers should disregard orthodox ideas of so-called market pricing and pay more attention to an approach grounded in ethics and fairness. Indeed, the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights hinted at such an approach. Its Article 23 states that “everyone who works has the right to just and favour-

able remuneration”. Article 25, moreover, enshrines a worker’s “right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services”.

- A “living wage” is one that covers the costs of food (for a low-cost nutritious diet), housing (for basic healthy housing), and other essentials (schooling, medical care), plus a small margin for emergencies.
- A “living income” is the net household income level that enables farm households to afford a decent standard of living plus a margin for investments. This includes investments that smallholder farmers must make to cope with the climate crisis – in tools and seeds for different crops, for example.



Fair-trade bananas on offer in German supermarket.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which the UN adopted unanimously in 2015, point in the same direction. For example, SDG1 is “no poverty”, SDG2 is “zero hunger” and SDG8 is “decent work and economic growth”. Specific industries have adopted codes of conduct, and many private-sector companies have made pledges concerning corporate social responsibility. Most of this would be unnecessary if market pricing actually worked as orthodox economic theory suggests.

Awareness of the need to ensure a change in pricing policies is growing. Such initiatives focus on the twin objectives of ensuring a living wage for workers in manufacturing and a living income for farmers.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in 2020, 720 to 811 million in the world faced hunger. The FAO reckons that global heating may push 122 million more people, most of them farmers, into extreme poverty by 2030. In a similar vein, the World Bank has reported that “conflicts and climate change have been increasing extreme poverty for years in parts of the world”.

A BETTER APPROACH

On the upside, development agencies have been focusing on promoting fair pricing policies for several years. Examples include Germany’s GIZ, a government agency, and

Fairtrade, a global umbrella organisation co-owned by more than 1.8 million farmers worldwide. Another proponent of pricing reform is the global Voice Network of non-governmental organisations and trade unions that promote sustainability in the cocoa sector.

Reform of pricing would involve shifting the focus of price-setting to the needs of producers rather than relying on the imagined “invisible hand” of the market. In agriculture, reformers have developed models that lead to fair prices based on reference data and farm-gate prices. That would result in “living incomes” for farmers.

The fair-price approach adds up farmers’ production costs, the income level they need for decent living and their further investment needs. Next, it divides that sum by farmers’ expected yields. Obviously, a farmer might be able to generate higher yields by using better seed, adding land, installing better irrigation or applying fertiliser more effectively. The pricing calculation takes this into account, adding a margin to

the price to ensure that the farmer can make such improvements.

It would make sense, moreover, to ensure that pricing promotes sustainable land use rather than maximising unsustainable monoculture production as often happens on big commercial farms (see Susanne Neubert in the Focus section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/11). While staying focussed on social justice, fair-price research should pay more attention to this issue in future.

Setting prices in such a way does not necessarily lead to much higher consumer prices. If supply-chain obstacles are removed, household spending can often be kept stable. Typical obstacles include:

- subsidised food imports, which disadvantage local farmers,
- food aid crowding out local produce and
- bottlenecks in the marketing chain.

Governments should remove such obstacles to ensure consumers must not pay excessive prices. At the same time, they would boost smallholders’ opportunities.

It cannot be stated too often, that fair prices for manufactured goods and agricultural produce benefit society in general. Higher incomes for the lowest-paid workers mean higher aggregate purchasing power which drives economic growth. Higher wages for poor families also facilitate greater educational achievements, as parents become more likely to send children to school, including secondary education, and thus reduce child labour. The ultimate goal, of course, is to make society more just and more equitable. Everyone would benefit.



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“Economics of human rights:

Using the living income/fair price approach to combat poverty” (Cham, Switzerland, 2020: Springer Nature). He is based in the Netherlands.

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Expert advice from the Netherlands

The InfoBridge Foundation (InfoBridge) is a non-profit organisation, established in the Netherlands in 2002. Experts with long-time experience in development cooperation decided to use their knowledge to further support partners.

InfoBridge has local partners in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Pacific. There are three main categories of InfoBridge programmes:

- applied research for development,
- capacity development and learning,
- knowledge sharing and innovation.

Fair-price research is an important area of activity for

InfoBridge. The coordinator is Ruud Bronkhorst. The focus is on the methodology for calculating fair prices for smallholder farms. InfoBridge is cooperating with experts from the Living Income Community of Practice, Living Wage Lab, GIZ and other institutions.

To better support partners overseas, InfoBridge is currently preparing an online course on fair pricing approaches. It will tackle the following issues:

- why Fair Prices are important,
- how to calculate Fair Prices for different products,
- how to analyse – and close – gaps between fair prices and market prices,

- what impacts fair pricing will have on workers, producers, the local economy and the environment and

- how to assess value chains. The course will be free of charge. Donations to make

continuation of the course possible, are welcome however: support@infobridge.org. RB

LINK

InfoBridge Foundation:
<https://infobridge.org/>



Preparing a shipment of fair-trade cocoa from São Tomé and Príncipe to France.



Only a small number of Malawians fit the middle-class profile: teacher in Chiradzulu.

SHARED PROSPERITY

“The middle class is missing”

Malawi has problems of income inequality and social exclusion. Many people struggle to make ends meet, leaving little hope of a proper middle-class coming to life anytime soon.

By Rabson Kondowe

James is married and has two children who are both in private school. The family owns a car. James is a Malawian who could be considered middle class. He is well educated and works as a lecturer at a college in the city of Blantyre. He finds things tough nonetheless. “It is survival of the fittest,” he says. “Life is proving to be so expensive, and one needs to be creative in order to find an extra penny to make ends meet.”

James does not only rely on what he earns teaching at the college, which is not enough to provide for his family and pay for his children’s education: “I do other things in order to meet my expenses such as school fees, rent, car maintenance and other costs.”

He therefore also does work as a media consultant.

While there are no precise statistics on the country’s middle class, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reckoned in 2017 that 50.7% of the population lived below the poverty line and 25% even suffered extreme poverty. The small number of Malawians who fit the middle-class profile are usually found in the country’s three main cities Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu. They tend to work in government, finance, business and marketing.

Nonetheless, Betcheni Tchereni, an associate professor of economics at the University of Malawi, does not see much evidence of a middle class in Malawi. A lot of people are struggling to make ends meet he says, unemployment is very high, and a real middle class is “missing”. He admits that some people are relatively well off, but adds: “If we are to compare them to the middle class of other parts of the world, we are nowhere near a middle class.” He says the people he is thinking of in Malawi tend to

be “deep in debt”, struggle to send their children to good schools and often cannot afford decent housing.

LOW-INCOME COUNTRY

According to World Bank definitions, lower middle-income economies have a GDP per capita above \$1000. The most recent World Bank figure for Malawi is around \$600, so it is a low-income country.

Malawi is stuck in slow growth which is compounded by the unequal distribution of wealth and incomes. The challenge of reducing social disparities is huge. A history of corrupt public institutions has made matters worse.

In 2015, an Oxfam report stated the gap between the richest 10% of Malawians and the poorest 40% increased by almost a third in the years 2004 to 2011. Reasons indicated by Oxfam included a huge sovereign debt burden, a small tax base and distrusting international development partners who spent aid outside the government system. For these reasons, the government struggled to mobilise resources.

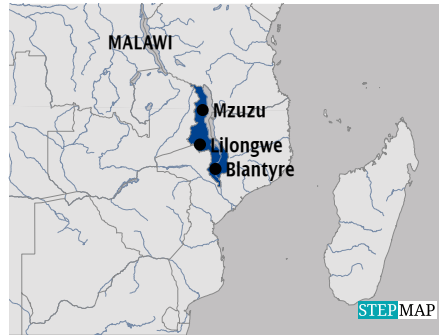
In the meantime, the courts have begun to improve governance. Most prominently, the Supreme Court annulled a manipulated presidential election. The new president, Lazarus Chakwera, has a reputa-

tion of integrity, but he has not been able to make a difference in economic affairs so far (see Rolf Drescher in Opinion section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/05).

He was inaugurated in the summer of 2020, and one of the big challenges he faces is that the Covid-19 crisis has made matters worse in Malawi. That is true in many other developing countries too (see R. Sseggujja Ssekandi in Opinion section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/12). Poverty has been spreading, especially in urban areas.

STUCK IN INFORMAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

The big problems predate Covid-19, however. The full truth is that most Malawians work in the informal sector, which includes smallholder farms. According to a 2013 Malawi Labour Force Survey, 89% were engaged in precarious employment. As is true of many African countries, Malawi needs a development model “that generates employment in the formal sector and provides a measure of income security to all”, as Ndongo Samba Sylla put it in the Focus section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/07.



Informal-sector businesses are marked by low productivity, low incomes and no social protection. Whether the businesses are involved in agriculture, manufacturing or retail services, hardly matters. Even though it is not taxed, informal activity is a recipe for poverty.

Joshua Mkandawire is a person concerned. He is 32 years old and runs a small barbershop in a low-income neighbourhood of Mzuzu. He has a wife and three children. “It’s not easy,” he says, “I do not make enough, but I’m grateful because this is better than nothing.”

His wife Catherine spends most of her days selling vegetables on the streets to make some extra money. Housing costs and the rent for the barbershop, she says, are draining her husband’s income.

Scholar Tchereni considers that the government needs to create a more fertile environment for formalised manufacturing industries, while at the same time making sure that labour laws are adhered to. “Most people are being paid below the minimum wage, we need people to be paid handsomely,” he says (also see Ruud Bronkhorst on page 8 of this Digital Monthly).

“We also need to have a lot of entrepreneurs in the country in order to reduce the income inequality gap. At the moment we have a lot of traders and not entrepreneurs.” According to Tchereni, a progressive taxation would help to distribute income from the rich to the poor.



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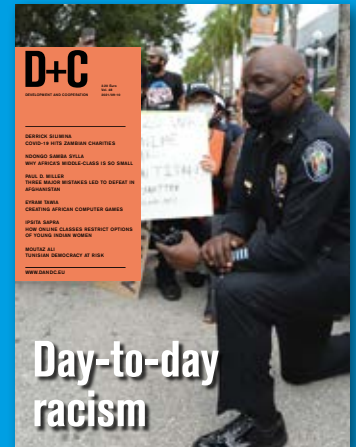


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Covid-19 crisis boosts thriving trade in moonshine

As beer halls, bars and liquor stores closed due to Coronavirus restrictions, individual entrepreneurs with illegal backyard distilleries filled Zimbabwe's demand for drink. This illicit industry existed before the Covid-19 crisis of course, and it is still going on now that bars have reopened.

Their home-made moonshine, produced in makeshift stills, is poured into empty bottles of name-brand alcohol and sold in market stalls and along roadsides. Among the new alcohol entrepreneurs who joined the trade recently is 26-year-old Forward Nyakuenda of Mbare township near Harare. He sells 200-milliliter bottles of illicit liquor for 50 US cents each.

At his market stall, Nyakuenda places bottles of home-made spirits in neat rows. The bottles bear brand-name labels such as Café-Rum, Challenger, King Stallion and Two Keys. Customers know that he is not selling the brand-name products, but do not seem to care.

His trade is clearly illegal, but police raids are of no concern. "The police just want money," Nyakuenda says. "I give them each a \$5 note every day, and they leave. They are on my payroll now." During lockdown, his booze business made \$200 to \$250 per day.

The trade has a long history – and is common in many poor countries where consumer demand is strong, but purchasing power is weak. The home-made alcohol sold by Nyakuenda and many others is known in Zimbabwe as musombodia, kachasu or tumbwa. It is a blend of alcohol and brown food colouring. There are occasional cases of poisoning due to excessive ethanol content, with people going blind or even dying.

Hilton Nyamukapa of the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network is in favour of legalising moonshine industry. "Illegal alcohol is cheap and accessible", he says, and in particular young unemployed people by it. Demand cannot be met through legal channels so far. The general experience internationally is that an illegal industry is impossible to regulate, so there can be no quality control preventing poisonings, for example.

By mid-November, about 20% of Zimbabweans were vaccinated, according to the news agency Reuters, and bars were open again to patrons with vaccination certificates, but of course, the illicit liquor trade is still going strong – and it will not go away. One of the customers, 24-year-old Teddy Gwangwava, says she drinks illicit alcohol to drown her sorrows, which include joblessness. Gwangwava also supplies illicit alcohol to others. She buys home-made alcohol in neighboring South Africa and smuggles it into Zimbabwe with the help of long-haul truck drivers.

During lockdown, owners of legitimate bars had to close. Some switched to the illicit trade, for lack of alternatives. Mike Mhike of Warren Park, a neighbourhood west of Harare, is among those who made the switch, employing runners to sell moonshine booze at street stalls in the capital city. He says that "people love to get drunk because many of them are stressed".

Lockdown restriction thrust many people deeper into poverty. The times are still tough now, even in the eyes of Zimbabweans, who have experienced many serious crises in the past decades.



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VIOLENT CONFLICT

Why the AU is dithering

The humanitarian situation in Ethiopia is desperate. In a devastating war, neither side can afford to yield. For several reasons, leaders of the African Union are silently backing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

By Alphonse Shiundu

The African Union's headquarter is in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital. Its officers are from all over the continent; they live and work in the city. That is one reason why African heads of state and government are not putting more pressure on Abiy. Nobody wants a hostile landlord, and it would be risky for the AU to challenge the Ethiopian leader in any way. The response might not be generous.

Such considerations matter, but others are more important. The presidents and prime ministers who sit in the AU's top decision-making organs, basically see the escalating conflict in much the same light as Ethiopia's prime minister does. In this perspective, the legitimate government has been fighting an illegitimate insurgency in the past 13 months. When Abiy first sent troops into the Tigray region, he spoke of a "law and order operation". The sub-national government of the TPLF (Tigray's People's Liberation Front) had defied his central government.

The backdrop is that the TPLF used to be the dominant force in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The EPRDF was an alliance of ethnicity-based rebel movements which, after years of guerilla warfare, ended the rule of military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. The EPRDF then ran the country for decades. In the spring of 2018, Abiy became its prime minister. He was its first top leader who was not from Tigray. Aware of anti-Tigrayan sentiments spreading across Ethiopia, the EPRDF certainly hoped that Abiy, an Oromo, would stabilise its power. However, he soon alienated the TPLF by dissolving the EPRDF and starting a new party.

For the leaders of other African nations, the conflict in Ethiopia looks like an

attempt of an influential former elite to grab power once more. That is what they expect opposition groups might do in their own countries. Accordingly, many feel empathy towards Abiy and quietly support him. Making matters even more complicated, Eritrea is also involved in the conflict, with President Isaias Afwerki having become Abiy's ally. At the turn of the millennium, Eritrea and then TPLF-led Ethiopia clashed in a war that claimed up to 100 000 lives. Eritrea is an AU member. It is also a brutal dictatorship.

AU leaders know, however, that they must not ignore the conflict, as that would bring into question the geopolitical relevance of the AU. Muassa Faki Mahamat, the chairman of the AU commission, therefore keeps his comments wishful, general and diplomatic. He has called on all parties to "safeguard the territorial integrity, unity and national sovereignty", asked them to "engage in dialogue" and demanded an "immediate cessation of hostilities, full respect for the life and property of civilians (...) and infrastructure". Those were good words, but carried no punch.

Perhaps one should not blame him. The fundamental challenge is that solving Ethiopia's problems is really up to Ethiopians, and both sides are extremely stubborn.

The AU has appointed Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian president, to mediate in the conflict. On the very day Obasanjo stated that "war represents a failure in politics", both sides claimed territorial victory and threatened fresh offensives to recapture lost ground or gain additional land.

Violence has been escalating dreadfully since November 2020 (see Markus Rudolf in the Opinion section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/10). The war has spread beyond Tigray, and civilians have become pawns in the battle for global opinion.

Obasanjo fully understands that neither Abiy nor the TPLF can yield to the other side. Both want victory, and neither is prepared to show mercy. Their militarised mindset was formed in the struggle against Mengistu and then further hardened during the Eritrean–Ethiopian war. Genuine dialogue is difficult, and outsiders cannot do much to bring it about.

It would certainly help if Abiy's government stopped calling the TPLF "terrorists". On the other hand, the TPLF must understand that inclusive policies result from complex and cumbersome negotiations. At this point, neither side is helping to make Ethiopia a peaceful and prosperous nation. Both sides must remember that only Ethiopians can solve Ethiopia's problems.



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At least 12 civilians died in clashes between the armed forces of the DR Congo and a local militia in Ituri province in September 2021.

DR CONGO

Election chaos looms again

Political tensions are running high in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). People doubt there will be credible and fair elections under President Félix Tshisekedi.

By Gesine Ames

The DRC will go to the polls in 2023. In the run-up to the presidential election, a controversial decision has aggravated an already tense situation. In October 2021, the Congolese Constitutional Court swore in Denis Kadima as the new president of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). He will thus play a decisive role in the conduct of the presidential election.

The CENI chief was supposed to be nominated unanimously by the country's eight main religious groups. However, Kadima was rejected by both the Catholic Bishops' Conference (CENCO) and the union of Protestant churches (ECC). The church leaders expressed concerns about his independence. In their eyes, he is the person preferred by incumbent President Tshisekedi. Supporters of the president reportedly used corruption and threats to get Kadima appointed.

Leading policymakers and pro-democracy activists have expressed criticism too. Many are concerned that Tshisekedi loyalists have also been installed as leaders of other important institutions, including the Constitutional Court, which is in charge of certifying election results.

PUBLIC PROTESTS

Even before Kadima was sworn in, Tshisekedi supporters violently clashed with supporters of opposition leader Martin Fayulu in Kinshasa, the capital city. In November, thousands of Kinshasans demonstrated peacefully against the politicisation of the CENI. In the country's south-east, however, security forces assaulted demonstrators.

The presidential election of 2018 showed what can happen when electoral bodies are not independent (see my article in the Debate section of the D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2018/05). Data from the CENI and the Catholic Church's election observation mission suggest that Martin Fayulu was the real winner of that election. However, the official outcome was different.

Back then, incumbent President Joseph Kabila was not allowed to run again, but he still controlled key institutions. "His" people at CENI and the Constitutional Court allowed him to negotiate a deal with Félix Tshisekedi. Kabila made sure the CENI confirmed him as winner of the election. In return, Kabila kept a majority for his own party in parliament and stayed in control of the security forces.

Tshisekedi ended his coalition with Kabila in early 2021 and appointed a new government. At that point, observers hoped for reform and tougher action on corruption. However, Tshisekedi's record remains disappointing. In the east of the country, violent conflicts have intensified. Martial law was declared in the provinces of Ituri and North Kivu in March, but the number of violent assaults on civilians has increased nonetheless. Pro-democracy activists have been detained, and three journalists were murdered. They were investigating the impact of martial law and army misconduct. The freedoms of assembly and expression have been curtailed.

The undefined length of the state of emergency, in particular, suggests that the DRC could descend into the kind of chaos seen in the years before the 2018 presidential election. The lack of political will to make timely preparations for the elections is a cause of concern, and so is the lack of clarity about how they will be financed.

Germany's Federal Government and EU partners have resumed cooperation with the DRC government. They should raise four key demands:

- a transparent electoral calendar,
- transparent election financing,
- admission of independent election monitors and
- respect for the democratic rights of the opposition and civil society in general.

Given that his own rise to power was questionable, President Tshisekedi needs to restore credibility to politics. Free and fair elections are indispensable.



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SOCIAL MEDIA

Masses of online trolls

An old political saying in the Philippines holds that, to win a national election, a candidate needs “3Gs”: guns, goons and gold. A new letter had to be added recently: a “T” for trolls.

By Alan Robles

Five years ago, tens of thousands of Facebook trolls helped Rodrigo Duterte win the presidential election with 39% of the vote (see my essay in the Focus section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2020/12). In spite of his bloody track record, their online propaganda cast the right-wing populist in the role of the country’s saviour. As mayor of Davao, he had been known for extrajudicial killings.

The trolls were effective for two reasons:

- Nearly 80% of 110 million people in the Philippines use Facebook. It has become part of daily life.
- Before the election, Facebook gave people free internet access on mobile devices as long as they stayed on Facebook.

This gift turned out to be poisoned. Disinformation spread by trolls has become all too common. Duterte has appointed an “influencer” with 4 million Facebook followers to several lucrative jobs. Her basic competence is summed up in her nickname: “Queen of Fake News”.

Hundreds of thousands of Duterte trolls now rule Facebook, calling themselves “Duterte Diehard Supporters”, a way of appropriating and neutralising the original meaning of DDS – Davao Death Squads, the murder groups associated with Duterte.

They make life hard for outspoken critics of the government. A stream of abuse flows through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. “Red tagging”, for example, means that opposition politicians, human-rights activists, lawyers or journalists are denounced as communists. Physical violence may easily follow. Many Duterte critics have been harassed – by security forces as well as civilians. Some have even been killed.

The trolls mobilise others in within minutes. They widely share posts to make

attacks go viral. Their continuous mocking of mainstream media undermines faith in the press. At the same time, they promote fabricated stories and push items invented by government agencies.

In 2016, Duterte’s digital disinformation came as a surprise. He was 71 years old, and there was reason to doubt he even knew what Facebook was.

He most likely had expert advice. Alexander Nix of Cambridge Analytica, the company that became infamous for digital manipulation, met three persons in Manila in 2015: one later became Duterte’s social-media director, another his campaign spokesman and the third his administration’s information undersecretary.

According to Christopher Wylie, the whistleblower from Cambridge Analytica, the company tested strategies for spreading propaganda and manipulating voters in the Philippines. Later in 2016, it used those strategies in Britain in support of Brexit and in the USA in support of Donald Trump.

Filipinos have paid a huge price. According to Human Rights Watch, some 12,000 people have died in Duterte’s so called “war on drugs”. Others reckon that up to 30,000 were killed. The International Criminal Court has launched investigations.

Duterte is accused of crimes against humanity.

Propaganda and disinformation have existed for generations, but social media now make it easy and cheap to organise, coordinate and execute what analysts call “influence operations.” Social-media platforms tend to tolerate trolling because how much money they make depends on how many users they have and how long they stay on the platform. Rage and anger keep people glued to their screens. As the author Cory Doctorow has stated, “Facebook is optimised for engagement, not happiness.”

Online disinformation is an international challenge. The most recent Facebook whistleblower in the USA, Frances Haugen, says that action must be taken to rein in disinformation on social media or otherwise the riot in the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 or genocidal action in Myanmar and Ethiopia will only prove to be the “opening chapters” of worse things to come.

In the Philippines, Facebook has promised to shore up its act. It has revealed that Cambridge Analytica stole the data of 1.17 million Filipino users. It also closed down some fake accounts and admitted that the Filipino military ran disinformation pages. The depressing truth, however, is that the DDS trolls are as active as ever. Harassment and intimidation continue.



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Anti-Facebook protest in Manila in 2019.



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Celebrating the legalisation of
abortion in Córdoba, Argentina in
December 2020.



FOCUS

Empower women

“Education and paid work boost a person’s self-confidence.” **SUNDUS SALEEMI, P. 18**

“In the absence of prior knowledge, the onset of menstruation comes as a shock.” **MAHWISH GUL, P. 20**

“Modern communication technology provides opportunities to demand change.” **MONA NAGGAR, P. 22**

“Girls are generally seen as future mothers. The role model must change.” **MABINGUÉ NGOM, P. 24**

“A Burundian saying goes: ‘He who lacks a good woman lacks wealth.’” **MIREILLE KANYANGE, P. 25**

“That the two sexes are not equal is evident in legal affairs.” **ALPHONCE SHIUNDU, P. 27**

“Dominican women would much prefer legislation to protect them.” **MARJORIE PONS PIÑEYRO, P. 29**

“Access to safe and legal abortion is very important.” **VIRGINIA CABALLERO AND MARÍA LÍA GHEZZI, P. 30**

“Disabled women often experience stigmatisation and exclusion.” **SABINE BALK, P. 32**

“Women face greater risks when it comes to fighting the pandemic.” **SABINE BALK, P. 33**



Jobs matter: women working in ceramics manufacturing in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

GENDER JUSTICE

Self-confidence matters

To achieve gender equality, women must be empowered. Exclusion, discrimination and violence must end. The challenges are complex and multi-dimensional. Formal education and access to jobs make a huge difference.

By Sundus Saleemi

Today's gender inequalities can be traced back through the millennia. Socio-cultural traditions and economic processes play important roles. Undoing the impacts is no trivial task, but feasible.

Around the world, women's disempowerment is evident in many ways. Women have fewer opportunities in regard to education, skills training and employment. Moreover, women across the world own fewer tangible and intangible assets. Even when women have the same professional competence and indeed do the same work as men, they are regularly paid less. Gender

wage gaps persist around the world. Moreover, women everywhere do a disproportionate share of care and household work.

Two other international phenomena are that:

- women's health-care needs get less attention even though they are more complex than men's and
- they are particularly exposed to violence.

While perfect equality between men and women has not been achieved anywhere, international comparisons show that the worst inequalities exist in regions of the global south. Progress requires several things:

- Women's access to tangible and intangible resources must improve.
- They must get more say in decision-making, both in private and public affairs.
- Women's and girls' well-being must be considered just as important as the well-being of men and boys.

Formal education does not solve all problems, but it is of crucial relevance. First of all, literacy and numeracy are important in themselves (see my essay in the Focus section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/04). Without them, it is neither possible to access and process new information independently, nor to manage money issues properly.

Moreover, school education hones women's cognitive and intellectual capacity. It also enables them to understand their rights and access state institutions including law courts. In a similar vein, only literate persons tend to get access to sophisticated financial services.

Experience shows, moreover, that self-confident women have a greater impact on family life, are more likely to reject sexual harassment and feel more empowered to raise their voices in public life. Progress towards gender justice thus depends on several, mutually reinforcing factors.

BETTER ACCESS TO SCHOOLS

It is obvious that girls and women deserve better access to primary, secondary and tertiary education. They continue to lag behind their male counterparts. In low- and middle-income countries in 2010, girls' enrolment rate in secondary schools was only 34%. By comparison, boys' rate was 41% (see Esther Duflo, 2012). Indeed, the gender gap in education in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa worsened from 1960 to 2010. In both regions, the median gap in boys' and girls' years of schooling was more than three years in 2010 (see Evans et al, 2020).

According to Ester Boserup, the Danish economist who is considered to be a pioneer of the field of gender and development, formal education is key to labour-market opportunities. She wrote in 1970: "As long as girls remain under the twofold handicap of a family education which suppresses their self-confidence and of training facilities in schools and elsewhere which are inferior to those given to boys, they are bound to be inferior workers."

To earn money, women must typically participate in the labour force. If they earn enough, they can begin to save and accumulate assets. History – or rather "herstory" – shows that this pattern is prevalent in societies where women's status has improved. Wherever jobs made large numbers of wom-

en more independent financially, gender disparities were reduced overall.

It is telling, for example, that East Asian countries such as Taiwan and South Korea have made more progress than South Asian ones such as India and Pakistan. Gender historian Alice Evans (2021) attributes the reduction in observed inequalities in these regions to women's participation in paid work.

VIRTUOUS CYCLE

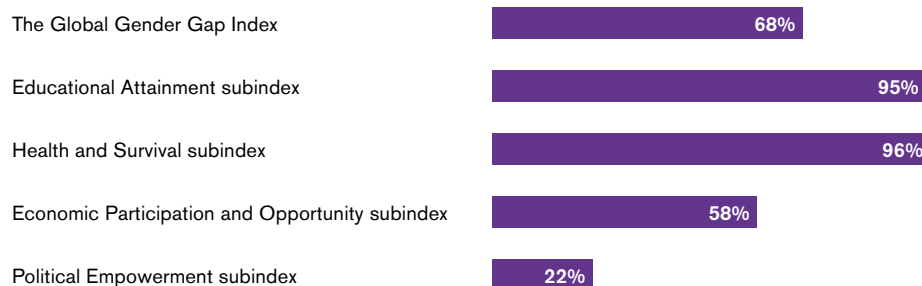
A similar trend is evident in Bangladesh, where a virtuous cycle has set in. Women's achievements in formal employment are making people more interested in girls' education, while better formal education is improving women's job opportunities. This country was long considered to be South Asia's "basket case", but it now ranks higher in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index than India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. To judge by success regarding the Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh was the regional leader as well. Its literacy rates are comparatively high, while its maternal and child mortality rates are low.

Both education and paid work boost a person's self-confidence. They thus enable women to be more assertive both in family life and public affairs. Household surveys collect information on decision-making in regard to consumption, investments and other aspects of family life. In particular, how many children a family has depends on female education, and responsible sex education is especially important (see Aditi Roy Ghatak in Opinion section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2019/05). The use of contraceptives becomes more common the better women understand reproductive health and the more self-assured they are in relations with their husbands.

The data show clearly that women's say in family life increases with their incomes and their educational achievements. At the same time, domestic violence tends to decrease. Educated women are less likely to suffer battering. Self-confident persons, moreover, may also be more confident in rejecting undesired sexual advances and blatant harassment. Around the world, rapists still largely enjoy impunity. Illiteracy and financial dependence arguably make it more difficult for women to take perpetrators' sexualised violence to court.

THE STATE OF GENDER GAPS, BY SUBINDEX

Percentage of the gender gap closed to date, 2021



Note: Population-weighted averages for the 156 economies featured in the Global Gender Gap Index

It matters, of course, that institutions of formal learning often contribute to fostering gender awareness and ideas of gender justice. In gender-unequal societies, women tend to accept the conditions of their lives as unchangeable (see Mahwish Gul in the Focus section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2020/09). Where girls are historically excluded from formal education, they are unlikely to resist such exclusion.

Places outside the home are where girls and young women can make new experiences of liberty. Schools and universities matter in particular (see Ipsita Sapra in the Magazine section of D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/11). This is where students often learn to challenge accepted attitudes and behaviour. Discussing experiences of discrimination, violence and exclusion with peers, they start to see the structural nature of women's oppression. Accordingly, educated women are more likely to participate in civil-society organisations, social movements and political parties.

HEALTH MATTERS

It cannot be over-emphasised how much women's education improves health outcomes. Greater awareness of nutritional exigencies, for example, tends to benefit entire families. Better access to contraception, antenatal and postnatal, is of obvious relevance, of course, and not only because it reduces the mortality risk for mothers and infants. Reduced levels of domestic violence are good not only for women's physical health, but for their mental health as well. Their children are likely to benefit too.

However, formal education and employment are no panaceas for women's em-

powerment. To some – and often considerable – extent gender discrimination and abuse permeate institutions of learning as well as places of work. Exposure to violence persists. Moreover, household chores remain unevenly distributed. Public policies are needed to address gender justice. At the same time, state action can – and should – further improve opportunities in education and employment. Prudent policymakers will do their best to set in motion virtuous cycles of progress.

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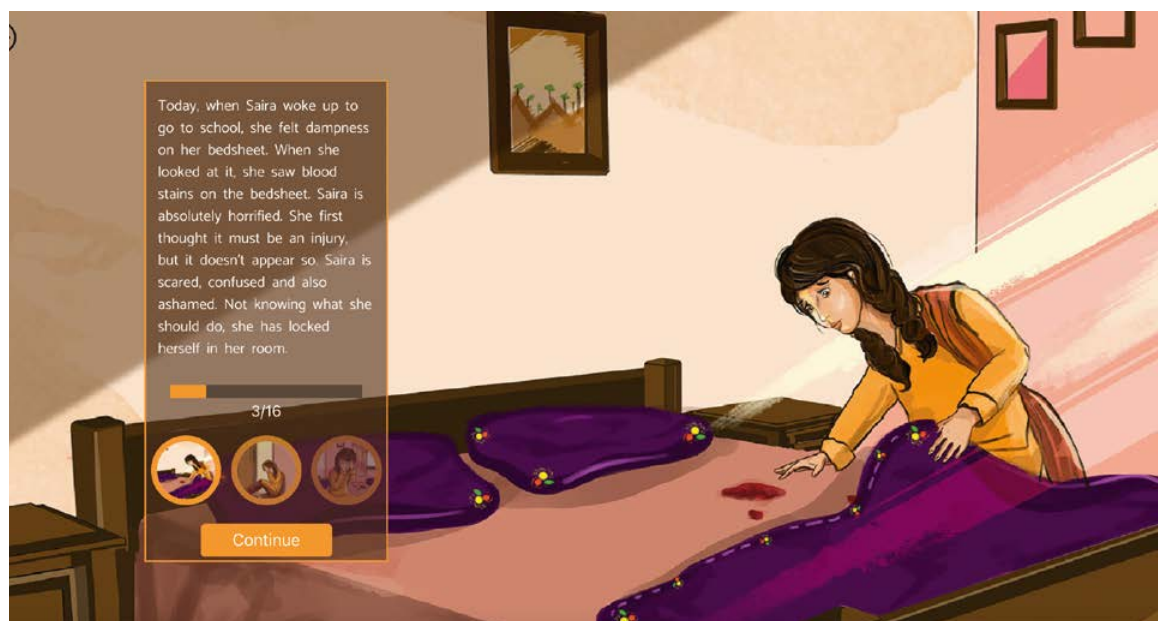
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Menstruation is nothing to be ashamed of: scene from the #HelpSaira storyline: Screenshot <https://sairaneedshelp.web.app/>

MENSTRUATION

Breaking the taboo

Pakistan needs to start removing the stigma that society attaches to menstruation. A new digital tool aimed at teenage girls can help by offering constructive and value-free information and advice.

By Mahwish Gul

In a handful of communities, it is a cause for celebration when a girl first gets her period. According to ActionAid, an international charity, Fiji is an example. On the fourth day of a girl's first period, the family prepares a feast to mark her entry into womanhood. Some Brazilian communities let girls take time out to learn about themselves and their heritage when her period sets in, and then welcome them back with a celebration. And, unlike other parts of the country, in parts of South India, the occasion of a girl's first period, known as menarche, is celebrated in a coming-of-age ceremony in which the girl receives gifts and wears a traditional skirt-and-sari outfit.

Things are very different in Pakistan and many other parts of the world, where the entire topic of menstruation is shrouded in shame and taboo. No one is supposed to

even mention it. In fact, only a lucky minority of girls learn ahead of time that they will start menstruating one day, most likely in their early teens. The full truth is that women's health and sex education deserve more attention in Pakistan, as I have argued on this platform before (see Focus section of D+C Digital Monthly 2020/04).

Almost two-thirds of teenage girls in Pakistan do not know about menstruation before they get their first period. That finding was included in a report published jointly by the independent New York-based Population Council, UK Aid and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2019. "Knowing in advance what changes puberty will bring to their bodies can help boys and girls be more prepared for the physical transition involved in adolescence," the report stated. "It can protect them from undue psychological or emotional stress when these changes begin to manifest."

In the absence of prior knowledge, the onset of the first menstrual cycle comes as a shock. One 13-year-old girl recalled the start of her periods this way: "I thought this only happened to me. I thought my mother would be angry to know this. I thought she

would say it happened because I did something to myself."

Such fears and misconceptions are depressingly widespread. The stigma and ignorance can cause great harm. Above all, fear and shame lead to emotional distress and often negatively affect girls' performance in school. According to UNICEF, misconceptions about menstruation cause many girls to withdraw from normal activities, including playing with others and attending school.

In a society that stigmatises menstruation, it is often not useful to rely on girls' mothers or older sisters to convey the necessary information and emotional support. That is because the older girls and women often have internalised the stigma, and present the topic in patriarchal tones that perpetuate shame and fear. Beyond that, older girls and women often lack good information themselves, so they are likely to pass on poor hygiene practices inadvertently. There are considerable health risks. "Poor menstrual hygiene can pose physical health risks and has been linked to reproductive and urinary tract infections," UNICEF stated.

The Coronavirus epidemic has made this situation even worse. It has further reduced girls' already limited sources of support. School closures have restricted girls' access to information and to sanitary products. Parents hit by financial hardships related to the pandemic have had to cut spending on sanitary products moreover.



CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Instead of continuing to shroud the topic of menstruation in shame and stigmatisation, Pakistan should encourage a dialogue that normalises a girl's coming of age and helps her to understand the natural and normal changes taking place in her body. Technology can help, with online platforms conveying useful information about menstrual health and hygiene, among many other topics. It helps that pandemic-related restrictions pushed many Pakistanis to install Wi-Fi connectivity, buy smartphones and use online channels for information and shopping.

Putting information online is certainly no panacea in and of itself. Information may be inaccurate or incomplete, or it may be too technical or lack proper context. But some online tools strike the right note, presenting information in a useful format to which young girls can relate. One such digital tool is #HelpSaira, developed by myself in collaboration with the East-West Center, Hawaii and with technical support from the Center for Communication Programs Pakistan, a public relations organisation.

The #HelpSaira exists in English and Urdu versions. Saira is a fictional adolescent girl – presented as an illustrated character – who is confronting menstruation. The digital tool shows her in a school with other girls. It invites visitors to “help Saira” by answering some basic questions about what menstruation is and how to maintain good hygiene. The idea is to correct and reinforce users' knowledge in regard to biological facts and about hygiene practices. The correct answers are provided in the storyline as users respond to scenes.

The format of #HelpSaira is a three-episode, interactive story. It starts with Saira getting her period for the first time. Like

most other girls, she doesn't know what is happening to her and how to deal with it. The story shows Saira receiving help and advice from her family, friends, and teacher. Toward the end of the series, she becomes a source of help to others: She advocates for all girls to be informed about menstruation and for her school to offer sanitary pads and appropriate bathroom facilities for menstruating girls.

The digital tool is aimed at teenage girls and tries to build their self-confidence and knowledge. Above all it combats any notion that menstruation is something shameful or wrong. It models the proper response that parents, teachers and other girls should have when a girl first gets her period – namely, to offer help and support, not to ban or shun the girl involved.

Saira's story also takes aim at various myths and misconceptions about menstruation – information we gleaned from interviews with girls about their own embarrassment and difficulties. Every teenager – whether male or female – should learn early on that women normally experience menstruation about once a month unless:

- they are pregnant,
- have recently given birth or
- are beyond child bearing age.

There is nothing shameful about this natural phenomenon. Some women feel pain or nausea during their period, but they remain competent and fully accountable persons. At the same time, personal hygiene matters very much. Girls must know these things to become self-confident adults. And if boys are to grow up to be men who respect women, they must learn these things too.

A tool like #HelpSaira can be the start of a broader programme to educate girls (and boys) in schools about menstruation. It can start the long process of breaking a cultural taboo. This will not be easy: The site has already received hate-filled comments accusing it of following a “foreign agenda” to subvert the local culture. In time, however, Pakistani society may find a way to set old taboos aside and view the start of puberty in girls as something to be celebrated, not feared.

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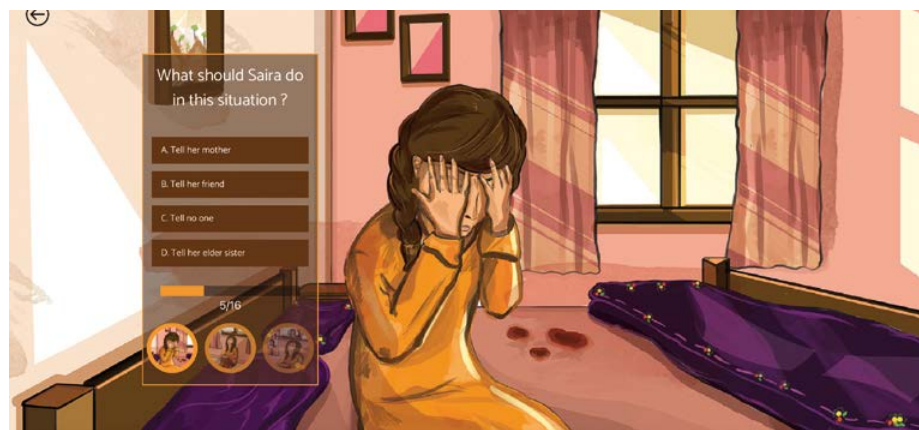


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Better women's health education would make a difference: another scene from #HelpSaira. Screenshot <https://sairaneedshelp.web.app>

EMANCIPATION

Slow, but self-determined change

In regard to gender justice, things look bleak in the Arab world. Laws typically discriminate against women. National legislation all too often does not comply with the international agreements governments have signed.

By Mona Naggar

Apart from Somalia and Sudan, all Arab countries have signed up to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). However, they neither ratified all of its clauses, nor adopted it in national law (UNESCWA 2018). Indeed, legislation often still serves male dominance.

In most Arab countries, men are considered to be the heads of families. Inheritance laws put male relatives at an advantage. Family law is often derived from faith

doctrines that make it harder for women to get a divorce or legal guardianship of their children. In most Arab countries, a woman's nationality has no bearing on her children's or husband's citizenship. Women do not have equal access to financial resources. Legal obstacles prevent them from fully participating in public life. They are massively underrepresented in politics.

Discriminating laws result from the male dominance that marks society and is rooted in conventional family norms. A mutually reinforcing dynamic of formal legislation and conservative traditions limits women's choices and constrains their lives. Some rules are obvious, others are barely visible.

Traditions are not codified in writing, but passed on by example. Family members are expected to comply with them and perpetuate them. It is, for example, an unwrit-

ten law that women should marry at a young age and that their greatest contribution to society is to serve as mothers and homemakers. The family is always expected to be the top priority, even when a woman does professional work.

To the outside world, the father represents the family. He is responsible for its prosperity as well as its reputation. Accordingly, he has the authority to control female family members. One consequence of this traditional understanding is that the perpetrators of honour killings are often not punished or only get rather mild sentences.

MORE ENCOURAGING TRADITIONS

The overall setting is sobering, so more promising family traditions tend not to be noticed. Indeed, they strengthen girls and women and might contribute to more gender equality. In spite of conventional male dominance and legal discrimination, they boost female self-confidence and encourage independent decision-making.

Consider Sarah Rachid, for instance. In her mid-40s, this Lebanese woman re-



In Lebanon and the Arab region in general, traditions expect women to submit to men.

members how her thinking was shaped by her family's culture: "My father always told my siblings and myself to use our brains and never to be misled by people, just because they are highly regarded in society, for example because of religious leadership." Education and independence are values that guide her. She says that even her grandmother enjoyed some financial independence, being in control of her own money.

Female solidarity is strong in her family, Sarah reports. For example, mothers and grandmothers traditionally support young women when they are pregnant, give birth or take care of babies and toddlers. On the other hand, she admits that female family members are generally expected to prioritise family affairs without exception. When she grew up, professional activity and independence were encouraged, but not at the expense of the family.

Men are not expected to do household work. Those who do take up some chores such as cooking or babysitting are unlikely to say so in public.

Over time, family traditions change, though it is often barely noticeable. Better

education, urbanisation, new role models and women's rights activism have made a difference. Rana Haddad is the example of a woman who is living her life independently, in spite of having grown up in a conservative Muslim family. Education helped her to find a way for dealing with faith-based norms pragmatically.

She is 40 years old and from Beirut. She no longer wears a headscarf as she did when she was younger. Rana studied psychology and sociology and works for local and international non-governmental organisations in Lebanon. She is single and earns her own money. She says that, 40 years ago, her mother was forbidden to talk with men she didn't know and that her elder sister had to obey strict rules as well. Rana says she appreciates her family's traditions, but has created a niche for herself. Education was the key, allowing her to expand her freedoms. Her family accepts her self-determined lifestyle.

Oppressive traditions persist of course. To some extent, modern communication technology provides opportunities to address them and demand change. For

instance, Rayan Sukkar, a young Palestinian journalist has produced video clips in Beirut's Shatila refugee camp. She posted them on Campji.com, so several thousand people inside and outside the camps have been able to watch them. The topic is gender-based violence in families.

The journalist wears a headscarf, but she eloquently speaks without fear or shame. In her surroundings, many girls and women consider her a role model.

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The Sahel region's water shortages are becoming worse due to the climate crisis.

THE SAHEL

From crisis to dynamism

The Sahel region is facing a host of problems, which are mutually reinforcing. Fast population growth is one of them. Societies need to get a grip on it – and may then even benefit from a demographic dividend. Young women and girls must be empowered for traditional role models to change.

By Mabingué Ngom

The Sahel region, which stretches along the southern edge of the Sahara desert, has a reputation of crisis. Crucial issues include armed conflict, which has become worse after the fall of Libya's long-serving leader Muammar Gaddafi, and worsening water shortages due to the climate crises. Women and girls are particularly exposed to increasing ecological threats.

Since 2015, extreme militant jihadism in the Sahel has doubled, causing many fatalities. In a recent report, the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) pointed out that in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, terrorism led to more than 4,000 fatalities

in 2019. Three years earlier, the number had been 770. Extremist groups include Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram, but separatist Tuareg forces are causing trouble too. The Covid-19 pandemic has compounded the humanitarian situation in the Sahel contributing to an increase in civil unrest by about 10% since 2020. It has resulted in ever more people fleeing their homes. The numbers of internal displaced persons and cross-border refugees has kept growing. Mass media worldwide depict this region as mired in multiple severe problems. (For an assessment of the situation in Nigeria, see Ben Ezeamalu in the Focus section of our Digital Monthly 2021/12.)

WOMEN AND GIRLS AT RISK

The multidimensional crisis is threatening to undermine progress made in addressing all forms of gender based violence against women and girls. As is well established by various studies, during conflicts, natural disasters and public health emergencies,

sexual and reproductive health needs are often overlooked – with staggering consequences. Pregnant women are at risk of life-threatening complications without access to delivery and emergency obstetric care services. Women and girls often lose access to family planning services, exposing them to unintended pregnancy in perilous conditions not to mention becoming more vulnerable to sexual violence, exploitation and HIV infection. This is the scenario in the Sahel.

Population growth is an issue of concern as well. The Sahel has the world's highest fertility rate, currently pegged at five to seven children per woman. The current Sahel population is estimated at 414 million. According to the World Bank, the population of the 23 countries of the Sahel and Equatorial Africa will reach 1 billion by 2050.

The Sahel region's youthful demographic profile gives it the world's highest dependency ratio (about 87%) – the measure of those not of working age compared to those of working age. This is a challenge, as it puts pressure on the productive population. However, as legions of young people grow up and enter the work force, the region may yet benefit from a "demographic dividend", in which working-age people outnumber those not of working age. Opportunities of this kind must be grasped since they can contribute to growth and prosperity.

Two things are needed:

- the young generation needs good education and
- total fertility rates must drop.

UNFPA STRATEGY

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) is implementing a strategy that serves this purpose. In 2016, the UNFPA's West and Central regional office announced that plan together with the African Union (AU) – which represents 55 African countries. The idea is to invest in today's youth so that they become tomorrow's productive adults.

The focus must be on young women and girls. According to tradition, they are generally seen as future mothers. The role model must change. Experience around the world shows that education and greater prosperity lead to women having fewer babies, not least, because they are confident that those children will survive. Families with many children, by contrast, tend to be

overburdened and cannot take care of all of them well.

Several flagship projects illustrate the solutions being developed. For example, a 2017 project in the community of Gueule Tapee-Fass-Colobane in Dakar, Senegal aims to benefit women and girls through investments in municipal services and infrastructure. The project promotes awareness of sexual and reproductive health.

Other initiatives include the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project. SWEDD launched a regional centre for midwifery training alongside a network of emergency obstetric care clinics. It also set up a series of safe spaces to protect girls against gender-based violence.

These efforts have produced impressive results. Awareness of gender issues has increased: The premiere broadcast of *C'est la Vie* ("That's Life"), a TV series filmed in Senegal and focusing on family health issues, attracted 20 million viewers in seven capital cities in West and Central Africa.

More than 106,000 girls have received support to enroll and stay in school and avoid early marriage. Nearly 100,000 teenage girls attend vocational courses and other economic empowerment programmes.

In the years ahead, these successful programmes should be scaled up across Africa. They aim to create a conducive environment for reaping demographic dividends. The Sahel has great potential in this regard. Its youth are its greatest asset. Experiences from the Sahel offer valuable lessons that Africa's demographic dividend holds a promise of promoting peace, security and economic development.



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DISEMPowerMENT

Women work and men decide

Burundian women have made some progress towards economic emancipation, but a web of cultural norms holds them back. Men are still considered the natural heads of household and chief decision-makers. Women's property rights tend to be weak.

By Mireille Kanyange

On the surface, Burundian women are making progress. Even in remote villages, some women break with stereotypes and earn independent incomes. Some even start businesses of their own. Many join economic cooperatives that support their efforts and offer power in numbers. Public events such as observances of International Women's Day and ceremonies to honour rural and African women help to spread the idea that women are breaking free of traditional roles.

But look deeper. Cultural traditions still keep Burundi's women on a lower footing than men. This is especially true in rural areas, where most Burundian women live. Cultural norms and traditions give men the final say in household matters. Many men profit from their wives' labour, without giving them a say in how those profits are spent.

Consider, for example, Mariam Nahimana, a 46-year-old mother of four children living in Buterere outside Bujumbura. She labours in rice fields all day and is the family's main breadwinner. Her husband does not have a regular job. But she does not complain. "I enjoy my work," Mariam says. She adds that it ensures the family has an income at all.

In worse condition is Adelaide, a mother of five in Bukeye in Muramvya province, in the centre of the country. She

cultivates small plots of land, sometimes carrying a child on her back and working with two other children alongside. Her husband is out in the streets all day long, usually drinking. He often comes home drunk, and occasionally beats Adelaide for neglecting a household duty such as having dinner ready. At harvest time, he sells the rice crop – and pockets all the money.

LIFE ON FAMILY FARMS

This is patriarchy in action. Unfortunately it is fairly typical, particularly in village communities. Men tend to take the family decisions. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), most Burundian women live on small family farms. They do most of the ploughing, sowing, weeding and harvesting, as well as the preserving, processing, transporting and marketing of crops. Rural men, in contrast, are more likely to be working for enterprises producing industrial crops that generate more substantial incomes. On the other hand, some men do not work at all. Rural women tend to have little control over the

revenues their work generates, and how it is spent. By tradition, women have fewer rights related to land inheritance and ownership than men do. Their situation is made worse by lack of access to modern farm technologies.

Nor do women have much access to credit. Borrowing from a bank generally requires having a bank account, offering collateral and making a substantial personal investment in a farming enterprise. Most

cluded: “Increased participation by women in decision-making will require an active and practical strategy which can encourage adjustments to existing traditional gender norms.” The authors pointed out that tradition recognises “men as the main decision-makers at both the household and community levels”.

As in most countries, women have a slight majority in the population. According to the World Bank, 50.4% of Burundi’s

en’s participation in public administration, pointing to a deeper problem: “Women’s unequal access to education in comparison with men leads to a lack of qualified women to enter and advance in the public administration.”

Some of this has begun to change. A women’s investment and development bank was founded in February 2021. The goal is to help women build and expand agricultural enterprises. In June 2021, the World Bank gave Burundi \$80 million to promote employment of women and young people. Some 120,000 people have benefited, including 16,000 Burundians returning from abroad.

Moreover, Burundi’s laws promote female employment. The Constitution sets a minimum of 30% women in government. The National Assembly, the lower chamber of Parliament, even requires government offices to employ women for half their positions.

At the same time, Burundian women’s organisations are attacking cultural barriers that hold women back. They want to end practices such as parents not sending their daughters to school. The Burundian Association of Women Engineers encourages girls to pursue scientific and technical studies. The Burundian Association of Women Lawyers advocates for women to have equal rights to land ownership. Other groups, such as the Association of Repatriated Women, encourage women to organise in order to gain strength in numbers.

Efforts like this can chip away slowly at longstanding traditions and attitudes. They are a good start.



The chores of Burundian farm women include fetching water.

women cannot fulfil these conditions. Some turn to loans from informal sources and pay usurious interest rates. Burundian women’s comparatively weak position is rooted in tradition. A Burundian saying goes: “He who lacks a good woman lacks wealth” (“Umuhushatunga ahusha umugore”). It shows how much Burundian culture makes women support men.

An academic study has confirmed this cultural bias empirically (Sikhu Okonya et al, 2019). It was carried out by an international group of researchers. With regard to household decision-making by farm families, they provocatively asked: “Do men decide and women work?” The results revealed a considerable gender gap, so the study con-

cluded: “Increased participation by women in decision-making will require an active and practical strategy which can encourage adjustments to existing traditional gender norms.” The authors pointed out that tradition recognises “men as the main decision-makers at both the household and community levels”.

WINDS OF CHANGE

In 2012, a UNDP report on gender equality in public administration in Burundi showed that procedures for recruitment and promotion did not closely comply with laws and rules aimed at boosting female representation. The report cited a lack of data on wom-

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GENDER JUSTICE

To empower women, pass and enforce laws

African women demand equality in public life and want to assume leadership roles. The obstacles they face include deep-rooted patriarchy and systemic discrimination. It matters, of course, that men own most assets. African countries need to implement policies and legislation to empower women.

By Alphonse Shiundu

In most African countries, men hold most positions of power in both politics and business. The reasons are socio-cultural. In many traditions, men are automatically

considered leaders. Religion matters too, with religious texts obligating women to obey their men. Women often feel unsupported, disrespected and ignored in these settings.

To reach leadership positions, a person needs resources, including money and social contacts. Ambitious women are sometimes forced to seek the permission of their husbands and the male elders of their community. Otherwise, they face denunciation and stigmatisation. A prominent polygamous trade-union leader in Kenya, for example, dumped his wife after she wanted

to become a member of parliament against his will. She lost the election, but he held a grudge and even refused to pay school tuition for her children.

The relevance of male support is similarly evident in South Africa. Though almost three-quarters of school teachers are women, that is only true of one-third of the principals. Based on her research, Nuraan Davids of the University Stellenbosch concludes that the female principals are competent in their jobs, but she points out that they “all maintained that they would not have been considered for their positions without their male predecessors’ endorsement”.

LEGISLATION DEFICITS

Some African countries have laws to promote women. In some places, a certain share of the seats in parliament or government jobs are reserved for them. However, implementation often remains weak, with the girlfriends and lovers of male party leaders or government officers getting appointed.

According to the Kenyan constitution, neither gender may occupy more than two-thirds of the positions in a public institution. Nonetheless, the women’s share tends to be below one third, and there is usually no sanction. The legislative process is slow and cumbersome, so passing laws to empower women is difficult. The full truth is that the political will is lacking, both at national and sub-national levels.

Efforts to promote women have been going on for many years in Africa, but so far Rwanda is the only country where more than 50% of the cabinet members are women. Women hold 60% of the seats in parliament there. These figures are impressive and send a solid socio-cultural signal even though it is well known that Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame has authoritarian tendencies and takes most decisions.

LEGAL INEQUALITY

That the two sexes are not equal is most evident in legal affairs. It matters very much that, in poor and especially rural communities, traditions are typically more important than formal legislation, with faith leaders and elders delivering judgments on disputes. Even where traditions such as child



Foreign Minister Raychelle Omamo is one of Kenya's few female policymakers.

marriage or bride prices have been made illegal, some communities still practice them. One implication is that many young women and girls are still considered to be a kind of commodity.

Even when the law is on their side, few African women have the education and financial resources they would need to go to court (on the relevance of schools and employment for gender justice, see Sundus Saleemi on page 18 of this issue). According to the World Bank, property ownership in particular would help to boost the position of women. However, both formal law and social conventions ensure that men typically own land and other assets.

It is complicated to take legal action against a violent or merely quarrelsome former partner. To a large extent, society does not consider it appropriate for women to do so.

Around the world, rape victims tend to be ignored. Even worse, their trauma is often ridiculed, with people – typically men – stating that they caused their suffering themselves. If a woman is sexually assaulted at a nightclub or a hotel at night, questions are asked such as: “What was she doing outside her home that late?” Such remarks im-

ply that sexualised aggression is permissible after dusk.

The traditions of some communities demand that a rapist marry the woman or girl he has abused, and the matter is then considered settled. Should that not be possible, compensation payments may be accepted.

Africa faces a flood of misogyny, but there is also a drip of success stories. For example, a male member of the Kenyan Parliament was jailed for slapping a female colleague. The case took three years, but the court ruled against him. Two rich entrepreneurs caught on camera in an altercation with women at a high-end hotel in Nairobi lost hundreds of millions of Kenya shillings in seed funding. In the aftermath of the scandal, investors and venture capitalists shied away from them. Child molesters get jailed for life. In some countries, the minimum prison time for rape is more than 20 years.

On the other hand, teenage girls are more likely to get punished for adventurous sexual behaviour than their male peers. Former Tanzanian President John Pombe Magufuli banned pregnant schoolgirls from schools, even after they had given birth. By

contrast, the boys who got the girls pregnant went on with their education. Generally speaking, education on reproductive health and sex tends to be poor, and women’s health issues tend to be hushed up (see Mahwish Gul on page 20 of this issue).

It would be important to change the narrative in both social and mainstream media (see box). The sporadic virality of the #MeToo movement is not enough. For change to happen, the voice, place and status of women must grow in the everyday coverage of social, economic, political and cultural affairs.

According to experts, various measures are needed to overcome the marginalisation of women in African societies. More women must be in positions of leadership, and for that to happen, we need equal opportunities in education. The cultural understanding of why women’s empowerment and gender equality are good for society in general must grow.



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How the media cover women

Christina Chan-Meetoo is a media scholar at the University of Mauritius. In 2021, she assessed how women are portrayed in the media and what that means for gender justice.

Her conclusions are striking. According to Chan-Meetoo, 70 % of the sources and experts the media quoted were male. Women only played subordinate roles. Moreover, the photographs in newspapers mostly showed men. While some female journalists relied on female sources, their male colleagues mostly quoted men. There was not a single woman in the top leadership of any Mauritian media organisation.

Regarding the promotion of gender equity, Chan-Meetoo sees ambiguity: “I think that media both continuously frustrate and help the gender agenda. They frustrate it when they sensationalise stories about women and LGBTQ+ groups – especially crime and rape stories – or give little to no space to these voices as experts rather than objects regarding ‘serious’ topics.”

On the other hand, the journalists are helpful when “they raise awareness about gender issues or occasionally showcase women’s success stories, for example as entrepreneurs, leaders or researchers”.

She does, however, note a tendency to add “a pinch of subtle sexism, oftentimes through imagery or allusions to family life” in such cases.

In Chan-Meetoo’s eyes, the media could – and should – do more for making spaces safe for women, including streets, workplaces and the internet (see main story). Involving men in this debate is vitally relevant, she argues, regretting that related topics tend to be treated as though they only concern women.

Apart from the media, institutions of education matter, Chan-Meetoo says. Schools should raise awareness and help to instil a culture of equal rights in the minds of the young generation. At school, she wants girls and boys to be

treated the same ways when it comes to career orientation and the choice of subjects such as science, maths or home economics. “At home,” she adds, “it means no discrimination in the allocation of chores.” Boys too should learn how to cook, wash, iron et cetera. AS

REFERENCE

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WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Demands for a better penal code

25 November is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. In the Dominican Republic, activists “celebrated” it by protesting in the streets of Santo Domingo, the capital city. The reasons were controversial reforms of the penal code that would make life more dangerous for women.

By Marjorie Pons Piñeyro

The activists were upset because they did not like a reform of the penal code which the Senate had adopted a few days earlier. In the meantime, the Chamber of Deputies has opted for some modifications, so the Senate now must choose between either accepting that version or discarding the reform.

From the start, women’s-rights activists opposed several reform details. Their criticism focuses on two issues in particular: sexualised violence and abortion.

Articles 133 and 134 of the new code deal with rape and non-consensual sexual activity. The new law would foresee weaker punishment for the latter, with only four to ten years rather than 10 to 20 years of prison. So far, Dominican law has sanctioned both crimes equally.

In women’s eyes, the arguments of those who want the reform are appalling. For example, Eugenio Cedeño, deputy of the city La Romana, said in a press conference that one cannot punish a husband for taking off a condom even if his wife wants contraception with 20 years of prison. He said: “In the marriage contract, sexual consent is previously established.” Rogelio Genao, a senator, insisted: “You cannot punish or sanction a rape to a third party as you would with a person with whom you have a formal relationship”.

Women’s-rights activists insist, however, that it generally cannot be differentiated from rape. Refusing to use contraception, for example, only puts the woman at risk. She may indeed become pregnant against her will. Refusing to wear a condom is actually a form of exerting power.

Conservative politicians typically fail to acknowledge, moreover, that sexual

abuse typically happens within an established relationship. According to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), one out of 10 Dominican women becomes a victim of sexualised violence at some point in her life. In 80% of the cases, the culprit is her actual or previous partner. The idea that rapists are



Protestor in Santo Domingo on 25 November.

strangers is therefore misleading. The UNFPA figures probably do not tell the full story, however. UN Women reckons that internationally, one out of three women experience violence (both of the sexualised and domestic kind), with “fewer than 40%” seeking help of any sort. Quite likely, the 10% figure for the Dominican Republic results from under-reporting.

Abortion has always been illegal in the Dominican Republic. In recent months, however, civil-society groups have demanded the legalisation of therapeutic abortion, which means the right to end a pregnancy:

- when it poses a risk to the life of the mother,
- when the foetus has malformations incompatible with life or
- when the pregnancy is the consequence of rape.

Legislators, however, have not made these amendments in the proposed reform. Abortion opponents claim to be “pro-life”,

arguing that ending a pregnancy amounts to murder. However, things are far more complex, as became evident in a famous example in the Dominican Republic. It is known as “Esperancita’s case”.

Esperancita was a 16-year-old girl who was diagnosed simultaneously with leukemia and a 7-week pregnancy in 2012. Doctors considered an abortion so she could undergo chemotherapy. However, since abortion is illegal, doctors could do nothing. Esperancita was not treated for leukemia, and neither she nor the unborn baby survived.

Women’s-rights activists, moreover, point out that an uncounted number of women die because of illegal abortions (see Virginia Caballero and María Lía Ghezzi on page 31 of this issue).

The current penal code does not properly defend women’s basic right to self-determination. The reform would make things worse. Dominican women know the Senate will probably approve the new penal code, but they hope it will not. They would much prefer legislation to protect them.



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Women's-rights activists celebrating in Buenos Aires after legislators passed the new law on 30 December 2020.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Legalising abortion

Despite long-entrenched opposition, Argentina passed a landmark abortion-rights bill in late 2020. The story of how this turnaround came about is complex, involving high-level political manoeuvring, massive street protests and attempts to deflect attention from a teetering economy.

By Virginia Caballero and María Lía Ghezzi

A landmark abortion rights law entered into force in Argentina in January 2021. Law No. 27,610 allows women to access abortion and related health-care services up to and including the 14th week of pregnancy. The law guarantees access to these services within 10 days of request.

This law puts Argentina at the forefront of advancing women's reproductive freedom among large Latin American nations. Mexico took similar action a few months after Argentina. On 7 September 2021, Mexico's Supreme Court outlawed any measures that penalise abortion. This sent a clear message to all Mexican states that they must support abortion rights.

Access to safe and legal abortion is very important. Illegal abortions are dangerous and sometimes deadly. Nonetheless,

desperate women depend on them, which is why they are common in countries that deny women legal access. At the same time, prohibition means that unwanted babies are born to women who hardly have the means to raise them. Families get stuck in poverty. Moreover, societies that do not permit abortions tend to make access to contraceptives and sex education difficult too (see Renate Bähr in D+C Digital Monthly 2017/08). Adding to the problem, men – who do not become pregnant – often press or force women to have unprotected sex. An unmarried woman's reputation can be ruined by an out-of-marriage pregnancy, while her male partner remains totally unaffected.

Smaller countries in Latin America have long since liberalised abortion laws. Cuba permitted abortion in 1965. Guyana did so in 1995 and Uruguay in 2012. With larger countries such as Argentina and Mexico now following suit, Latin America – a region that is heavily Catholic and socially conservative – is turning a corner on this issue.

Argentina's breakthrough on abortion rights did not come easily. It was the result of a confluence of unique political, social and economic conditions. To understand

how this happened, it is important to consider the difficulties.

BIG HURDLES

To begin with, Argentina's political structure focuses on presidential powers. Without the president's support, a bill cannot move forward. Moreover, small and conservative provinces are over-represented in the Senate, while state governors have a lot of influence.

Given the influence of conservative forces, it took Argentina a long time to even consider liberalising abortion laws. Earlier women's-rights initiatives focused on other, though related issues. For example, in the first decade of the 21st century, Argentina regulated reproductive health services and introduced a public-health programme aimed at benefiting women and girls. Among other things, it improved access to contraceptives. Between 2003 and 2007, the legislature approved a universal child allowance as well as policies appreciating sexual diversity.

Throughout these years, legalising abortion remained a taboo. In Argentina, abortion was only allowed in the case of rape or when the mother's health was at risk. That was the official law from 1921 on, but it was not implemented in most provinces. Prominent cases of women who were prosecuted for having abortions made matters worse. Health-care providers built barriers to abortion.

In 2003, a coalition of feminist groups started lobbying for expanded rights. Their work led the introduction of several bills in Congress in the years 2007 to 2014 aimed at legalising abortion. The bills all failed. Comprehensive abortion rights were denied. Other reforms such as equal marriage rights for diverse couples also fell by the wayside.

There were glimmers of hope, nonetheless. In a case involving a teenaged rape victim in 2012, the Supreme Court ruled that some abortions are indeed allowed. That judgment allowed a woman's mental health to be considered when courts decide whether an abortion is permissible. The fact that such a ruling was necessary shows how strongly provincial health officials resisted abortions.

Despite this ruling and a growing feminist movement, then-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) initially opposed legalising abortion. So did at least half of the ruling bloc in the lower house of Congress. That the head of state opposed reform, was an insurmountable barrier.

In 2015, the centre-left Peronist “Front for Victory” party lost the election after three consecutive terms in office. Mauricio Macri, leader of a centre-right coalition with conservative leanings, became president (2015–2019). The new government quashed any hopes of legalising abortion in the short term.

Yet activity on the streets told a different story. A wave of demonstrations protesting violence against women began in June of 2016. Under the banner “Ni Una Menos” (“Not one [woman] less”), the movement against femicides gathered strength. Considering those who die because of illegal abortions, it quickly embraced the cause of legalising abortion. Huge rallies took place, with participants wearing large green handkerchiefs.

POLITICALLY CONVENIENT DISTRACTION

Argentina's teetering economy also helped to put abortion rights back on the political agenda. By early 2018, inflation was out of control and the economy was in tatters. In this setting, President Macri's inaugural address on 1 March surprised lawmakers. He permitted Congress to consider abortion.

Many analysts stated that this step was meant to distract attention from the nation's economic woes. Capital was flee-



ing the country as the economy worsened. That year, the International Monetary Fund granted Argentina the largest loan in IMF history.

In any case, Congress took up the challenge and debated allowing abortions. The debate extended beyond Congress to the media and social networks. Arguments were heated, featuring smear campaigns and horrific images showing fictitious abortions.

The lower chamber of Congress approved the abortion rights bill, but the Senate rejected it. The influence of small-state senators and the pressure from the Catholic Church proved very strong. As in other countries, abortion opponents suggested reform would only invite women to be irresponsible. That they never did much to help women get contraceptives or cope with poverty shows that their main concern is not the unborn baby's life. It is to keep women under control.

Making matters more complicated, the leading parties were both split. Peronist state governors opposed the bill, and Peronist legislators voted overwhelmingly against it. The southern provinces and the province of Buenos Aires, which has a higher proportion of urban and middle-class voters, were more favourably disposed, but even here support was not uniform.

It was a turning point when the most prominent spokeswoman for progressive Peronism spoke out in favour of abortion rights. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the former president, who was now serving as a senator, changed her stance and endorsed reform. She did so at the urging of her electoral base, especially the urban middle class, and in response to the demonstrations on the streets.

By the 2019 presidential elections, voters had a clear choice. On one side was then senator Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and

presidential candidate Alberto Fernández, a lawyer and former cabinet chief. They united the Peronist party and promised abortion reform. The alternative was the conservative ruling party headed by Macri. After the conservatives performed poorly in the primaries, Macri moved further to the right and withdrew his support for abortion rights.

The “Frente de Todos”, by contrast, adopted a feminist agenda, which also included combatting violence against women and improving women's access to jobs. A few months after winning the election, its new government sent an abortion-rights bill to Congress, which passed it in December 2020.

SOCIAL SHIFTS

The change of abortion policy at government level reflected a noticeable shift in popular sentiment. According to the polling company Ipsos, the share of Argentines who support the right to abortion under specific condition grew from 64% to 75% between 2014 and 2020. About 35% of Argentine voters now approve of a woman's right to choose abortion in any circumstances.

All these factors – the economic crisis, the growing demonstrations in the streets and the political manoeuvrings – contributed to the passage of the abortion law. At first, abortion rights may well have served to deflect attention from the economy. In a similar sense, it may have helped the new president, Alberto Fernández, to deflect attention away from the Coronavirus pandemic.

The result, though, is that Argentina's women finally have the right to full reproductive self-determination. This was a turning point. Argentina's historic abortion law has created much-needed momentum for women's rights in the entire world region.



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DISABILITY

Empower women and change mindsets

Violence against women is an issue that societies are becoming increasingly aware of. Nevertheless, the problem is still tabooed and concealed in developing countries in particular. Disabled women face the most serious challenges: experts report that due to their supposed helplessness, these women are three times more likely to become victims of violence than women without disabilities. Civil-society organisations and policymakers are looking for ways to address this problem and find solutions.

By Sabine Balk

Laure Tay is the country director of Togo, Benin and the Côte d'Ivoire for Christoffel-Blindenmission (CBM), a German civil-society organisation. She has a good understanding of the situation of disabled women in the countries she is responsible for. Particularly problematic is the connection between poverty and disability: disability is often the cause, but also the result of poverty.

Tay reports that the affected women are confronted with many forms of violence. "There is direct and indirect violence, physical and psychological violence, which are inflicted by people in their surroundings, for instance by their caretakers. They also suffer because it is often not possible for them to earn an income or lead an independent life." According to Tay, this happens in many countries, even in rich industrialised ones, but in Africa there are additional socio-cultural barriers: disability is frequently seen as a curse or a sign of witchcraft.

For that reason, disabled women often experience stigmatisation and exclusion in many areas, including education, health care, employment and family life. CBM wants to come to their aid with a human-rights-based approach, the country director says: "We are primarily concerned with making women strong and empowering them to change their situation. They have to be made aware of their rights and claim

them." In her opinion, that is the only way to permanently change society's mindset.

CBM secured the support of Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) for a project in Togo that was initiated by a woman who



The exhibition "Silent Tears" gives women with disabilities a voice: Jacky from Guatemala "dances" in her wheelchair.

has been affected by violence and disability. Along with a few women from her village, she began to establish herself a livelihood by manufacturing small items like soaps, salves and bags. Around 1000 women are now part of the enterprise. Their income has allowed them to make a living and send their children to school. According to its founder, the project succeeded in boosting the women's confidence and changing the attitudes of those in the surrounding area.

Tay reported on the project at an online conference in November. It was organ-

ised by CBM and representatives of Germany's federal government to address the needs of people with disabilities.

SIMILAR PROBLEMS WORLDWIDE

Disabled women in other parts of the world struggle with similar problems as women in West Africa, explains Abia Akram, the head of the National Forum for Women with Disabilities in Pakistan. She emphasises that the coronavirus has exacerbated the situation; domestic violence in particular has become even more common. She regrets the fact that women often don't know where they can find help. During the pandemic, her organisation began equipping disabled women with better technology so they can access information on the internet and take advantage of digital opportunities.

Akram argues that a real social transformation must take place and that disabled women should be given a true stake in society and politics. According to her, policymakers also have to do their homework. She points out that while there are laws that guarantee the equal rights and opportunities of people with disabilities, they must also be implemented.

According to its managing director, Ingrid-Gabriela Hoven, the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) is aware that disabled women have an increased risk of experiencing violence. Therefore, she says, GIZ has set itself the goal of integrating and heeding this knowledge in all of its programmes. In order to raise awareness among its own employees, the organisation is conducting trainings and has issued guidelines about how the topics of gender sensitivity and inclusion can be incorporated. Like many experts, Hoven bemoans the fact that it is very difficult to collect data because disability is often not reported.

LINK

CBM photography exhibition Silent Tears – Starke Frauen (strong women):

<https://www.cbm.de/unsere-politische-arbeit/silent-tears.html>



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A girl from Niger receiving online instruction.



GENDER EQUALITY

Successes and setbacks

2020 was not a good year for women. They suffered more than men from the coronavirus crisis and experienced numerous setbacks with regard to gender equality. Nevertheless, there were some positive developments: in 2020, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) stepped up its advocacy for women and girls in particular and implemented its largest-ever emergency response.

By Sabine Balk

Women were more impacted by the coronavirus crisis than men and experienced an increase in unemployment and poverty. There were more early and forced marriages as well as more gender-based violence (GBV). In some countries, cases of domestic violence rose by 30%. Women also face greater risks when it comes to fighting the pandemic, given that they make up about 70% of health care workers worldwide. These are some of the findings of UNICEF's annual report on gender equality.

Despite the coronavirus crisis, UNICEF has recorded some successes in the health-care sector. The child welfare organisation advocated for the maintenance of important health services for mothers in the pandemic. By the end of 2020, 38 countries had plans to scale up the care of mothers and newborns – seven countries more than

in 2019. Seventy-one countries, 14 more than in the previous year, integrated nutrition counselling into prenatal care.

UNICEF saw setbacks with regard to HIV infection rates in adolescent girls and in maternal mortality rates worldwide. In both areas, according to the report, the numbers are still too high for the organisation to reach its own targets.

School education was severely impacted by the coronavirus crisis in 2020 (for more, see also Enakshi Dutta et al. in the Magazine section of our D+C/E+Z Digital Monthly 2021/11). UNICEF advocated for equal learning opportunities within the framework of Covid-19 restrictions. The child welfare organisation also supported gender-responsive distance education in humanitarian settings like refugee camps. According to UNICEF, 301 million children received distance education, about half of them girls. Nevertheless, the report acknowledges that school closures have given rise to concerns about the learning outcomes of girls in particular.

Furthermore, UNICEF assisted governments in their efforts to increase inclusivity and remove bottlenecks in education policy. In 2020, 53 countries included menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) targets in their strategies for water, sanitation and hygiene in schools. MHH was implemented in almost 10,000 schools, and over 70,500

schools, including those for children with disabilities, received separate sanitation facilities for boys and girls.

UNICEF expressed alarm over the increase in gender-based violence. It reacted by increasing its aid and prevention services. UNICEF and its partner organisations are also now offering more of their services online. Thus according to the report, 4.2 million children (among them more than 1.25 million girls) who have experienced violence were reached by health, social work and justice services. In 83 countries, 17.7 million people in emergency situations received GBV risk mitigation, prevention or response interventions.

An important aspect of UNICEF's work are its efforts to transform damaging gender roles and norms. During the pandemic, UNICEF has often made use of online platforms to achieve that end. In 2020, the organisation was able to reach approximately 2.6 million parents and caregivers in 87 countries. UNICEF also always prioritises including boys and men in its programming.

In order to promote gender equality in the future, UNICEF is planning to coordinate more closely with other UN organisations and pursue cross-sectoral cooperation. Its goals are:

- Strengthening the role of girls and ending child marriage
- Investing in the health of women and girls with regard to HIV, nutrition and sexual and reproductive health
- Promoting school education for girls
- Ending violence against girls and
- Promoting gender-equitable parenting and care.

UNICEF also wants to be better prepared for future emergency situations comparable to the Covid-19 pandemic and include the promotion of gender equality in those measures.

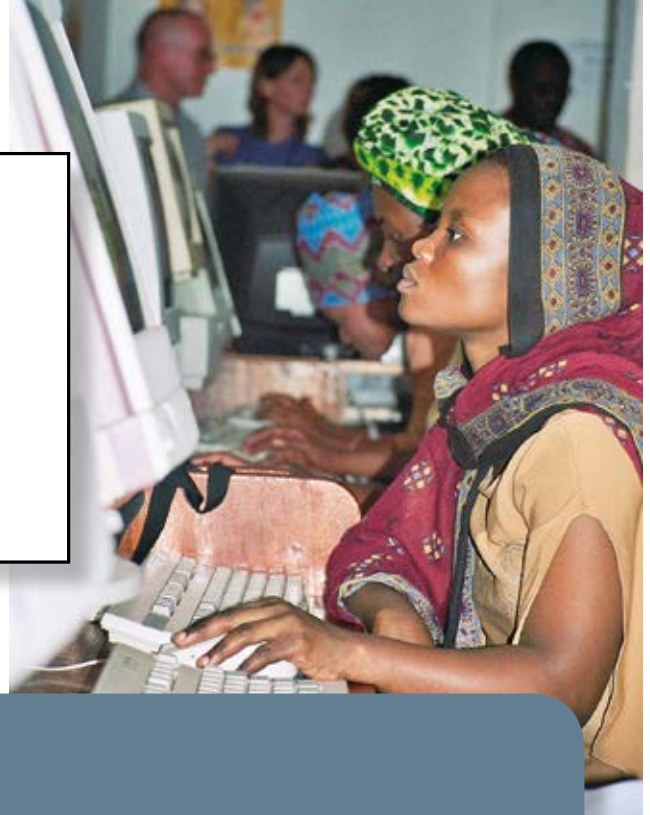
LINK

UNICEF, 2021: Gender Equality – Global Annual Results Report 2020:
<https://www.unicef.org/media/102281/file/Global-annual-results-report-2020-gender-equality.pdf>

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