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PERSPECTIVE

The Roots of Gender Inequality Grow Deeper Than Technology Can Reach

Gender equality requires more nuanced approaches, investment in intersectional feminist-led solutions, and a focus on underlying social norms.



#CSW67-Insights

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By: Thoai Ngo

Every two minutes, a woman dies from a maternity-related cause. That number is [down significantly from two decades ago](#), but it's still three times the target set by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In fact, [progress toward almost all gender-related SDGs has stalled](#). The pandemic destabilized food production, damaged health and education infrastructure, and eliminated millions of jobs—all changes that [hit women hardest](#). Violence against women and girls is rising rather than falling, and almost one in three women experience sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Early and forced child marriage remains widespread and female genital mutilation and cutting are still common practices. The United States has reversed five decades of progress on abortion rights, the persecution of transgender people has become a prominent feature of public discourse, Iran has [reacted violently](#) to a massive wave of protests for women's rights, and Afghanistan's girls and women [are once again barred](#) from its schools and from many jobs.

This is the context against which the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has gathered this March to discuss its [priority theme](#) of technological innovation and digital education. We should pause to note that the issues just listed are mostly not amenable to technological solutions. They are rooted in discriminatory and limiting ideas about gender that we construct through

everyday biases and the expectations we teach to our children. And there are structural barriers, created by sexist and transphobic laws and policies. Participants in this year's CSW Session will rightly point to the ways that digital tools can expand access to learning resources, help women find jobs, community, and information online, and even work around some gender-based social or economic restrictions. But these benefits are an incomplete picture of technology's effects.

Keeping up with the digital age must also mean ending the unique risks and downsides that online life brings for girls and women. These harms include online stalking and harassment, the erasure of privacy, and a rapidly growing crisis of adolescent mental health fueled by a vicious digital culture of performance, comparison, and consumption. Alongside offline differences in income and opportunity, these factors create a substantial [gendered "digital divide"](#) in access to online services. Simultaneously, social media platforms are creating [new dynamics in the spread of gendered misinformation](#) and blocking women from participating in activism and public life.

Gendered differences in digital access intersect with other forms of technological inequality. [More than a third](#) of the global population remains fully offline. That disparity between [low- and middle-income countries \(LMICs\) and their richest peers](#) will be built into the foundations of any development efforts that rely on the internet. So too will the similar divides that exist between rich and poor within each country, and between urban and rural populations.

This year's CSW theme thus highlights a pair of interrelated problems. Gender equality cannot be achieved using tools that perpetuate "elite capture". And progress toward justice must address the root causes of inequality—the social norms, the laws, and the other concrete factors that every society creates to be in favor of cisgender men. From the perspective of a researcher at a nonprofit that has been deeply engaged in [gender equality and equity](#), I see three broad ways to improve our collective efforts toward achieving gender equality.

First, we need to start interventions early in life and coordinate programs across sectors. A preponderance of empowerment program focuses on adolescent girls or young women, but that effort often comes too late. An estimated [219 million](#) children under five lack the resources and support for baseline social and cognitive development. [Entrenched patterns of discrimination against girls](#) cause them to disproportionately suffer stunted physical, mental, and socioemotional growth. Girls worldwide receive less [parental engagement](#) and have fewer opportunities for [learning](#) and [play](#). Negative stereotypes are taught and enforced starting in early childhood and can [persist into adolescence](#).

Changing these realities requires more than providing specific material resources. For example, a randomized evaluation from the [GIRL Center](#) challenged the widespread assumption that ending period poverty will naturally increase school enrollment for girls. Distributing menstrual pads combined with reproductive health (RH) education had [positive effects](#) on self-confidence and RH knowledge, but did not affect educational outcomes. By contrast, the Council's Adolescent Girls Initiative in Kenya compared several combinations of empowerment programming, education-conditional cash transfers, health-focused social groups, and wealth education, and found multiplicative, pandemic-resistant, long-term effects from providing these options in parallel.

To leverage lessons learned from the principle of "start early and work across sectors," the Council and our partners are currently building GROW, a program to create equal opportunities for play-

based learning for children under six. The program combines reading materials, games, toys, outdoor play, and visits to parks and farms. Drawing on a rich body of evidence about shifting gender norms, it will work with teachers and schools, parents and grandparents, to change harmful beliefs about gender and open new doors.

A second principle is inspired by the challenges of the digital divide and the risk of elite capture. Remedy can only come from practicing intersectional inclusion as we map out strategies for investment and development. Policy and program development must include marginalized groups in meaningful ways; without them, we perpetuate the exclusion of their skills and talents. Women who are migrants, women of color, women with disabilities, Indigenous women, sexual and gender minorities (SGMs), and those affected by conflict are routinely neglected by socioeconomic development programs. Many also live under direct legal discrimination.

Much of the Council's work has put this principle into practice. During the pandemic, the [VoCeS-19 project](#) used innovative online tools to survey more than 160,000 young people in Mexico (where [75% of the population has internet access](#)), and connect many SGMs to accessible care for mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and SGBV. In India, the Council's [Our Health Matters](#) study, led by a steering committee of transmasculine people, was able to document the health needs of a group that is often excluded from research and by healthcare providers. In Guatemala, we collaborate with young Indigenous women who are reviving traditional practices and building new forms of community, exchanging knowledge and resources to ameliorate the gender-skewed impact of climate change on economic opportunity and quality of life.

Finally, the path forward depends on detailed, reliable, sensitive data on the needs and demands of marginalized women as well as what kinds of changes would most affect entrenched gender discrimination. Much of the data we need to design effective programming and policy is not available. For example, earlier this year, we published a [review of the literature](#) on the experiences of SGM youth in LMICs. While we did find a small body of articles that included SGMs in their survey, many conflated sex and gender identities and there was an overall lack of consistency. Through [Baobab](#)—an Africa-based and African-led consortium—the Council and our partners are bringing selected, rigorous sexual reproductive health and rights surveys into refugee settings in the East Horn of Africa for the first time.

Getting such data will require other changes to the ways we think about gender and do research. Feminist organizations run by and for local communities must control and direct our efforts. Recent evidence of the power of this approach comes from major victories for abortion rights in [Mexico](#), the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), and [Colombia](#). Feminist and post-colonial principles must guide our research, elevating the voices of women and expertise from the majority world.

Ultimately, achieving gender equality and equity will require all of us to engage with the root causes, rather than limiting ourselves to alleviating its material symptoms one at a time.