

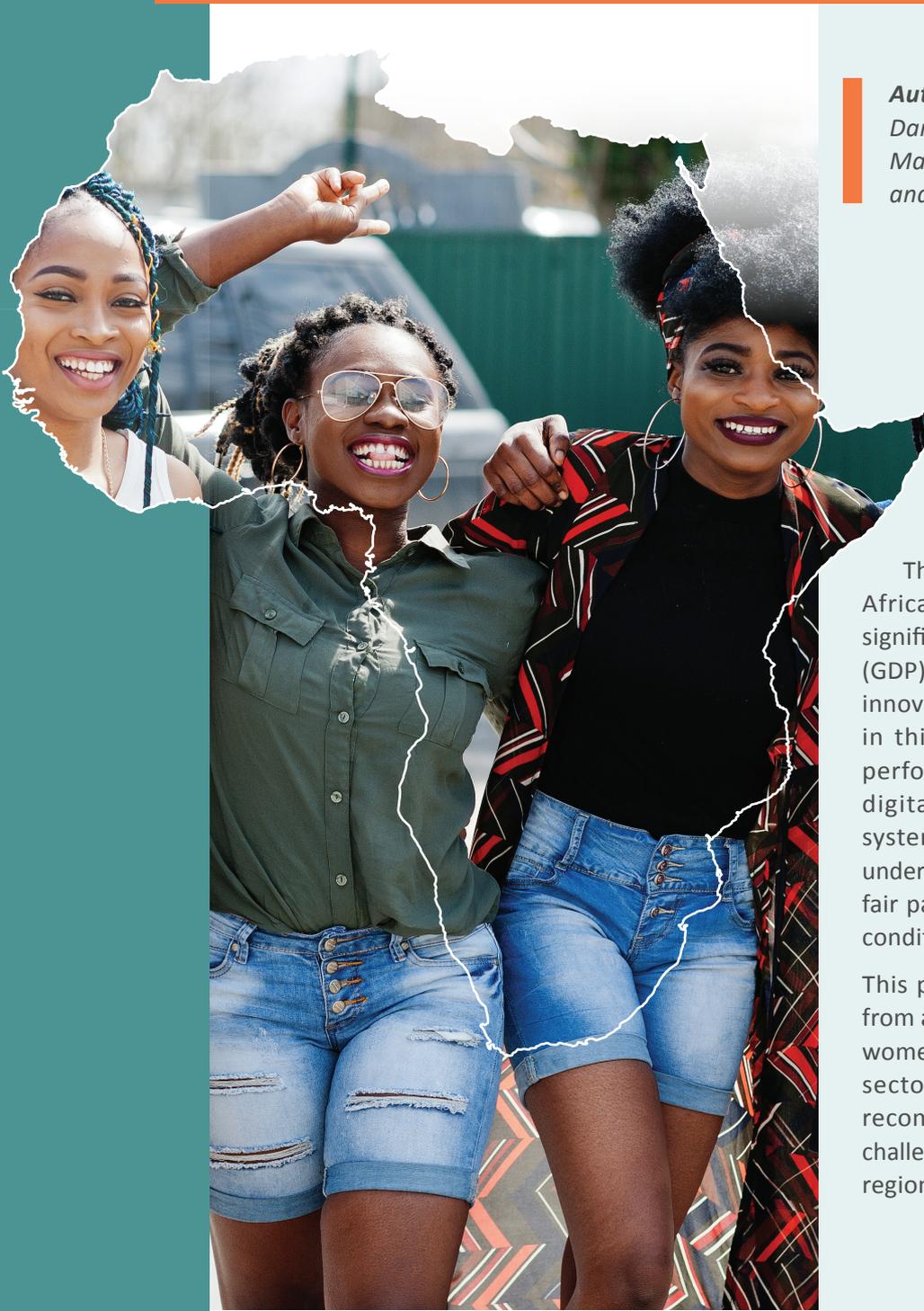
Advancing Gender Equality in Sub-Saharan Africa's Creative Sector: Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

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Executive Summary

The creative sector in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is thriving, contributing significantly to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), youth employment, and cultural innovation. Women play a critical role in this sector, particularly in crafts, performance arts, film, fashion, and digital content creation. However, systemic gender inequalities persist, undermining women's access to training, fair pay, leadership roles, safe working conditions, and markets.

This policy brief summarizes findings from a review of published research on women's participation in SSA's creative sector and outlines evidence-based recommendations for addressing the challenges facing women creatives in the region. The review reveals that women



creatives in the region suffer several gendered barriers, including sexual harassment, gender-based violence, online bullying, and “quid pro quo” harassment, in which sexual compliance is required to obtain creative work or positions. They also often have a more difficult time accessing credit facilities for their work than their male counterparts, usually earn less than their male counterparts despite equivalent qualifications, and frequently have to balance creative jobs with domestic duties and responsibilities. Additionally, they face pervasive cultural bias, stigma, a lack of gender-responsive creative regulations, globalization and related competition from mass-produced creative products, and safety concerns linked with working late hours or traveling alone. To address these barriers, governments in the region, funders, creative industry bodies, financiers, and sector grassroots actors must work together to:



- **Strengthen research and data systems in the creative sector** by developing a regional research agenda on women creatives, collecting gender-disaggregated data on employment, income, and ownership in creative sectors, and funding research on gender and participation in different creative sub-sectors such as architecture, gastronomy, software/digital media, computer games etc.



- **Implement national creative industry policies and programs** that prioritize gender equality, mandate creative workplace gender charters and codes of conduct, and require gender impact assessments for all creative public investments



- **Invest in creative infrastructure**, including internet connectivity, and implement capacity building, mentoring, entrepreneurship training, and digital literacy initiatives for all creatives, particularly female creatives



- **Improve female creatives' access to finance and markets** through women-focused cultural funds, microloans, and equity schemes; gender-responsive financing tools (e.g., zero-collateral loans); and creative work fairs, online marketplaces, and export support



- **Promote creative workplace safety and labor rights** by enforcing anti-harassment laws, establishing safe reporting mechanisms, offering secure lodging, childcare, and transportation for creatives while they are on the job, and mandating formalization of creative work contracts.



The review reveals that women creatives in the region suffer several gendered barriers, including sexual harassment, gender-based violence, online bullying, and “quid pro quo” harassment, in which sexual compliance is required to obtain creative work or positions.



Introduction

The creative sector—defined as industries based on individual innovation and intellectual property—has emerged as SSA’s most dynamic economic growth driver. Creative and cultural productions, including fashion, film, digital entrepreneurship and content creation, performing arts, publishing, music, crafts, architecture, and advertising, employ millions of Africans and generate billions of dollars in revenue. In addition, the sector has birthed a vibrant new generation of African creative and digital entrepreneurs who earn livable, if not abundant, wages. Currently, the industry accounts for over 4% of SSA’s GDP, generates more than \$58 billion annually, and employs over 8.2% of the region’s workforce, which exceeds the global average.

Nonetheless, the region’s creative industry experiences numerous social, economic, equity, access, and inclusion challenges. One of these challenges is gender-based discrimination, which restricts women from entering, continuing, and remaining in artistic or creative occupations or fields that they find meaningful, dignifying, respectable, and productive. This policy brief presents findings from a recent review of existing research on women’s engagement in SSA’s creative sector and proposes evidence-based solutions to the myriad challenges that the region’s women creatives confront. The brief aims to inform governments, development agencies, guilds, and sector stakeholders on pathways for fostering a more gender-inclusive and -equitable creative economy.



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Women in the creative economy: Participation and Potential

The reviewed literature indicates that women in SSA are involved in a wide range of creative fields, including digital arts and content creation, creative writing, poetry, hairstyling, beauty and body aesthetics, photography, videography, and filmmaking, as well as crafts and fashion design, advertising, music, dance, DJing, comedy, theater and drama acting, and other self-expression art forms such as movement and painting. Additionally, women outnumber men in

some artistic professions in sub-Saharan Africa, such as storytelling, hairstyling, quilting, tailoring, jewelry design, and performing arts. Importantly, for many women, creative work serves as a vehicle for self-expression, a route to prominence, and a source of pride and community development, in addition to being a source of income. However, they are also generally underrepresented in positions of leadership in the creative sector.



Women creatives in SSA frequently must balance professional jobs and positions with household duties and obligations including childcare.

Key challenges of women creatives in SSA

Women creatives confront long-standing institutional, cultural, and structural obstacles despite their growing visibility and contribution to the sector. They face precarious working circumstances, often earn less than their male counterparts despite equivalent qualifications, and are over-represented in informal, freelance employment with no contracts or legal guarantees. Women creatives and creative entrepreneurs in SSA also generally have a harder time than their male counterparts in obtaining credit facilities or financing from banks. For example, lack of support often forces female playwrights and filmmakers to self-publish, self-fund, or produce low-budget works, which limits their audience, readership, reach, and visibility



Women creatives in SSA are stigmatized and subjected to pervasive cultural bias. For instance, women in dancing, hairstyling, music, acting, and advertising are frequently viewed as “sexually decadent” or ethically dubious.

in the industry. Additionally, women creatives face access obstacles to training, digital platforms, markets, education, and business skills, all of which limit their capacity to grow their businesses.

Gate-keeping and discriminatory behaviors that harm women creatives are sustained by men’s dominance in the region’s creative infrastructure, such as ownership and management control of studios, training facilities and institutes, publishing companies, finance institutions, movie theaters, and creative guilds. Furthermore, women creatives in SSA are stigmatized and subjected to pervasive cultural bias. For instance, women in dancing, hairstyling, music, acting, and advertising are frequently viewed as “sexually decadent” or ethically dubious. Some creative activities, including drumming, weaving, or sculpture, are also considered taboo for women in parts of SSA.

Among women creatives in SSA, sexual harassment and gender-based violence are prevalent, taking the forms of sexual coercion, online harassment, trolling, cyberbullying, gossiping, spreading rumors, and body shaming. Several of SSA’s women creatives are routinely subjected to unwelcome verbal remarks and jokes, coercive efforts to initiate sexual relationships, or “quid pro quo” harassment, in which sexual compliance is required to obtain creative

tasks or positions. In addition, influential, frequently male directors, managers, and business owners in the industry sometimes sexually harass women creatives, pressure young women musicians to dress and dance more provocatively to get concert opportunities, deny women creatives financial and other forms of support for their work, or force them into predatory deals or contracts.

In addition to dealing with long and unpredictable work schedules, including working late and risky hours, women creatives in SSA frequently must balance professional jobs with household duties and obligations, including childcare. Studies of women playwrights in the region suggest that while some took their children to rehearsals, others were forced to wait to write after their children were grown. There were also those who took a long break after their marriage or gave up their marriage to concentrate on their creative careers. Other obstacles include the exclusion of creative rural and disabled women from profitable opportunities in the sector, globalization and the competition from mass-produced craft products that comes with it, as well as safety and security issues associated with working late hours or traveling alone. For instance, female DJs, singers, and dancers in some parts of the region continue to report safety concerns, including hijackings or attacks, while commuting to and from performances.

Poor governmental support, unclear laws, weak policy guidelines, lack of gender-responsive creative sector policies and initiatives, and limited institutional support to women creatives are also widely reported barriers for the region's women creatives. For example, in some parts of the region, local authorities and police exploit environmental and traffic laws to harass street-based female creatives, including street acrobats and other performers, as well as hairdressers, pedicurists, and manicurists. Weak government and institutional support for women in creative fields hinders their access to business capital and larger, more profitable markets, confining them to local markets with limited growth potential.

Coping strategies

To overcome these obstacles, women creatives in SSA are using social media for marketing, advocacy, training, and fundraising; pursuing crowdfunding and resource-pooling to bypass traditional gatekeepers; launching campaigns to question gender norms and promote change; and unionizing to support themselves (e.g., all-female DJ platforms in South Africa). However, some of them also resort to maladaptive strategies that hinder sector development and personal advancement, like quitting their jobs, keeping silent, or limiting the expansion of their businesses.



Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

The growing number and contribution of women in SSA's creative industry, the many gendered barriers they face, and the strategies they employ to overcome these barriers highlight the pressing need for coordinated remedial action

among governments, donors, creative industry bodies, financiers, and grassroots actors in the region. Some areas for urgent policy and programmatic action include the need to:



- Strengthen research and data systems in the creative sector by developing a regional research agenda on women creatives, collecting gender-disaggregated data on employment, income, and ownership in creative sectors, and funding research on gender and participation in different creative sub-sectors such as architecture, gastronomy, software/digital media, computer games, etc.



- Implement national creative industry policies and programs that prioritize gender equality, mandate creative workplace gender charters and codes of conduct, and require gender impact assessments for all creative public investments



- Invest in creative infrastructure, including internet connectivity, and implement capacity building, mentoring, entrepreneurship training, and digital literacy initiatives for female creatives



- Improve female creatives' access to finance and markets through women-focused cultural funds, microloans, and equity schemes; gender-responsive financing tools (e.g., zero-collateral loans; and trade fairs, online marketplaces, and export support)



- Promote creative workplace safety and labor rights by enforcing anti-harassment laws and safe reporting mechanisms, offering secure lodging, childcare, and transportation for creatives while they are on the job, and mandating formalization of creative work contracts

Conclusion

The creative sector has enormous potential for economic development, employment creation, and social transformation in SSA. Women are essential to its vibrancy, inventiveness, and ongoing evolution. Nonetheless, their potential is underutilized due to continuing gender inequities. Addressing these difficulties requires collaboration among governments, funders, creative sector organizations, investors, and grassroots actors in the region. By addressing gender-specific barriers, the region will unleash the full potential of creativity for inclusive development and shared progress.

Acknowledgements

This brief was produced in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Foundation, its staff, or its Board of Directors.



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