



The So What from BCG

Gender Equality in Africa Has Been Set Back a Generation

Zineb Sqalli, Managing Director and Partner; Phillipa Osakwe-Okoye, Partner

GEORGIE FROST: A decade ago, Africa was closing the gender gap faster than any other region on earth, but then things changed. The pace slowed. Now in some countries, women's economic participation has actually been falling. Insufficient access to education, health care, and job opportunities are part of the problem, but so too is the narrative around the role of women in society. Changing that will do more than achieve gender equality, it will help improve the prosperity of African economies and societies, and in turn, the world. I'm Georgie Frost and this is The So What from BCG.

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PHILLIPA OSAKWE-OKOYE: Research shows that Africa has the potential to boost its GDP significantly, in fact, as much as \$300 billion by 2025 if we can get this right.

GEORGIE FROST: Today I'm talking to Zineb Sqalli, BCG managing director and partner in the Casablanca office, and Phillipa Osakwe-Okoye, BCG partner in the Lagos office.

ZINEB SQALLI: Today, Africa's gender gap is similar to the world average. So if I may give just a few explanations or illustrations of this, out of 146 countries that are usually ranked for this global gender gap, you have countries like Rwanda that is number six, Namibia that is number eight.

But at the same time, 50 of the lowest ranking countries in this same ranking are African countries. Nigeria comes 123rd, Morocco, my

home country, comes at 136, et cetera. So there is no such thing as one situation of African women. But this being said, from 2010 to 2016, Africa was closing the gender gap faster than any other region in the world, in all dimensions actually, education, health care, participation to the economy, et cetera.

GEORGIE FROST: Why? What was it doing? How was it doing that?

ZINEB SQALLI: So historically there were massive investments that were made on schooling, both for boys and girls. But given that the gap was higher for the girls than for the boys, so they were able to catch up. So that's on the education part, for example, partially catch up, let's say. There was a lot of investments that were made both by the governments themselves, but also by also using investments, foreign investments that were coming from GFIs, et cetera, to really upgrade the infrastructures in terms of education, in terms of health care, and there was this step-change there.

But what happened starting 2016, and that's actually the case in every economic crisis, is that we see that every economic crisis anywhere in the world, and especially in Africa, is going to impact women disproportionately more than men because they will be in this more delicate situation or fragile situation.

So what's happened in 2016 is that this pace, this rapid pace of catching up, as I said, in the gender gap, has actually slowed. Because of the commodity prices, then after that the global downturn and the pandemic. So women's economic participation specifically began declining quite significantly, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.



COVID has set the gender gap globally by one generation. This is from the World Economic Forum who has published that we lost 20 years in the gender gap. So today the gender gap is 120 plus years, and these 20 plus years are related to the onset of the pandemic.

GEORGIE FROST: So Phillipa, obviously there are, as Zineb's just pointed out, look, this has set back women's progress by 20 years across the board, but then there are unique situations on the continent of Africa, and then there are unique issues within each country. So talk to me from the Nigerian perspective, if you would.

PHILLIPA OSAKWE-OKOYE: Sure, absolutely. In Nigeria, we're seeing some specific and complex barriers to women's progress. I think one major issue is the lack of meaningful and safe job opportunities. So women are not just struggling to find work, but also to find work where they feel respected and they have opportunities to grow. Unfortunately, workplace harassment is all too common and women face significant hurdles in achieving independence and battling legal discrimination.

The challenge of independence is quite stark. Women often encounter skepticism in basic situations like renting a house, particularly if they're single. In short, there's a significant room for impact with over 20% of women citing legal discrimination in the study that we took and saying that it really impacts their daily lives and decision-making.

The point you raised around the differences is quite emphasized. So if you move a bit more southern away from Nigeria, for instance, to South Africa, the situation is equally troubling, but it's a very different nature, right? So there, it's really a conversation more around domestic violence, and our studies revealed 80% of women see this as a potential challenge beyond just the home, but also safety and security in public spaces. And while we recognize the conversation there is evolving, it's still a space where there's a lot of change. So it's this point around being very specific and complex is one to really highlight.

GEORGIE FROST: Zineb, one theme that came up in some of the research that you've done into this was around the narrative of women's role. Now, we spoke about across the board, I imagine there are many, many countries in the world where the narrative of women's role in society is a stumbling block. But you found that's very much the case particularly on the continent of Africa.

ZINEB SQALLI: We surveyed 6,000 men and women in Africa precisely because we wanted to understand what are the roadblocks women are facing. So we did ask questions like, is it as important for boys and girls to go to school? If the husband, father is able to provide for his family, do you think the woman should be working, for example?

We actually found that there were major differences across countries and across cultures because the cultural element there is very important. If I may say in a very schematic way, you have a significant difference between North Africa, to start with, and the southern parts of Africa. In North Africa, for example, the levels of women access to education is quite high. But at the same time, you have a participation to the economy of women that is very low. In Morocco, for example, we're talking about 19%, one-nine. So 19% of women that are in age of accessing the job market are either working or looking for a job, which is very, very small, and it's a number that is actually declining year over year.

One of the major reasons behind this is that although they are educated, the narrative around women is the most successful role for a woman is to be a mother, and if I'm being provocative, is to be the mother of a successful boy. This is something that is very entrenched in the mindsets of society at large, which means including women.

So in Morocco and Egypt, when you ask the question that I mentioned earlier, if the husband's or father's income is sufficient to cover household needs, should the wife or daughter be working? You have around 50% of both men and women that we surveyed would tell you that the wife or daughter should not be working.



While when you look at the same question in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, you're closer to 10%, between 10 and 15%. Now, it doesn't mean that the narrative in these other countries is empowering, but it's a different type of narrative. So if you look at the southern part of Africa, women have made significant progress when it comes to labor force participation.

But at the same time, what's happening there, and Phillipa mentioned it, violence is by far the most daunting factor. Economic empowerment has actually moved quite significantly. But from the women that we have surveyed, this has created a different trend, which is that women are starting to be perceived as a threat, which could actually be one of the drivers of domestic violence, for example.

GEORGIE FROST: I just want to zoom out just a little bit, Phillipa, and just ask you the question of why this is such a significant topic beyond the sort of, "of course we want empowerment of women. We're three women here, successful women here," but why does it matter? Why is this such an important topic for Africa, and as I said at the start, for the world? For the business community, what does this mean, for CEOs in Africa globally? What's the significance of this?

PHILLIPA OSAKWE-OKOYE: Georgie, we can't express enough that advancing women in Africa and even globally is not just a social imperative, rather it's an economic strategy. Research shows that we know that Africa has the potential to boost its GDP significantly, in fact, as much as \$300 billion by 2025 if we can get this right. It isn't just about the numbers, it's about unleashing the full potential of half of Africa's population.

Women are at the heart of community health and education and are key for driving that sustainable societal progress that we all hope to see. This is why we like to emphasize to our clients, business leaders in Africa and beyond, gender parity isn't just a nice to have, it's a must have. It opens up a world of diverse talent.

GEORGIE FROST: You're in Lagos. Looking around you, your friends, the people you pass in the street. What will it take to change the

narrative? What are you seeing? What benefit do you see to that country particularly by having a really strong female workforce without all the threats of violence and narrative and all that sort of thing?

PHILLIPA OSAKWE-OKOYE: Nigeria is an interesting place because we have various models that just highlight what success could look like and the opportunities for growth. If you look at the finance industry, today you have an industry where the leadership in the banking space really is dominated by women. You have government driving clear policies and creating the right infrastructure to support change.

We have business leaders who are bringing value-based conversations into the workplace and creating those inclusive environments that can really drive those discussions. But that's not true of all the other sectors. We have a lot of sectors that can really drive impact health, legal, et cetera, and there are opportunities there.

You asked about my communities. I'm seeing a lot of women, very hardworking, intelligent women, who again are just putting in their all. What would it take to support them, those policies, those fair work practices in the workplace, equal pay, which we can have more conversation around? Also, when we bring it into more concrete initiatives for the business world to pursue, it's taking this holistic lens to supporting businesses, right? I know a lot of great women entrepreneurs that would benefit from more inclusive engagement practices.

GEORGIE FROST: Zineb, is this business-led or does this require global intervention, government regulation, policy?

ZINEB SQALLI: My personal belief is that the private sector can do much more in Africa than maybe what they think they can do. Because on the continent, there are companies that have significant sizes and that can by themselves actually create momentums for the rest of their industry and even more broadly for the rest of the country.



So of course you could say that this is a public matter, as in it's the public authorities that need to tackle this head on because definitely there is things around changing the laws, changing education programs, so things that are, I would say, clearly in the prerogatives and the responsibility of the public authorities and the government authorities.

But beyond that, the private sector has really a key role to play in showcasing role models, in showing that women can be successful business partners, and at the same time caring mothers and valuable elements of society, and that they don't need to choose between these two hats actually. They can also have a significant impact on women entrepreneurship. The biggest share of women entrepreneurs is in Africa, and Phillipa mentioned the role of the financial industry, for example.

So women entrepreneurship can be a part where Africa can surprise the world and Africa can lead the way exactly as what was done, for example, in mobile banking because they have this population of young women entrepreneurs. So there can be room for innovation that the public sector and the financial sector in particular can be tackling.

GEORGIE FROST: Phillipa, what role do you see the private sector and government playing to address this issue? How do we begin to accelerate change?

PHILLIPA OSAKWE-OKOYE: At the heart of it is the recognition that boosting economic productivity and participation is a strategic necessity, right, for economic growth and also for building sustainable competitive advantage. And so, with the private sector, it's really about harnessing that value of improved diversity and working backwards to understand, what are those core elements of the business that have to sort of adapt to really make this possible, thinking about creating those strong sort of competitive advantages that are institutionalized, right? So we always talk about fair pay, equitable promotion practices, flexible working arrangements, safe and inclusive workplace culture.

I remember walking into a banking hall, this was a couple of years ago, and there was one toilet for women, one bathroom facility for women, and there were several for men. I've gone back to the same banking hall and there are several for women and several for men. That's real progress. It's a small thing, but it's real progress, right? So that's the kind of small but big thinking that we'd like to see. One more thing though is while we recognize that a lot of progress has been made, there's still so much room for growth.

GEORGIE FROST: Well, talk to me then. Let's be really practical about this. When you speak to businesses or when you see these sort of gaps, what are you saying to them? What are the steps that businesses can take, that leaders can take to actually make sure that these diversity strategies, or whatever they want to call it, are actually really working and being felt by women? Give me a blueprint. Do we have one?

ZINEB SQALLI: In a nutshell, we tell them three things. One is we tell them connect to business. Don't do gender diversity or gender equality, or however we call it, because it is the right thing to do from a moral standpoint. Do it because it is a smart thing to do. This is not an HR topic. This is a C-level topic precisely because it's connected to value, precisely because we're doing this so that we can generate more innovation, because we can reduce our risk exposure, because we can increase our revenues and the bottom line.

The second thing that we say is avoid tokenism. Every single company in the world would tell you that they have the diversity measures or strategy or roadmap, or however they call it, but very few have a very deep understanding of what are the roadblocks that women are facing in their organizations.

The third thing that we tell them is this requires an involvement of the whole ecosystem. Companies, especially in Africa, and getting back to what Phillipa is saying, they have a responsibility to improve gender diversity within their four walls, but also outside of their four walls through, for example, inclusive supply chains. But it needs to start internally before you would go



externally. Otherwise, there is kind of a legitimacy and incoherence risk.

Our research has shown that, even at a global level, that there is around 90% of the companies that have diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies in place and actions. But, only 20% of the employees that are being surveyed actually say that they feel that this has an impact and that they benefit from it. So, it means that the intention is not enough and that kind of the, I can call it kind of a gender washing right, is definitely not enough. And that it actually takes very thorough understanding of what we call the moments of truth within a company to be able to design and sustain over time the targeted relevant measures. That will not only get to hiring more women because every client I have been working with thinks that the problem is on the recruiting front. But if you are able to recruit 50, even 60, 70% of women, but if you have a leaky pipeline, you're not solving the problem right? And so it requires a thorough strategy and understanding of these roadblocks to be able to have the right recruiting, but more importantly retention, leadership advancement strategies

GEORGIE FROST: Do you have any examples where this is working, solutions have worked or are being worked on now?

PHILLIPA OSAKWE-OKOYE: Some of our global philanthropy clients who are thinking, "How can we support key enablers that really drive momentum in this space?" So that's thinking about data tracking in governance as an example, because Zineb mentioned it's really about driving value for the businesses, but you can't do that if you can't measure it, and if you're not tracking it and reporting on it and just bringing visibility around the progress.

So that's an important one and there's still a lot of room there. There's also leadership engagement, just bringing awareness to the topic and sharing of best practices, and then also highlighting the success stories, awards and schemes, et cetera.

Then there's the shared learning that comes from bringing in those examples from other regions where it's worked to really equip the initiatives

that are happening on the ground to be successful. So if you think about Nigeria, for instance, mentorship, it's really taking up, and I think that's true for other parts of Africa as well.

A lot of these sort of initiatives are still at a very small scale and can benefit from those global sort of partnerships that really help boost not only their credibility, but also build those capabilities for more sustainable impact. That's really where we're seeing some of those other partners really come in and add power with their strength and advocacy and platform to really direct resources in that way.

ZINEB SQALLI: Another interesting example is for companies who work in male-dominated industries, for example, take mining, who would consider that the pipeline is actually, so the pipeline of women in the engineering schools, for example, or in universities, is actually not that diverse. So what they do is that they would tackle the problem very upfront, very upstream in the process where they would have initiatives where they would send female ambassadors of the company to these universities, to these schools so that they can foster different paths and so that they can also have both, I would say students, both male and female, think that there is no such thing as a job for women and job for men, right?

I had one of my clients at a mining company telling me that actually driving these trucks is today much more like a PlayStation game, so everybody can do it. So this goes a long way, of course, for the company itself because then it will generate a bigger pipeline for women in these type of jobs. But it also goes a long way in terms of biases for the general population, which draws back to the conversation that we had earlier around the narrative. It also contributes to changing the narrative around the role of women.

GEORGIE FROST: Zineb, Phillipa, thank you so much for your time and thank you for listening. If you want to check out the research they were referring to, there is a link in the show notes of this podcast episode. We'd also love to know your thoughts. To get in contact, leave us a message at



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