



HAITI'S UNTAPPED POTENTIAL:

# An assessment of the barriers to gender equality



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# Executive Summary

While the world over has dealt with the mortality, pressures on health systems, and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, Haiti has been additionally rocked by earthquakes, hurricanes, and political upheaval in recent years. These shocks come on top of existing fragilities, exacerbating dangers for marginalized and vulnerable populations and stalling progress toward gender equality. This gender assessment seeks to describe the status of gender gaps and gender inequalities in Haiti on the heels of this difficult period. In terms of gender equality, Haiti has traditionally lagged behind its peers in the Caribbean, and the types of events mentioned above have exacerbated existing inequalities. The assessment takes a broad and deep look at Haiti through a limited data landscape, relying on multiple data sources to identify gender gaps and inequalities that can serve as opportunities and points of entry for future policy.

The main part of this assessment examines human capital endowments, economic opportunities, and voice and agency along the lines of the *2012 World Development Report* (World Bank 2012) and the World Bank Group's *Gender Strategy* (World Bank 2016). The second part of the paper examines four key topics in depth, identifying gender gaps and barriers to gender equality through an examination of the relevant data and the literature.

Several key insights arise from part one, the stocktaking, notably that women are disadvantaged in many areas, though boys are also in danger of falling behind. A few salient findings follow:

- Broadly speaking, educational attainment is low among Haitians. A closer look reveals that gender gaps in secondary and tertiary school enrollments at the higher levels have reversed, indicating higher rates of dropout for boys that leave them vulnerable to the risks associated with low educational attainment.
- With a lifetime risk of maternal death of 1 in 67 (as of 2017), women in Haiti have the second-highest maternal mortality rate of women in countries in the world outside of Sub-Saharan Africa; only women in Afghanistan experience a higher rate.

- According to the latest available data (from 2017), 1 in 4 women ages 15 to 49 years has experienced intimate partner violence and many women cannot make decisions about their own health care or spending.

Turning to the focused analysis, the first deep dive—on labor market entry—describes the disadvantages women face in entering the labor market. Alongside strong gendered sectoral segregation, women's opportunities for advancement are limited by low educational attainment, few opportunities for formal sector workers, and a culture of impunity around sexual harassment. In addition, the pandemic has decreased labor market attachment for women. The analysis pays particular attention to the *madan saras*, women traders who link rural areas to markets and thus ensure access to goods for many, but often at the expense of their own safety.

Haiti has a moderately egalitarian legal and regulatory environment with several key laws in place to support gender equality, but it lacks codification and enforcement in some areas. Haiti ranks lower than its neighbors in the Caribbean in terms of gender-equitable legislation, and even where legislation supports gender equality, enforcement of these laws is perceived as limited. Haiti has laws that support gender-equitable access to land and assets, prohibit sexual harassment, delineate quotas for public administration positions by gender, and even provide some maternity leave benefits. The extent to which the average Haitian can access remedies or is subject to enforcement is likely quite low, however, limiting the ability of these laws to contribute to gender-equitable outcomes.

Social norms and individual attitudes about gender equality also may govern behaviors and gender-equitable societal outcomes to some extent. We find that younger Haitians display more-progressive attitudes toward gender equality, though these data require updating to identify more-current trends.

An analysis of risky behaviors and the resulting health issues shows that while women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, men engage in riskier behaviors and have a lower life expectancy. While boys' declining school attendance rates are generally alarming in that they reduce future earning potential and development, they are particularly worrisome in Haiti, where dropout is associated with higher rates of crime and association with gangs. For girls, school dropout is associated with early pregnancy and marriage, both of which have health implications. Boys are more likely to use alcohol and drugs, while girls and women are more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence.

Over the past 15 years, Haiti has experienced a series of devastating natural disasters, exacting huge human and economic costs. The prevailing gender norms and inequality in terms of economic security make already-marginalized groups more vulnerable when it comes to natural disasters. Women are especially at risk during disasters due to their lack of access to information; the lack of preparedness and planning involving and designed for women; their unique health, privacy, and shelter needs; and their lower access to stable wages, assets, and savings, which hinders preparation. Haiti's geographic location makes it subject to more than its share of natural disasters and climate change will only exacerbate their impacts, highlighting the need to examine the needs of women in these situations in order to preclude further marginalization.

Improving opportunities for women and shrinking gender gaps require well-designed and broad-based policies to support labor market entry for women, improve safety and security in the workforce and in society at large for women entrepreneurs in particular and for Haitians generally, support high-quality education for all, and strengthen and enforce laws that promote gender equality and opportunity. The current context hinders the implementation of some long-term policies that could promote gender equality, but aid organizations, women's organizations, and other local organizations can implement programming and encourage the government where it is functioning to enact policies in the short term to ease constraints for women and make disaster response more gender equitable. The assessment discusses these policies in more depth, highlighting those that are feasible and have been successfully implemented in fragile contexts and those that will require long-term investment and stable institutions to achieve the desired outcomes. An emerging focus on ensuring that men and boys are not left behind is crucial to broad-based policy. While there are no silver bullets or quick fixes, the Gender Assessment provides a descriptive tool to understand the challenges ahead.

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