Building forward better: Why pandemic recovery needs to embrace transformation to achieve equality

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1. Effects of the pandemic on gender equality
The pandemic elucidated gender inequalities and exacerbated them, especially for women from marginalized groups.

For every 3 months of lockdown, an additional 15 million additional cases of gender-based violence expected. COVID-19 pandemic is likely to cause a one-third reduction in progress towards ending gender-based violence by 2030.

(UNFPA, 2020)

“Women have been hit harder than men by job losses around the world due to the pandemic and their employment levels are likely to recover more slowly as they continue to do more unpaid care work”.

(WEF, 9/12/2021)

....as well as unmet needs for family planning, increases in child marriages, loss of assets, debt traps and more....
An entire extra generation has to wait for gender equality

(World Economic Forum, 2021)

“When it comes to gender equality, we are not talking about a lost decade. We are talking about almost four”

UNCTAD, Oct 2021

136 years
2. Why?
Underlying structural barriers

- Pandemic and measures to address it took place in socio-political, economic contexts that were already unequal and inequitable
- Not causing, but revealing and worsening inequalities because of the underlying barriers ‘built into’ societies, markets, and development
- Deeply embedded, naturalized inequitable and constraining ‘rules of the game’:
  - Policies (& formulation, translation)
  - Systems (e.g., statistics/data, finance, innovation)
  - Social and gender norms
- Create and re-create inequalities...
- ‘Weak link in the development chain’: In the face of shocks, underlying barriers drive societies and markets at all scales towards worsening intersectional gender inequalities
Why weren’t previous gender investments enough to buffer the shocks?

- In theory, development recognizes that achieving gender equality will rely on amplifying **agency**, balancing gender **relations**, and enabling **structures**

- **Yet**, to date much development has de facto **narrowed** to agency...and then further narrowed agency...

- Many gender approaches and investments tended to:
  - Address visible gender gaps, eg women’s ‘participation’ in programs or in economic opportunities (but limited)...
  - Target women (only), heroes or vulnerable, aiming to build their capacities

- Missing out on addressing structural barriers, these represent ‘empowerment lite’ (Cornwall, 2018), ‘tinkering’ (Lawless et al. 2021) or **above the waterline** approaches...
‘Shallower’ approaches targeting individuals

What **women** do (roles), capacities, participation *in* programs...
‘Shallower’ approaches

Targeting individuals

What *women* do (roles), capacities, participation in programs...

‘Deeper’ approaches

Transforming structures

How *society says* women and men should behave

How *society values* people of different genders, different identities
What women chose and act on...

Needed for sustained, systemic change

Amplifying agency

Balancing relations

Transforming structures

How society says women and men should behave

How society values people of different genders, different identities
3. Two insights for moving ahead
Instead of building back, build forward better
• Opportunity to surface what was not working in ‘normal’:
  • ‘naturalized inequalities’
  • naturalized yet constraining norms, systems and policies...
• Break ‘lock in’ on pre-existing but constraining structures...
• Engender resilience via transformation...
Instead of building back, build forward better
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  • naturalized yet constraining norms, systems and policies...
• Break ‘lock in’ on pre-existing but constraining structures...
• Engender resilience via transformation...

Assess and opt for transforming underlying structural barriers
• Level the playing field, change the rules of the game
• Build on emerging best practices
• At multiple scales...
  ....to create a tipping point
Emerging transformative strategies

@ macro, meso levels

- **Digital and educational messaging**
  Children’s television, schools

- **Feminist policies (and budgets)**
  Including land, care infrastructure

- **Changing gender blind data systems**
  Breaking the cycle of invisibility

- **Transforming financial services**
  “Making banks more woman-able, not women more bank-able”

@ local levels (development programming)

- **Gender transformative approaches**
  Methods engaging men and women, girls and boys, sparking reflexivity, awareness, ideas and commitment for change in norms & dynamics

Source: McDougall et al., 2022
The necessary foundation for gender transformative change is that ‘those doing the research and development’ need to begin by questioning themselves and their own perceptions and biases…”  
(McDougall et al. forthcoming)

@within development organizations
...more internally and externally inclusive, equitable, empowering....
Recap: Two take aways

1. Instead of building back, **build forward better**

2. Invest in **transforming** underlying structural barriers at all scales... to ultimately create a **tipping point** towards equality
Thank you—and your insights are welcome!
References


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