



# A GAP BETWEEN POLICY INTENTION AND LIVED REALITY

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About Author:

**Name:** Gifty Boatemaa Annan

**Role:** Global Lead, HERizon Africa

**Email:** [gifty@herizonafrica.org](mailto:gifty@herizonafrica.org)

## The Maputo Protocol

Decades ago, a growing concern began to emerge across the African continent: despite the existence of broader human rights frameworks, many African women continued to experience persistent inequalities in their everyday lives. These inequalities were further reinforced by long-standing cultural practices and entrenched patriarchal systems that shaped daily realities within households (often considered the primary safe space for women and children) as well as within communities, institutions and leadership structures across national and regional domains.

This growing urgency eventually led to a historic moment on 11 July 2003, when the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, widely known as the Maputo Protocol, during its Second Ordinary Summit held in Maputo.

Beyond the Maputo Protocol, several other gender equality frameworks have since been developed at national, continental and global levels to further strengthen commitments toward inclusive participation, equitable representation and shared societal progress.

## Two Decades Gone...

As I reflect on the progress and implementation of these commitments across the continent after more than two decades, it is evident that while governments and key stakeholders have made significant strides in advancing gender equality across varying spheres, the world still remains considerably far from achieving full gender parity. According to the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2025, the current trajectory suggests that full parity may still be approximately 123 years away. The weight of this reality is worth pausing on.

More than two decades have passed since the adoption & ratification of key gender equality commitments, yet it is impossible to ignore the widening gap between policy intention and lived reality. While these frameworks were envisioned as catalysts to advance equitable participation of both men and women, implementation has often fallen short of translating the everyday experiences of many women across the continent into tangible equitable circumstances. In practice, progress has been uneven and, in some cases, slow to materialize beyond policy documents and institutional declarations.

While many view gender equality as an essential pathway toward fairness and balanced societal progress, others approach the concept with skepticism, discomfort, misunderstanding, or even resistance. As a result, gender equality has evolved into a term that often garners mixed feelings across different genders, societies, institutions, generations, and ideological perspectives.



## Who Is to Blame for the Lapse in Gender Progress?

The growing misconceptions surrounding gender equality cannot be attributed to a single individual, gender, or institution. Rather, they are the result of a complex combination of Historical Systems, Societal Conditioning, Cultural Narratives, Misinformation, Normalization of Unequal Structures, and at times, Poor Communication surrounding the intended purpose of gender equity itself.

For generations, many societies have operated within deeply rooted social structures that shaped perceptions of gender roles, leadership, access, and influence. As conversations around inclusion and equality evolve, resistance, misunderstanding, and fear of displacement have naturally emerged in some spaces, particularly where gender equity is incorrectly interpreted as competition, superiority, or exclusion rather than fairness and shared societal progress.

Additionally, polarized public discourse, social media narratives, selective activism, and the oversimplification of gender conversations have also contributed to confusion and division. For instance, statements such as *“Gender equality means women want to dominate men”* or *“Men are the problem”* often reduce complex gender issues, societal inequalities, and broader developmental conversations into overly simplistic, one-sided, emotional, and misleading narratives that fail to capture the nuance, depth, and multidimensional realities surrounding the subject. In some instances, the language used around gender issues may unintentionally alienate rather than educate, making constructive dialogue more difficult.

## The Real Essence of Gender Equality

Despite the hardcore debates, gross misconceptions, and entrenched controversies surrounding the concept of gender equality, its original intent remains clear and unchanging. At its core, gender equality is not about competition, displacement, or the elevation of one gender over another. Rather, **it is the pursuit of wholeness within society.**

Research overwhelmingly confirms that gender equality is a formidable lever for sustainable development on all fronts. A society is deprived of its fullest economic, political or institutional potential when opportunities, representation, leadership, and influence are unevenly distributed or when entire groups remain systematically excluded from contributing meaningfully to its growth. Gender parity therefore seeks to close these gaps in order to strengthen the collective fabric of society through equitable participation and shared progress.

Although the primary focus of the framework is to create a more equitable playing field for women and girls across various spheres of society, its implementation also holds significant and far-reaching benefits for men and boys.



In highlighting some of its broader benefits for men and boys, gender equality helps dismantle harmful stereotypes and long-standing societal pressures that often impose rigid expectations on men regarding masculinity, emotional expression, leadership, financial responsibility, and social identity. In many societies, men are frequently conditioned to suppress vulnerability, carry disproportionate economic burdens, or conform to narrow definitions of strength and success. Over time, these expectations can create emotional strain, unhealthy social pressures, limited self-expression, and barriers to healthier relationships and wellbeing.

By promoting more balanced and inclusive societal structures, gender equality creates space for men and boys to embrace their full humanity by engaging more freely and authentically within families, workplaces, institutions, and communities, without being constrained by restrictive social conditioning. It encourages healthier models of masculinity grounded in the wholesome ideal of purposeful leadership, complementary partnership and shared contribution rather than ego-driven dominance or suppression justified by patriarchal hierarchy.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the broader vision of gender equality is not centered on exclusion or dominance, but on wholeness, inclusion, and sustainable societal progress. Its success is most meaningful when both women and men are empowered to thrive, contribute, lead, and coexist within systems that are fair, balanced, and human-centered.

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# About HERizon Africa

HERizon Africa is a Pan-African, Women-centered Hub committed to advancing women's leadership & representation, strengthening women's economic agency, and cultivating constructive male allyship across the continent and its global diaspora.

## MISSION

Established with a bold mission to champion women's leadership and holistic agency through Dialogues, Capacity Building & Regional Collaboration.

## VISION

We seek to become the continental champion for Inclusive Development

 [info@herizonafrica.org](mailto:info@herizonafrica.org)

 PLOT No. 49, Haatso RD, North Legon - Accra, Ghana

 +233 303 965259