

Overview

African First Ladies are joining forces under the banner of the Organisation of African First Ladies for Development (OAFSLAD) alongside partners to inject new urgency into the movement for gender equality at a critical moment. At its core, this campaign aims to drive home an essential truth: **We are equal – and always have been.** If we can agree on this fact, then it becomes impossible to tolerate or justify persistent gender disparities in our health care, education, economic opportunity, and freedom from violence – especially when evidence from around the world has proven that gender equality drives social and economic progress for all. As a society, we can do better.

There is no time to lose. This year, we reach the midpoint of both the Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union Strategy for Gender Equity and Women's Empowerment, and face some of the greatest social, economic, and environmental challenges of our lifetimes. By working together to create an equal society for all, we can meet these challenges head on and emerge stronger than ever before. The choice is up to us. **We are equal. Working together, our society can be too. Join us.**

General Messages

We are equal. And yet, many young girls and boys are still being influenced by societal messages suggesting otherwise.

- According to the World Economic Forum, African countries have been making steady progress on gender equality – with its smallest gender gap in over a decade.
- However, persistent gender norms and discriminatory practices mean that women earn less than men, have more limited access to health care and education, and have fewer opportunities to shape their own lives.
- The consequences are dire, including high rates of HIV/AIDS among adolescent girls, preventable deaths in childbirth, significant levels of gender-based violence, and more.

Closing the gender gap in Africa is critical to driving social and economic progress for all and building the world that we want.

- Evidence from around the world shows that investing in girls and women creates a ripple effect that yields multiple benefits, not only for individual women, but for families, communities, and countries.
- For example, [one report](#) released in 2019 indicated that by improving gender equality, the continent could add \$316 billion to its annual GDP by 2025.

The good news: We have proven solutions to build an equal society. Now, let us complete the task.

- In recent years, African countries have implemented successful policies to break down gender-related barriers.
 - For example, in countries with gender quotas, women's representation in parliaments is 10% higher than in those that have no quotas at all.
 - Thanks to awareness raising efforts, the share of African women who considered domestic violence to be sometimes justified dropped by 10% between 2012 and 2018.
- Several areas stand out as both symptoms and causes of gender inequality – including unequal access to quality health care, lack of access to education, high rates of gender-based violence and limited ability to participate in the formal economy. All of these are interconnected and tackling them together is key to unlocking a cycle of empowerment.

Together, we can build a future that enables all Africans to thrive.

- Now more than ever, we need fierce and proactive advocacy for gender equality.
- We know that girls and women are the drivers of sustainable development and powerful agents of change.
- If we work together and commit to prioritising girls and women, we can and will achieve lasting change for everyone.

Health Messages

We are equal. Our health care should be too.

African women and girls face many challenges to accessing quality health services, and as a result, bear an unacceptably high burden of disease and death.

- In 2020, more than 70% of global maternal deaths occurred in the sub-Saharan region; and an estimated 23,000 adolescent girls and young women died from AIDS-related illnesses, making it the second leading cause of their death after maternal mortality.
- Approximately 23% of all women on our continent had an unmet need for family planning; and women account for 63% of people living with HIV.
- Weak and underfunded health systems mean that women are often unable to access the care that they need. For example, due to cost, distance and more, almost half of the women in sub-Sahara do not have access to essential health care during pregnancy and childbirth.
- Even when care is accessible, uneven quality of care can lead to women being misdiagnosed, mistreated, or suffering preventable complications.
- Specific social and cultural practices and discriminatory policies such as age of consent for accessing services can increase women's health risks, including around HIV, and make it difficult to access the health information or care they need.

The positive ripple effects of investing in women's health are clear.

- When women have access to quality healthcare services and are able to maintain good health, they are more likely to participate fully in social, economic, and political life. By reducing the prevalence of HIV among adolescents, more young women can stay in school, which in turn improves women's social status and economic output.
- When women receive quality care in pregnancy and birth, their children reap the benefits. Children who survive their mothers while being born have a vastly reduced chance of surviving their first year.
- For every \$1 spent on family planning, governments can save up to \$6 that would otherwise have been spent on addressing complications from unplanned pregnancies.

Governments and their partners must prioritise investments and policies to ensure women get the comprehensive and quality health care they need.

- Governments must invest in the primary health care system and providers so that women and girls can access care in their communities at a price they can afford. Primary care facilities are where most women seek family planning, go for their prenatal check-ups and to give birth, and more.
- Governments and partners must prioritise getting women and families vital health information, including by training more health workers to deliver basic education.
- Women's health care must be provided free of discrimination, stigma or political barriers. When a woman can decide whether to have children and, if so, when and how many, she can define her life and future.

Education Messages

We are equal. Our education should be too.

Learning is every girl's right, but many do not have the chance to start or complete their education.

- 130 million girls worldwide are out of school, with the majority in sub-Saharan Africa. Only 18% of children in the region have access to pre-primary education, significantly lower than the global average of 69%.
- An estimated 50 million girls in sub-Sahara are out of school – more than any other region in the world – and this number is increasing.
- Major barriers to getting more girls in school include child marriage, cultural and religious beliefs, poverty, and violence.
- Gender-based disparities in education are a significant barrier to achieving social and economic progress. Educated women contribute to economic growth, reduce poverty rates, and improve health outcomes for themselves and their families.

Gender-based violence in schools, including sexual harassment and assault, is a serious barrier to girls' education.

- Gender-based violence in schools creates a hostile and unsafe learning environment, and can lead to physical and mental health problems, as well as increased risk of dropping out of school.
- Girls who experience gender-based violence in schools are more likely to miss school, drop out, or perform poorly academically – perpetuating a cycle of poverty and limited opportunities.
- Comprehensive programs that involve teachers, parents, and community members to address the underlying causes of gender-based violence have been shown to be effective in preventing violence and supporting girls' education and empowerment.

Education is a powerful tool for change. When girls and women can go to school, they can access more opportunities, challenge gender stereotypes and break the cycle of poverty.

- Investing in early childhood education is critical for breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage that often perpetuates gender disparities in education.
- 60% of our continent's population is under the age of 25, underscoring the immense potential that education can unlock for the continent's youth, particularly girls.
- When girls can access and finish their education, they have better job opportunities and are more likely to explore work outside the home – building brighter futures for themselves and their communities.
- An extra year of secondary school can increase women's eventual wages by 15-25%. Closing glaring gender gaps in secondary school has real returns for adolescent girls and young women.
- Secondary education also offers protection to adolescent girls and young women against HIV – with drops in HIV incidence among girls who complete secondary education by as much as one-third to one-half in some of our countries.
- Interventions to increase gender equality have extraordinary ripple effects, but maternal education is especially impactful. A study in Malawi found that for each additional year of maternal education, children have a 10% lower chance of dying.

Governments, civil society organisations and partners must prioritise investments, policies and programs to ensure girls can attend school.

- To ensure girls have access to quality education, governments and partners must invest in girls' education by allocating a larger percentage of national budgets to education and directly addressing the barriers that prevent girls from accessing education, such as poverty, early marriage, and gender discrimination.
- Civil society organisations and partners must prioritise gender equity in education through targeted interventions that address the root causes of gender disparities, including by providing mentorship and career guidance.
- Governments, international organisations, and individuals must work together to ensure that girls have safe learning environments when they do access school.

Economic Empowerment Messages

We are equal. Our economic opportunities should be too.

Women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for inclusive and equitable economic growth.

- African women make enormous contributions to economies. However, these are often undervalued or ignored due to social and cultural norms and the prevalence of women's informal work.
- Women's economic empowerment is essential for reducing poverty and driving inclusive growth and development on the continent.
- Developing and expanding financial services specifically designed to meet the needs of women, providing access to education and training, and promoting gender equity in the workplace are all critical components of advancing women's economic empowerment.

Women face significant gender-based barriers to achieving economic independence and security.

- African women encounter various gender-based barriers to participating in the formal economy such as unequal pay, limited access to education and training, unsafe work environments, and discriminatory laws and policies that prevent them from accessing resources like credit, land, and property.
- Women in the region spend 3.4 times more time on unpaid care and domestic work than men. Women's and girls' unpaid care and domestic work often subsidises the costs that sustain families, supports economies, and compensates for the lack of social services – but it robs them of equal education and economic opportunities.
- Women are especially held back from certain sectors of the economy, even in the face of job availability. For example, due to limited opportunities for education in STEM and ICT, women have far fewer chances to participate in the growing technology field.
- Women in many countries across the continent are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence in the workplace, including sexual harassment and assault, which can lead to limited work hours or abstaining from paid work altogether.
- These barriers hinder their economic independence and security, limit their employment opportunities and earning potential, and undervalue their economic contributions.

Promoting women's economic empowerment can reduce poverty, drive inclusive growth and development, and advance gender equity on the continent.

- Collaboration between the public and private sectors can help create opportunities for women in the workforce and support women entrepreneurs, including programs that provide mentorship, networking opportunities, and access to markets.
- Governments have a critical role in developing and implementing economic policies that recognize and financially support women's work and enact and enforce laws that protect women as workers.
- Employers across all sectors must implement gender equitable policies within the workplace and create safe and enabling working environments for women.
- Governments and partners should invest in and support women's organisations, cooperatives, SMEs and programs that promote and foster women's economic empowerment.

Gender-Based Violence Messages

We are equal. Our freedom from violence should be too.

Gender-based violence, in its multiple forms, is an unacceptable degradation of women's and girls' rights.

- GBV ranges from physical, sexual, emotional and other family violence to female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, trafficking and sexual violence as a weapon of war.
- In 2021, an estimated 33% of women in sub-Saharan Africa (aged 15-49) had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in their lifetime.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our countries reported increased cases of violence against women and girls, including intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, child marriage, FGM, and domestic and sexual abuse by family members.
- Sub-Saharan Africa's girls now face the highest risk of child marriage globally, with a 10% increase projected by 2030.
- Given the high levels of stigma and under-reporting of GBV, influenced by discriminatory social and cultural norms and policies, data on GBV is limited and the true figures are likely to be significantly higher.

The impacts of gender-based violence can be broad and longstanding.

- Violence can impact a woman's health and well-being throughout her life.
- GBV is associated with an increased risk of injuries, psychological trauma including depression and anxiety disorders, health complications such as sexually transmitted infections.
- Young women living with HIV are particularly vulnerable to violence where there's a lack of rights-based services and information for youth that meets their diverse needs.

- Female genital mutilation and child marriage impact women's bodily autonomy and health, and can lead to high-risk, unplanned pregnancies.
- Intimate partner violence fear of abuse prevents girls from refusing sex and jeopardises their ability to negotiate condom use.

Gender-based violence is a complex issue that requires addressing its root causes and challenging harmful cultural norms.

- Governments must institute and implement laws and policies that criminalise GBV and help protect women and girls.
- To effectively challenge specific cultural norms that devalue women or justify violence, it is essential to undertake a sustained effort to educate and empower individuals, communities, and institutions. This effort involves rejecting discriminatory practices and beliefs that fuel toxic masculinity, which will require a long-term commitment and investment of resources.
- Finally, comprehensive support and resources must be provided to survivors of gender-based violence, including medical care, counselling, and legal support.