Research Paper

Ineffectiveness of the United Nations' Gender Equality Program in Madagascar: An Empowerment-Based Analysis (2015–2021)

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Abstract

Gender inequality is a significant challenge in Madagascar, with women facing persistent gaps in education, employment and political participation. The United Nations (UN) has launched multiple initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality particularly in the education sector. This study explored why these efforts, implemented between 2015 and 2021 failed to achieve their intended outcomes despite sustained international support and resource allocation. Using the concept of empowerment as its analytical lens, the research adopted a qualitative approach drawing on secondary data from academic journals, development reports and government publications. The findings reveal that while there have been initiatives such as enhanced school enrolment for girls and the implementation of gender equality employment policies, substantial systematic barriers persist. These constraints include established gender stereotypes, limited institutional capacity, insufficient local ownership and poor coordination between international entities and local stakeholders. The results demonstrate that addressing gender disparity in Madagascar requires context-sensitive and inclusive tactics, transcending conventional top-down methods. Enhancing national education systems, enacting gender-responsive employment policies, and augmenting women's participation in political processes are crucial for attaining enduring gender equality. These initiatives are essential for promoting a more inclusive and sustainable growth trajectory for Madagascar.

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1.   Introduction

Madagascar, a large island national located off the Southeast coast Africa, is globally acknowledged for its biodiversity and cultural legacy. Nevertheless, it is also ranked as one of the poorest nations in the world, with over 75% of its populace existing beneath the poverty level, as per world Bank data. The widespread economic difficulties are further aggravated by enduring gender inequality, especially in education, work, and political engagement. In rural and underprivileged areas of Madagascar, women are significantly more likely than boys to drop out of school due to a combination of early marriage, gender specific household obligations and inadequate access to secondary education and sanitation infrastructure. Despite significant progress in attaining gender equality in primary education, variations persist in secondary and higher education, as well as in women's representation in governance and the formal labour market. In regions such as Menabe and Ihorombe, female literacy rates significantly behind those of males, and a considerable proportion of girls become mothers prior to adulthood, with 31% of females aged 15–19 having commenced childbearing. These realities illustrate persistent cultural norms and systematic constraints that hinder women's empowerment and sustainable development.[1]

Given the significance of gender equality in global development, the urgency of addressing these persistent disparities cannot be overstated. The 2015 introduction of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) signified a renewed commitment to global fairness, with Goal 5 explicitly focused on attaining gender equality and empowering all women and girls.[2] During this period in Madagascar, international organisations, notably the United Nations and its agencies like UNICEF and UN Women, intensified their efforts by implementing various programs to enhance educational access, economic participation, and reproductive health for women and girls. UNICEF's "Let Us Learn" project prominently offered educational loans, constructed schools, and advocated for policy improvements.[3]

Notwithstanding these efforts and substantial financial and technical contributions from the international community, Madagascar persists in its deficiency in attaining critical gender equality measures. The disparity between programmatic inputs and developmental outcomes raises essential questions on the efficacy of these activities. The challenges as externally imposed frameworks are adequately tailored to the socio-cultural reality of the populations they aim to serve. Comprehending the obstacles that hinder the success of gender-focused efforts in Madagascar is essential for enhancing international development strategies and guaranteeing that forthcoming programs are both inclusive and effective.[4]

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[1]   World Bank, "Madagascar Gender Assessment: Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities for Greater Empowerment of Women and Girls in Madagascar," World Bank, 2024, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/madagascar/publication/madagascar-afe-gender-assessment.

[2]   Sonya G. Smith and Jeanne C. Sinkford, "Gender Equality in the 21st Century: Overcoming Barriers to Women's Leadership in Global Health," *Journal of Dental Education* 86, no. 9 (September 27, 2022): 1144–73, https://doi.org/10.1002/jdd.13059.

[3]   Fanantenana Raholiarimanana and Akira Ishida, "Accurate Targeting in Social Assistance Programs in Southern Madagascar," *International Journal of Development Issues* 24, no. 2 (June 10, 2025): 151–69, https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDI-04-2024-0101.

[4]   For further understanding, *see, e.g.,* Mireille Rabenoro, "The Challenges of the Implementation of MDGs in a Fragile State: Universal Primary Education and Gender Equality in Madagascar," in *Implementation of the Millennium Development Goals: Progresses and Challenges in Some African Countries*, ed. Nicholas Awortwi and Herman Musahara (Addis Ababa: OSSREA, 2016), 75–110.

Previous studies on gender equality in sub-Saharan Africa have predominantly emphasised quantitative evaluations of disparities, focusing on access gaps in education and employment. Scholars like Matthias Doepke and Michèle Tertilt[5] investigate the macroeconomic advantages of female education, while Jacqui True[6] examined the global dissemination of gender-related norms in international organisations. Taking Although these contributions provide significant macro-level insights, they frequently ignore the country-specific, institutional, and cultural elements that influence gender results. Limited scholarly research has rigorously evaluated UN-led gender initiatives in Madagascar, especially on empowerment and collaboration between institutions and local entities. Current scholarship often regards gender equality as a quantifiable measure rather than a socially ingrained and debated phenomenon. This study fills the gap by providing a targeted qualitative case study of United Nations gender equality programs in Madagascar from 2015 to 2021. This research offers new insights into the interaction between foreign development policies and local realities by utilising the concept of empowerment as a dynamic process that encompass agency, participation and institutional flexibility rather than solely as an outcome. This represents the researcher's principal contribution to gender studies, development studies and policy assessment.

The primary inquiry driving this research is: Why did the United Nations' gender equality programs in Madagascar's education sector fail to achieve their goals between 2015 and 2021, despite substantial investment and effort? This study seeks to examine the interaction of institutional mechanisms, local sociocultural dynamics, and problems in program execution. The primary objective is to identify the particular institutional, cultural, and operational elements that constrained the efficacy of these programs, and to suggest alternative strategies that emphasise women's empowerment and local ownership of development initiatives. This research examines how international development goals, despite being well-intentioned and universally endorsed, may fail when they do not correspond with domestic reality or when the perspectives of the target populations are inadequately incorporated into the policy process.

This study is grounded in the concept of empowerment, offering a significant analytical framework for evaluating the successes and failures of international development efforts. Empowerment, as articulated by Naila Kabeer, is a multifaceted process enabling individuals to make strategic life choices in circumstances where such capacity was previously restricted.[7] It includes not just access to resources but also the augmentation of agency and the institutional circumstances that facilitate ongoing engagement and transformation. In the context of gender-specific initiatives, empowerment encompasses more than just quantitative growth in school enrolment or program participation; it entails enabling women and girls to assert their voice, influence decision-making, and demand accountability from institutions.[8] This concept is particularly relevant in Madagascar, where institutional challenges, cultural

[5] Matthias Doepke and Michèle Tertilt, "Women's Empowerment, the Gender Gap in Desired Fertility, and Fertility Outcomes in Developing Countries," *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 108 (May 1, 2018): 358–62, https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20181085.

[6] Jacqui True, "Explaining the Global Diffusion of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda," *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (June 2016): 307–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512116632372.

[7] Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (July 16, 1999): 435–64, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125.

[8] Andrea Cornwall and Althea-Maria Rivas, "From 'Gender Equality and 'Women's Empowerment' to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (February 24, 2015): 396–415, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1013341.

norms, and weak institutions frequently limit women's and girls' capacity to fully engage with international development initiatives. This study employs empowerment as a framework to critically assess whether UN programs have genuinely enhanced agency and institutional responsiveness, or if they have favoured externally defined measures over locally significant change.

This paper will address the following four dimensions: (1) the disparity between educational access and empowerment outcomes, (2) the constraints of local ownership and inadequate inter-agency coordination, (3) the convergence of patriarchal norms and institutional fragility, and (4) a targeted case study of the Let Us Learn initiative. Each part will utilise empirical data, policy documents, and expert opinions to assess the shortcomings of current methodologies and to suggest more inclusive, locally informed alternatives. The results will underpin the paper's conclusive recommendations intended to enhance sustained gender empowerment within the Malagasy education system.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research method using secondary data analysis to investigate the reasons behind the failure of the United Nations' gender equality initiative in Madagascar's education sector from 2015 to 2021, the study is based on official papers and publications from prominent UN agencies, including UNICEF, UN Women, and UNDP, in addition to policy documents, peer-reviewed academic journal papers from the previous decade were utilised to furnish theoretical and contextual support The chosen time frame pertains to the post-2015 execution of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a period characterised by heightened global emphasis on gender equality. The data were analysed to discern significant patterns, problems, and institutional responses concerning educational access, program coordination, and women's engagement. Special emphasis was placed on the congruence or missing between global strategies and local execution initiatives. A case study of the "Let Us Learn" program was incorporated to demonstrate realistic constraints and results in practice. This approach facilitates a rigorous assessment of institutional efficacy, considering the socio-cultural context and operational realities unique to Madagascar.

3. Finding and Analysis

3.1.   From Access to Empowerment: Gaps in Educational Continuity

Education gender inequalities have revealed different kinds of injustice in education systems all over the world. The literature shows that in several countries girls are dropping out of school compared to boys dropping out especially in rural and poor areas. However, even where they go to school many drop out earlier than boys due to social factors including early marriage, teenage pregnancy and so one. All these aspects affecting mostly the girls, and not allowing them to develop, and be educated.[9] Moreover, gendered norms imply that

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[9]   Girls' school dropout remains a pressing issue in many rural and low-income contexts worldwide, with evidence showing similar patterns across multiple countries. In Malawi, poverty and the inability to pay school fees are key drivers, while targeted bursary programmes have been effective in reducing dropout rates among girls. In India, socioeconomic disadvantage strongly predicts girls' dropout, particularly in poorer households, and in rural Nigeria, entrenched cultural norms, child marriage, and teenage pregnancy continue to undermine girls' education. Early marriage is also a leading cause in Bangladesh, with many girls leaving school around puberty to enter matrimony. Household characteristics are similarly influential; in Cambodia, fathers' education is closely linked to girls' school retention, while in rural India, low maternal education and early maternal marriage correlate with higher dropout rates. Health and safety challenges exacerbate the problem:

educating girls is of less importance and in many situations, families pay more attention to the education of boys than girls. Some of the challenges affecting girl child education include poverty, culture, early marriage and lack of adequate and sanitary washrooms in school dropout centres. Health wise, females including women are disadvantaged when it comes to quality health care services.

Furthermore, females especially women and girls are most affected by gender violence, this uncompress physical violence such as spouse battering, sexual harassment and human trafficking. These problems are worsened by the absence of legal rights for the disabled and the absence of organisations to help them.[10] In labour market women experience inequalities in access to employment and wages. Women are likely to be engaged in informal and low-wage employment and experience discriminations and constraints in promotion to higher positions. The gender wage disparity has not changed; women are paid 16% less than men in the global market. Also, the roles of leadership and decision making are occupied by few women and it is seen that few females can come forward to raise voice for the women rights.[11] In general, the level and trends of gender disparity in attaining secondary and tertiary education are improving for girls in many countries around the world but girls living in low income and countries experiencing conflicts related crises are being faced with lots of challenges. For instance, in the case of Madagascar girls are more likely to drop out of school in order to do domestic work or get married early and the problem is most acute when it comes to educating women in Madagascar, where gender inequality has long become one of the most significant components of the country's socio-cultural and economic development.[12]

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in South Africa, pregnancy and illness contribute significantly to girls leaving school, and in rural Kenya, lack of menstrual care and exploitative relationships lead directly to absenteeism and dropout. These examples highlight that girls' dropout is shaped by an interplay of economic hardship, cultural expectations, household dynamics, and health-related vulnerabilities, requiring multifaceted policy responses. For further information, see Lana Chikhungu et al., "Tackling Girls Dropping out of School in Malawi: Is Improving Household Socio-Economic Status the Solution?," *International Journal of Educational Research* 103 (2020): 101578, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101578; Susmita Mitra, Sudipta Kumar Mishra, and Rajesh Kumar Abhay, "Out-of-School Girls in India: A Study of Socioeconomic-Spatial Disparities," *GeoJournal* 88, no. 1 (March 4, 2022): 341–57, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-022-10579-7; Chinyere Onalu et al., "Prioritising Marriage over Education: Factors Associated with Girl-Child Dropout from Schools in Rural Areas of Enugu State, Nigeria," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-025-00384-w; Simeen Mahmud and Sajeda Amin, "Girls' Schooling and Marriage in Rural Bangladesh," *Research in the Sociology of Education* 15 (2006): 71 – 99, https://doi.org/10.1016/S1479-3539(06)15004-1; Akanksha A. Marphatia, Alice M. Reid, and Chittaranjan S. Yajnik, "Developmental Origins of Secondary School Dropout in Rural India and Its Differential Consequences by Sex: A Biosocial Life-Course Analysis," *International Journal of Educational Development* 66 (April 2019): 8–23, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2018.12.001; Kelvin Oruko et al., "'He Is the One Who Is Providing You with Everything so Whatever He Says Is What You Do': A Qualitative Study on Factors Affecting Secondary Schoolgirls' Dropout in Rural Western Kenya," ed. Ann M Moormann, *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 12 (December 4, 2015): e0144321, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0144321.

[10] For further understanding, see UN Women, "Progress of the World's Women 2019–2020: Families in a Changing World" (UN Women Headquarters Office, 2019), https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2019/Progress-of-the-worlds-women-2019-2020-en.pdf.

[11] World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2018* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1252-1.

[12] In Madagascar, girls' higher likelihood of dropping out of school is rooted in a combination of economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers. Poverty remains a central factor, with many families prioritising immediate survival over long-term educational investment, a pattern intensified when the death of a parent—particularly the father—reduces household income and disproportionately affects girls' schooling. Cultural norms also play a significant role: in semi-nomadic fishing communities, for example, boys are often encouraged to fish while girls are kept at home for domestic work, and early marriage continues to force many girls to leave school prematurely. Inadequate menstrual hygiene facilities further compound the

Into details, Madagascar is in very bad social-economic state; it is one of the poorest nations in the world, and it deals with lots of development issues.[13] It pointed out that average living standard index is extremely low with more than one fourth of the population below the poverty line, and Human Development Index is low. As at the year, over 75% of the population lives below the poverty level, social and economic stagnation issues compounded by serious gender inequalities, thus these gender disparities affect both social and economic. Malagasy women and girls continue to have low potential to accumulate their human capital in education. A significant share of adult women ages 15–49 is illiterate, reaching a striking 55.8% in the region of Menabe versus 26.9% among men. And still today only 30.8% of girls and 27.6 % of boys ages 11–17 attend secondary school. Participation in farming and other labour activities interrupt the school trajectories of many adolescents. Girls' chances to complete secondary education are further lowered by high involvement in domestic chores, gender-

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problem, as insufficient access to sanitary washrooms and puberty education contributes to absenteeism and eventual dropout. These interlinked challenges reflect deep-rooted gender inequalities that hinder girls' educational attainment and perpetuate socio-economic disparities. For further understanding, *see* Jean-Noël Senne, "Death and Schooling Decisions over the Short and Long Run in Rural Madagascar," *Journal of Population Economics* 27, no. 2 (April 15, 2014): 497–528, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-013-0486-4; Valérie Delaunay, Bénédicte Gastineau, and Frédérique Andriamaro, "Statut Familial et Inégalités Face à La Scolarisation à Madagascar," *International Review of Education* 59, no. 6 (December 3, 2013): 669–92, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-013-9388-7; Taiwo M Williams, "Girl-Child, Health, and Education in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, ed. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola, vol. 3–3 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 2409 – 2423, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28099-4_162; Marni Sommer et al., "Early Adolescence in Madagascar: Girls' Transitions Through Puberty in and out of School," *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 40, no. 3 (March 13, 2020): 354–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431619847529.

[13] Madagascar's fragile socio-economic condition stems from a long history of economic stagnation, political instability, and environmental degradation. Since the 1960s, GDP per capita has been on a downward trend, with recurrent socio-political crises disrupting growth and weakening governance structures. Rural livelihoods are further undermined by agricultural challenges—such as low yields, unsustainable farming practices, and frequent crop failures—which contribute to high poverty rates and widespread food insecurity, particularly in regions like the Mahafaly and northeast Madagascar. Nearly half of the population lives below the poverty line, facing poor health outcomes due to malnutrition, inadequate healthcare, and limited infrastructure. Environmental pressures, including deforestation and biodiversity loss, are intensified by poverty, while climate-related shocks such as cyclones and price collapses, notably in the vanilla sector, further destabilise already vulnerable communities. These interlinked economic, social, and ecological challenges place Madagascar among the poorest nations globally, with development efforts requiring coordinated, long-term interventions. For further understanding, *see* Mireille Razafindrakoto, François Roubaud, and Jean-Michel Wachsberger, *Puzzle and Paradox: A Political Economy of Madagascar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108770231; Philippe Hugon, "La Stagnation de l'économie Malgache : Le Rôle Des Crises et Des Facteurs Sociopolitiques En Longue Période," *Revue Internationale et Stratégique* N°60, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 19–32, https://doi.org/10.3917/ris.060.0019; Hendrik Hänke et al., "Social-Ecological Traps Hinder Rural Development in Southwestern Madagascar," *Ecology and Society* 22, no. 1 (2017): art42, https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-09130-220142; James P. Herrera et al., "Food Insecurity Related to Agricultural Practices and Household Characteristics in Rural Communities of Northeast Madagascar," *Food Security* 13, no. 6 (December 24, 2021): 1393–1405, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-021-01179-3; Daniel Kasprowicz, "Medics to Africa the Level of Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals on the Example of Madagascar," *Annales Academiae Medicae Gedanensis* 44 (2014): 143 – 155, https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84920693008&partnerID=40&md5=6d4f8903097c5729ad0becb3f5ed9808; Bruno Ramamonjisoa, "Managing Environmental Risks and Promoting Sustainability: Conservation of Forest Resources in Madagascar," in *Sustainable Living with Environmental Risks*, ed. Nobuhiro Kaneko, Shinji Yoshiura, and Masanori Kobayashi (Tokyo: Springer Japan, 2014), 73 – 86, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-54804-1_7; Henintsoa Rakoto Harison, James P. Herrera, and O. Sarobidy Rakotonarivo, "Compounding Impacts of COVID-19, Cyclone and Price Crash on Vanilla Farmers' Food Security and Natural Resource Use," ed. Amar Razzaq, *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 10 (October 3, 2024): e0311249, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0311249.

based violence in schools, limited agency, and above all child marriage and early pregnancy.[14] Malagasy women and girls also face challenges in access to maternal, sexual, and reproductive health services, as seen by a low share of professionally assisted births (45.8 %) and a high unmet need for contraception (14.6 %). The scarcity of health centres and prohibitive costs of consultations limit women's and girls' access to health services in general and they are further constrained by the lack of reliable sources of information on sexual and reproductive health, the absence of quality youth-friendly clinics, and social norms that discourage the use of family planning services among unmarried women/ women without children. All those barriers contribute to a high share of teenage pregnancies (31.1 % of girls ages 15–19 have begun childbearing), which is associated with numerous risks for girls' well-being, with potential long-term adverse effects on their education, health, employment opportunities, and vulnerability to poverty.[15] Lack of investment in human capital strongly affects women's potential to participate actively and productively in economic opportunities. Malagasy women are less likely than men to participate in the labour market (71.3 % versus 82.4 % respectively) and have limited access to better-quality jobs, with fewer women being wage employees (24 % of working women against 35 % of working men), and more women are contributing family workers (14 % vs. 5 % of male workers) and engaged in subsistence farming (32 % vs. 23 % respectively). Besides a general scarcity of jobs, women face discrimination in the recruitment process and are constrained as they lack the required skills and competencies, knowledge, a clear vision, and instruments on how to translate their job aspirations into action.[16] Malagasy women's limitation in their agency and decision-making power is manifested in high rates of intimate partner violence (41 % of ever-partnered women have experienced at least one of its forms) and child marriage (38.8 % of women ages 20–24 was married by age 18).[17] For many poor girls and their families, the decision to start a family at a very early age is driven by the lack of means and aspirations to escape poverty at home. In addition, widespread negative attitudes toward unmarried women and out-of-wedlock pregnancies often drive adolescent girls and their families to pursue marriage early, partly to comply with social norms and expected patterns of behaviour.[18]

In Madagascar, when moving from primary to secondary school, gender dynamics tend to disadvantage girls of sexual violence linked to long journeys, the remoteness of secondary schools, which often requires relocation, the lack of sanitary facilities, social norms unfavourable to women and early pregnancies which lead to sudden interruption of studies. In addition, poverty can lead families to decide to marry off their daughters prematurely.[19] dropout rates, in both urban and rural settings, become significantly higher for girls than for boys from the age of 16. This dynamic affects both rich and poor households, affecting the lives of girls in all population groups. The reasons for this are varied: the risks. These structural inequalities negatively affect women's chances besides constricting the general growth of the

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[14] World Bank, "Madagascar Gender Assessment: Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities for Greater Empowerment of Women and Girls in Madagascar."

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] *See, e.g.,* Peter Glick, Christopher Handy, and David E. Sahn, "Schooling, Marriage, and Age at First Birth in Madagascar," *Population Studies* 69, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 219–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2015.1053513; Jane Freedman, Mina Rakotoarindrasata, and Jean de Dieu Randrianasolorivo, "Analysing the Economies of Transactional Sex amongst Young People: Case Study of Madagascar," *World Development* 138 (February 2021): 105289, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105289.

[19] Caterina Arciprete and Sebastian Silva Leander, "Gender Inequalities in Madagascar" (Antananarivo: UNICEF Madagascar, 2022), 4–6.

nation. The generalization in education and employment between the male and female is major cause of poverty rates and slow economic growth. It has become very important to address these kinds of disparity to help in the development of Madagascar, and the achievement of the global gender equality.
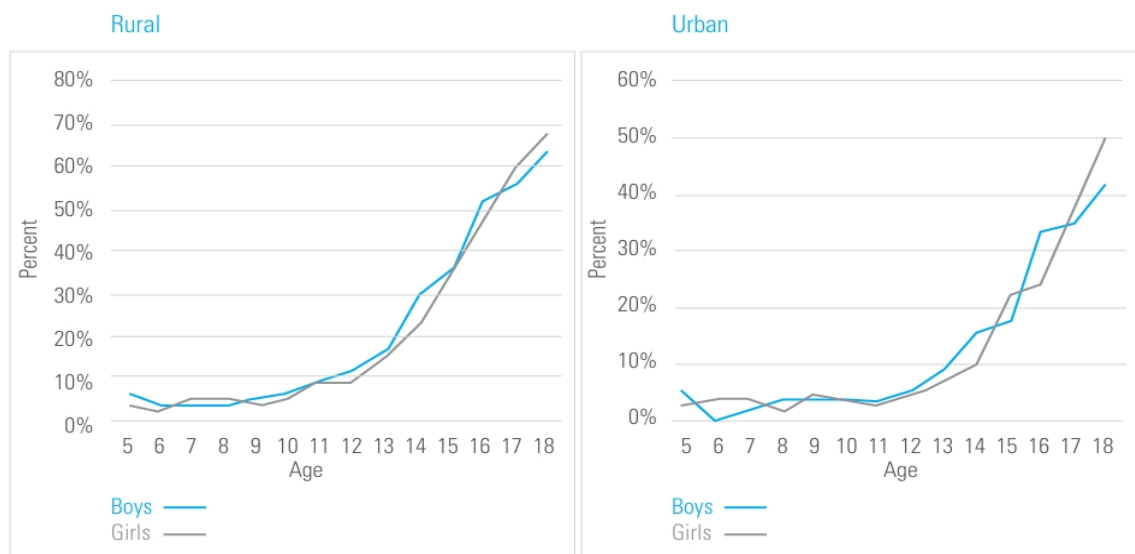

Figure 1. **Dropping out of school for Girls and boys, by place of residence**

Source: Caterina Arciprete and Sebastian Silva Leander[20]

Madagascar demonstrated that the global commitment to the protection of women's rights still cannot guarantee effective policies in countries with poor governance and conservative perception of female roles in society which radically hinders changes imported from outside.[21] However, these interventions have not received positive results with varying

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[20] Ibid., 6.

[21] Similar patterns of ineffectiveness in implementing the global women's rights agenda can be observed in other countries, where international commitments face resistance or dilution at the national level. For instance, despite the United Nations Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework, only 46 out of 193 UN Member States had adopted National Action Plans by 2014, with adoption unevenly distributed across regions. In Southeast Asia, the Philippines stands out as the only country to develop a WPS-specific plan, yet even there, hypermasculinist and populist-nationalist leadership has undermined effective implementation. Broader structural issues, including neoliberal economic restructuring, have eroded women's social rights in multiple jurisdictions, while feminists from the Global South face persistent barriers to participating in global policy-making. Moreover, multilateral advocacy has been hampered by the stagnation of agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action and by anti-feminist backlash within influential states, with domestic political agendas—such as the anti-abortion stance in U.S. foreign policy—further constraining global women's rights initiatives. *See* Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza, "Building the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Asean through Multi-Focal Norm Entrepreneurship," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 8, no. 2–3 (May 24, 2016): 158–79, https://doi.org/10.1163/1875984X-00803005; Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza, *Building the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Asean through Multi-Focal Norm Entrepreneurship*, *Regionalism and Human Protection: Reflections from Southeast Asia and Africa* (Brill, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004363212_005; Barbara K. Trojanowska, "Women's Rights Facing Hypermasculinist Leadership: Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda Under a Populist-Nationalist Regime," *Feminist Legal Studies* 29, no. 2 (July 4, 2021): 231–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-021-09464-4; Eunhye Yoo, "International Human Rights Regime, Neoliberalism, and Women's Social Rights, 1984–2004," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 52, no. 6 (December 10, 2011): 503–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715211434850; Dinah Musindarwezo, Felogene Anumo, and Sanyu Awori, *Transnational Feminist Organizing and Advocacy for Gender Justice and Women's Rights*, *The Handbook of Gender, Communication, and Women's Rights* (Wiley, 2023),

socio-cultural and economic challenges acting as barriers. Culture barriers provide education preference to boys rather than girls; early marriage and teenage pregnancies hinder the effectiveness of the UN interventions. Early pregnancies risk reproducing the pattern of poverty and the intergenerational process of early pregnancy. In fact, the children of child mothers (under the age of 18 at the birth of the child) have significantly more deprivations than other children: 52.2% suffer from 3 or more deprivations, compared to 44% for children of mothers aged 18 to 34 at birth; they are at increased risk of suffering from sexual violence, early pregnancy and child marriage. The use of contraceptives is taboo for many boys and girls. The causes are mainly related to the fact that adolescent girls do not have access to information, do not discuss this subject, therefore they do not receive advice on prevention either at school or in the family.[22]

3.2. Weak Local Ownership and Coordination Deficits

A significant obstacle hindering the efficacy of United Nations gender equality programs in Madagascar's education sector from 2015 to 2021 was the absence of local ownership and inadequate institutional coordination. Although international organisations were crucial in mobilising financial resources and establishing policy priorities for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the execution of gender equality programs frequently transpired in a disjointed and externally influenced manner. This hierarchical approach substantially constrained program relevance, contextual congruence, and long-term viability. Multiple UN agencies, including UNICEF, UN Women, UNFPA, and UNDP, operated in Madagascar throughout the SDG period. Although each organisation possessed clearly articulated objectives, they functioned under distinct programmatic frameworks, financing sources, and reporting mechanisms. Consequently, interventions frequently intersected both physically and thematically, lacking a unified national framework to synchronise strategies. For instance, UNICEF concentrated on educational and sanitation facilities, UN Women emphasised economic development and political engagement, while UNFPA addressed reproductive health and the prevention of early marriage. Although their goals are interrelated, these institutions rarely coordinated well at either the national or sub-national levels. This fragmentation extended beyond inter-agency ties. The collaboration between the UN and Malagasy national or municipal authorities was also insufficient. UN Women's 2019 assessment of its gender initiatives in Madagascar revealed that more than 60% of Malagasy stakeholders surveyed, including education officials, local government representatives, and civil society leaders, acknowledged awareness of international projects but indicated infrequent consultation during the design or planning phases.[23] In numerous instances, project objectives, metrics, and schedules were established in international capitals or regional centres, with merely superficial involvement from local populations. A district education officer in the Menabe region remarked in a 2021 UN internal report, "We are only informed about these programs just prior to their implementation." At that point, it is too late to implement modifications that align with our local circumstances.

https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119800729.ch24; Joanne Sandler and Anne Marie Goetz, "Can the United Nations Deliver a Feminist Future?," *Gender & Development* 28, no. 2 (May 3, 2020): 239–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2020.1753432; Sara Angevine, "Aborting Global Women's Rights: The Boundaries of Women's Representation in American Foreign Policy," *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 4 (December 29, 2021): 799–826, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000112.

22   Arciprete and Leander, "Gender Inequalities in Madagascar."

23   UN Women, "Progress of the World's Women 2019–2020: Families in a Changing World."

This dynamic illustrates what Cornwall, Andrea, and Althea-Maria Rivas term "technocratic capture" an approach to development in which donor-imposed aims and externally established agendas overshadow the programming landscape, frequently undermining substantial local engagement.[24] Technocratic capture may yield programming that is efficient in theory but becomes unsuccessful in practice. In Madagascar, this resulted in schools obtaining infrastructural funding without the requisite community engagement for sustainability; in scholarship programs devoid of follow-up mechanisms; and in teacher training programs that neglected to address local language and cultural challenges.

Table 1: UN Gender Program Implementation Chain: Ideal vs. Actual

(Visualizes the disconnect between the expected participatory flow of program planning and the actual top-down implementation in Madagascar)

Flow Type	International Agencies	National Government	National Government	Communities
Ideal Flow	✓ Planning + Funding	✓ Policy Alignment	✓Implementation	✓ Co-design
Actual Flow	✓ Planning + Delivery	⚠Partial Involvement	⚠ Inform Only	✗ Minimal

Sources: Author's analysis

As shown above, the optimal approach for program implementation highlights co-ownership at every level, incorporating community participation in both planning and evaluation. Although community engagement is acknowledged as fundamental to sustainable development, the implementation of programs in Madagascar has frequently been obstructed by significant deficiencies in local institutional capacity. The UNFPA Country Programme Document (CPD) 2021–2025 indicates that national institutions and local organizations often function with limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of qualified personnel, complicating the sustainability of interventions after the conclusion of external funding cycles.[25] This issue is particularly severe in rural and remotes areas, where more than 80% of the population resides at a considerable distance from key services, hence hindering the continuity of service delivery and significant community engagement. The CPD emphasizes the necessity of enhancing the resilience of systems, institutions, and individuals via focused capacity building to mitigate these restrictions. These approaches would empower local stakeholders to respond more adeptly to intricate social, economic, and environmental challenges, while safeguarding the benefits achieved during program execution throughout time. However, in the absence of appropriate coordination mechanisms, development operations are likely to become disjointed and inefficient. The CPD warns that concurrent actions by several development partners may result in redundant efforts, resource wastage, and further pressure on the already constrained operating capacities of local offices.[26]

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[24] Cornwall and Rivas, "From 'Gender Equality and 'Women's Empowerment' to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development."

[25] UNFPA, "Country Programme Document for Madagascar (2021-2023)" (DP/FPA/CPD/MDG/8: United Nations Population Fund, 2021), https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/board-documents/main-document/ENG_DP.FPA_.CPD_.MDG_.8 - Madagascar CPD - Final - 2Jul21.pdf?utm_source=.

[26] Ibid.

Moreover, whereas UNFPA advocates for multi-sectoral and integrated approaches linking sexual and reproductive health, gender equality and economic empowerment implementation frequently occurs in isolation, limiting potential for synergy and constraining the overall effectiveness of programs This division underscores the necessity for enhanced strategic partnerships between national authorities and grassroots organizations, ensuring that interventions correspond with local goals, promote genuine ownership, and retain viability beyond donor financing periods.

3.3.   Cultural and Institutional Barriers to Women's Empowerment

International initiatives aimed at enhancing gender equality in Madagascar have predominantly concentrated on increasing educational access; nevertheless, these endeavours have been compromised by enduring cultural norms and institutional deficiencies that hinder women's empowerment. Empowerment, characterised by both access to resources and the capacity to make choices and affect institutions, is fundamentally limited when gender roles are inflexible and legal safeguards are applied inconsistently. In Madagascar, these dual impediments persist in hindering the advancement of girls in education and other domains. A significant cultural barrier is the widespread occurrence of early and forced marriage, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. UNFPA's 2012 worldwide report on child marriage revealed that 48 percent of Malagasy women aged 20-24 were married or in unions before reaching 18, although national legislation that forbids the practice.[27] These graphic highlights the disparity between formal legal frameworks and their actual implementation. The World Bank's 2024 gender assessment underscores that deficiencies in administrative capability, coupled with insufficient resources for monitoring and enforcement, frequently hinder the efficient implementation of legislation against child marriage, gender-based violence, and job discrimination. Coordination among ministries and agencies tasked with gender equality is inadequate, leading to overlapping responsibilities, policy fragmentation, and inefficiencies in program implementation.[28] These shortcomings foster a climate conducive to the continuation of detrimental behaviours such as early marriage, while also restricting women's access to justice, excellent education, and economic prospects. Overcoming these institutional obstacles necessitates both legal reform and ongoing investment in capacity training, inter-ministerial coordination, and locally driven implementation techniques that can connect policy promises with tangible results. A 2020 UNICEF evaluation revealed that in certain areas, as much as 20% of females encountered harassment on route to or within school premises, although a minimal number reported these occurrences owing to apprehension of retaliation or scepticism.[29] The lack of confidential reporting systems, skilled counsellors, or punitive measures against offenders fosters a culture of impunity that jeopardises initiatives aimed at creating safe and inclusive educational environments. Neglecting these concerns may result in educational endeavours subjecting girls to additional harm instead of providing a means of empowerment. These cultural challenges are complicated by institutional obstacles, such as inadequately supported legal

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[27]   UNFPA, "Malagasy Women Wounded by Child Marriage and Its Aftermath," *United Nations Population Fund*, October 12, 2012, https://www.unfpa.org/news/malagasy-women-wounded-child-marriage-and-its-aftermath.

[28]   World Bank, "Unlocking the Potential of Women and Adolescent Girls in Madagascar Will Reduce Poverty," *World Bank*, February 26, 2024, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/02/26/unlocking-the-potential-of-women-and-adolescent-girls-in-afe-madagascar-will-reduce-poverty.

[29]   UNICEF, "Summative Evaluation of UNICEF Supported Child Protection Programme in Madagascar (2015 - 2021)" (Nairobi and Johannesburg: United Nations Children's Fund, 2024), 16–18, https://evaluationreports.unicef.org/GetDocument?documentID=19544&fileID=55029.

systems, a weak governmental presence in rural regions, and the predominance of customary law over statutory rights. Although Madagascar has accepted multiple international conventions concerning gender equality, including CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women),[30] the domestic implementation of these laws is constrained. Legal measures, such as the ban of child marriage and the prohibition of school-based discrimination, exist in theory but are infrequently enforced in practice. Local leaders and village elders, who frequently possess greater authority than government officials, typically prioritise traditional norms over statutory rights, particularly when gender equality programs are viewed as foreign or detrimental to community cohesion.

The deficiency of female leaders in decision-making positions further limits institutional transformation. Women constitute under 20% of national legislators and less than 6% of mayors,[31] resulting in the marginalisation of gender viewpoints in policy discussions. The lack of female representation in local school boards, district education offices, and community councils results in the issues of girls and mothers being inadequately represented or neglected. Feminist academic Jacqui True contends that empowerment necessitates both individual action and structural inclusion;[32] but, in Madagascar, institutional avenues for women's leadership are limited and inadequately funded. Moreover, a substantial urban–rural disparity exists in the availability of gender services and safeguards. In Antananarivo and many regional capitals, NGOs and international donors facilitate initiatives focused on women rights, legal literacy, and leadership development. Nevertheless, in remote regions like Melaky, Ihorombe, and Androy, these initiatives are virtually non-existent. The deficiency of transportation, digital connectivity, and skilled personnel intensifies service disparities. Girls in these areas encounter the dual disadvantage of geographic isolation and cultural conservatism, making worldwide gender equality programs mostly inconsequential or unrecognisable in their everyday existence. Ultimately, although international development entities like the UN have endeavoured to implement gender-sensitive policies and frameworks, numerous initiatives have inadequately considered local realities. Strategies were frequently formulated utilising global variables and standardised templates that overlooked the intricate social dynamics of Malagasy communities. Messages on "female empowerment" or "equal opportunity" were occasionally regarded with scepticism or confusion when not supported by culturally tailored communication, trust-building with traditional leaders, or economic alternatives for household's dependent on daughters' labour or dowry. In the absence of a locally negotiated and grounded knowledge of empowerment, international rules may be misinterpreted, opposed, or applied selectively.

The cultural and institutional obstacles to women's empowerment in Madagascar are intricately connected and mutually reinforcing. International interventions that fail to address both layers of constraint are improbable to provide transformative outcomes. Empowerment beyond mere access to education or financial aid; it necessitates a transformation in societal ideals, legal responsibility, institutional inclusivity, and communal support. Programs must be integrated within a comprehensive framework that links educational institutions with judicial systems, healthcare providers, and cultural authorities, cultivating an atmosphere where girls are educated, respected, safeguarded, and empowered.

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[30] UN Women, "Progress of the World's Women 2019–2020: Families in a Changing World," 84–87.
[31] UNDP, "Human Development Report 2020," *The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2020), 15–17, https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr2020.pdf.
[32] True, "Explaining the Global Diffusion of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda."

3.4.   Case study: Let Us Learn Madagascar

UNICEF's Let Us Learn Madagascar program was a prominent gender-focused education effort supported by the United Nations in Madagascar from 2015 to 2021. Initiated in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this multi-sectoral effort sought to enhance educational access and equity for girls in underserved areas. It concentrated on critical intervention domains such as infrastructure enhancement, scholarship allocation, menstrual hygiene management, educator training, and community engagement. Similar integrated approaches, such as comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programs in Madagascar, have been shown to improve not only academic outcomes but also confidence, leadership, and relationships with parents and communities, underscoring the potential for holistic models to address structural barriers to girls' education.[33] Despite the program's initial success, a detailed examination uncovers shortcomings in sustainability, community ownership, and long-term empowerment, providing important insights into the intricacies of adapting universal gender norms to localised and lasting results.[34]

Let Us Learn Madagascar was established to address the complex challenges that females experience in obtaining and persisting in education. The obstacles included economic limitations, considerable distances to educational institutions, cultural opposition to female education, and insufficient safe learning spaces. UNICEF's plan was multifaceted: it integrated conditional cash transfers, the construction of gender-segregated latrines, the establishment of school dormitories for girls in isolated regions, and the provision of menstrual hygiene kits. It also sought to educate teachers in gender-sensitive pedagogy and to involve parents through community awareness programs. Such approaches align with UNICEF's broader strategic shift from delivering emergency goods to advancing systemic educational development and children's rights, which is key to sustaining long-term gains.[35] By 2018, the program had benefited more than 40,000 students across five of the most disadvantaged regions in Madagascar: Androy, Atsimo-Andrefana, Menabe, Ihorombe, and Melaky. UNICEF reports a 12% increase in females' school attendance in designated districts, accompanied by a temporary decrease in dropout rates. The implementation of girl-friendly restrooms, access to reusable menstrual hygiene products, and the creation of female dorms greatly enhanced daily attendance and retention, particularly among adolescent girls.[36]

Let Us Learn received recognition for its cohesive methodology and prompt effect. By 2021, scholarship support benefited more than 26,000 girls, an increase from 12,000 in 2015, and communities indicated enhanced perspectives regarding the importance of girls' education. The presence of female instructors in program schools grew marginally, offering girls suitable role models and mentors. The implementation of child protection policies in participating schools led to increased awareness of gender-based violence and harassment,

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[33] Sara E. Baumann et al., "Exploring the Multi-Level Impacts of a Youth-Led Comprehensive Sexuality Education Model in Madagascar Using Human-Centered Design Methods," ed. Asrat Genet Amnie, PLOS ONE 19, no. 4 (April 10, 2024): e0297106, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0297106; Samuel O'Keefe et al., "'My Life Would Not Be the Same': A Qualitative, Retrospective Evaluation of the Post-Programme Outcomes of an in-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programme in Madagascar," Sex Education 25, no. 2 (March 4, 2025): 157–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2023.2289423.

[34] UNICEF, "Summative Evaluation of UNICEF Supported Child Protection Programme in Madagascar (2015 - 2021)," 4–15.

[35] Phillip W. Jones, "Elusive Mandate: UNICEF and Educational Development," *International Journal of Educational Development* 26, no. 6 (November 2006): 591–604, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2006.02.003.

[36] UNICEF, "Summative Evaluation of UNICEF Supported Child Protection Programme in Madagascar (2015 - 2021)."

despite the weak enforcement measures. Evidence from other Madagascar-based initiatives also indicates that embedding gender equity within broader development and peacebuilding frameworks—such as the Organising Technical Committee on security sector reform—can improve women's participation, suggesting opportunities for cross-sectoral integration.[37] The program illustrated that careful resource allocation can eliminate significant access barriers, particularly when initiatives are multidimensional. It underscored the necessity of integrating economic incentives with cultural engagement, as the scholarship program alone proved inadequate without community trust and participation. These initial accomplishments demonstrate UNICEF's extensive expertise in child-centric development and its ability to utilise collaborations with the Malagasy Ministry of National Education, local NGOs, and various UN agencies.[38]

Despite these achievements, the program faced substantial constraints that hindered its enduring influence and viability. A neutral study conducted in 2022 indicated that numerous short-term advancements were negated with the reduction or withdrawal of external financial and logistical assistance. For instance, dropout rates increased in certain regions once financial transfers ceased, suggesting that the initiative failed to effectuate a permanent change in familial behaviour or economic rationale. Families that initially let females to pursue education frequently reverted to conventional practices, such as child labour and early marriage, once the financial incentives ended.[39] Furthermore, although the program incorporated a community interaction element, the extent of participation was restricted. Parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and local women's organisations frequently participated in awareness-raising efforts but exerted limited influence on program design, budgeting, or evaluation. According to Arciprete and Leander, projects that do not achieve local legitimacy and ownership are likely to produce "islands of success" that lack replicability and sustainability.[40] The lack of locally established accountability mechanisms in Madagascar resulted in Let Us Learn being viewed as an external initiative rather than a community-driven effort for gender equity. This mirrors broader findings from CSE program evaluations in Madagascar, which highlight that without strong local ownership, even well-designed interventions risk fading after donor withdrawal.[41]

A further weakness was the absence of comprehensive monitoring and assessment procedures. The program monitored fundamental output indicators, including the number of girls awarded scholarships and the volume of hygiene kits distributed; however, it was deficient in mechanisms to evaluate qualitative improvements in empowerment, such as enhanced confidence, leadership abilities, or decision-making skills among adolescent girls. Nor did it methodically document changes in gender norms or attitudes within households and communities. Consequently, it was challenging to ascertain if the program had instigated profound changes in girls' social positioning.

The Let Us Learn Madagascar campaign exemplifies the intricate relationship between access-focused programming and empowerment-driven results. Although the initiative

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[37] Gaby Razafindrakoto, "Madagascar," *African Security Review* 24, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 445–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2015.1093763.

[38] UNICEF, "Summative Evaluation of UNICEF Supported Child Protection Programme in Madagascar (2015 - 2021)."

[39] Arciprete and Leander, "Gender Inequalities in Madagascar," 7–9.

[40] Ibid.

[41] O'Keefe et al., "'My Life Would Not Be the Same': A Qualitative, Retrospective Evaluation of the Post-Programme Outcomes of an in-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programme in Madagascar."

effectively eliminated many immediate obstacles to schooling, it failed to comprehensively tackle the structural and cultural factors essential for enduring reform. The notion of empowerment, as defined by Kabeer, entails more than mere service provision; it demands the enhancement of agency, transformation of power dynamics, and the development of local capacities to ensure enduring change.[42] In Madagascar, this entails transcending scholarships and infrastructure to invest in normative transformation, policy reform, and participatory governance. Programs must engage local leaders, school personnel, students, and parents not just in execution but also in the collaborative development of objectives and intervention strategies. Moreover, empowerment necessitates congruence with prevailing institutional frameworks and enduring political—factors that are reinforced by integrated, cross-sectoral approaches linking education to broader goals such as sexual and reproductive health, climate resilience, and community cohesion.[43]

Table 2. Key Institutional Gaps in Madagascar's Gender Equality Framework (2015–2021)

Area	Status and Challenges
National Gender Policy	Exists but lacks adequate funding and monitoring
Legal Age of Marriage	18 (commonly ignored in rural communities)
Enforcement of GBV Laws	Weak; no mandatory training for law enforcement
Female Representation	Less than 20% of national parliament members are women
Gender-Sensitive Curriculum	Minimal integration; teachers lack training and resources

Sources: Author's analysis

4. Conclusion

The examination of the United Nations' gender equality initiatives in Madagascar from 2015 to 2021 uncovers a significant disparity between enhanced educational access and the overall empowerment of girls. Although efforts like Let Us Learn Madagascar enhanced school attendance and momentarily diminished dropout rates, these improvements were precarious and inconsistently allocated. Cultural traditions advocating early marriage and domestic duties, along with inadequate institutional enforcement of gender legislation, constrained the durability of these programs. Moreover, top-down implementation strategies, little community involvement, and inadequate inter-agency coordination led to disjointed efforts that did not yield revolutionary, long-term effects.

In addressing the primary research inquiry: Why did the United Nations' gender equality programs in Madagascar's educational sector fail to achieve their objectives despite ongoing support? The solution resides in the disparity between externally imposed program

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42 Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," 112–17.

43 Vik Mohan and Edith W Ngunjiri, *Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Climate, Environment and Co-Existence in Madagascar*, *The Elgar Companion to Health and the Sustainable Development Goals* (Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2025), https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803927244.00019.

design and the actual socio-cultural and institutional contexts. Global initiatives emphasised accessibility, and inadequately tackled agency, systemic inequality, or cultural opposition. The empowerment of females was hindered by inadequate local ownership, underfunded legal systems, and the lack of methods to alter entrenched gender norms. Consequently, interventions enhanced visibility but did not enhance viability providing temporary fixes to enduring systemic issues.

To address these drawbacks, future programs must integrate empowerment as a fundamental principle. This involve creating projects in collaboration with local stakeholders, incorporating gender-responsive training across several sectors and connecting educational efforts with reproductive health, child protection and economic assistance frameworks. Programs must focus on enhancing local institutional capacity, maintaining long-term coherence with national policy, and emphasising participatory monitoring mechanisms that capture shifts in agency and decision-making, rather than merely attendance. Madagascar can progress from educational access to gender justice and sustainable empowerment solely through inclusive, context-sensitive, and community-driven strategies.

Acknowledgement

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