

AFRICAN WOMEN'S VOICES:

# Reframing the Narrative on Women's Roles in African Societies

May 2023

By Zineb Sqalli, Zoe Karl-Waithaka,  
Najwa Jamrani, Phillipa Osakwe-Okoye,  
and Nomava Zanazo



BCG

Boston Consulting Group partners with leaders in business and society to tackle their most important challenges and capture their greatest opportunities. BCG was the pioneer in business strategy when it was founded in 1963. Today, we work closely with clients to embrace a transformational approach aimed at benefiting all stakeholders—empowering organizations to grow, build sustainable competitive advantage, and drive positive societal impact.

Our diverse, global teams bring deep industry and functional expertise and a range of perspectives that question the status quo and spark change. BCG delivers solutions through leading-edge management consulting, technology and design, and corporate and digital ventures. We work in a uniquely collaborative model across the firm and throughout all levels of the client organization, fueled by the goal of helping our clients thrive and enabling them to make the world a better place.

# Contents

- 01** The African Back Story
- 02** Violence and Insecurity, the  
Common Denominators
- 03** Finding Solutions
- 04** About the Research

# Preface

A decade ago, most African countries were making steady progress in closing the gender gap across all its dimensions—health, education, economic participation, and political representation. Since 2016, however, a wave of macroeconomic challenges, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has caused women’s economic participation to decline more in Africa than in other parts of the world.

To get a deeper understanding of the reasons for this decline, BCG surveyed 6,000 men and women across six countries that together represent 60% of Africa’s GDP. (See “About the Research” below). Our analysis found that while various challenges—such as insufficient access to education, health care, and job opportunities—are certainly holding women back, the current narrative on the role of women in society is a central issue.

Therefore, closing the gender gap will only be possible if the social norms and the narrative around women’s role in society change. Countries across the continent, need to ensure that legal, social, and educational measures are designed to address this underlying issue.



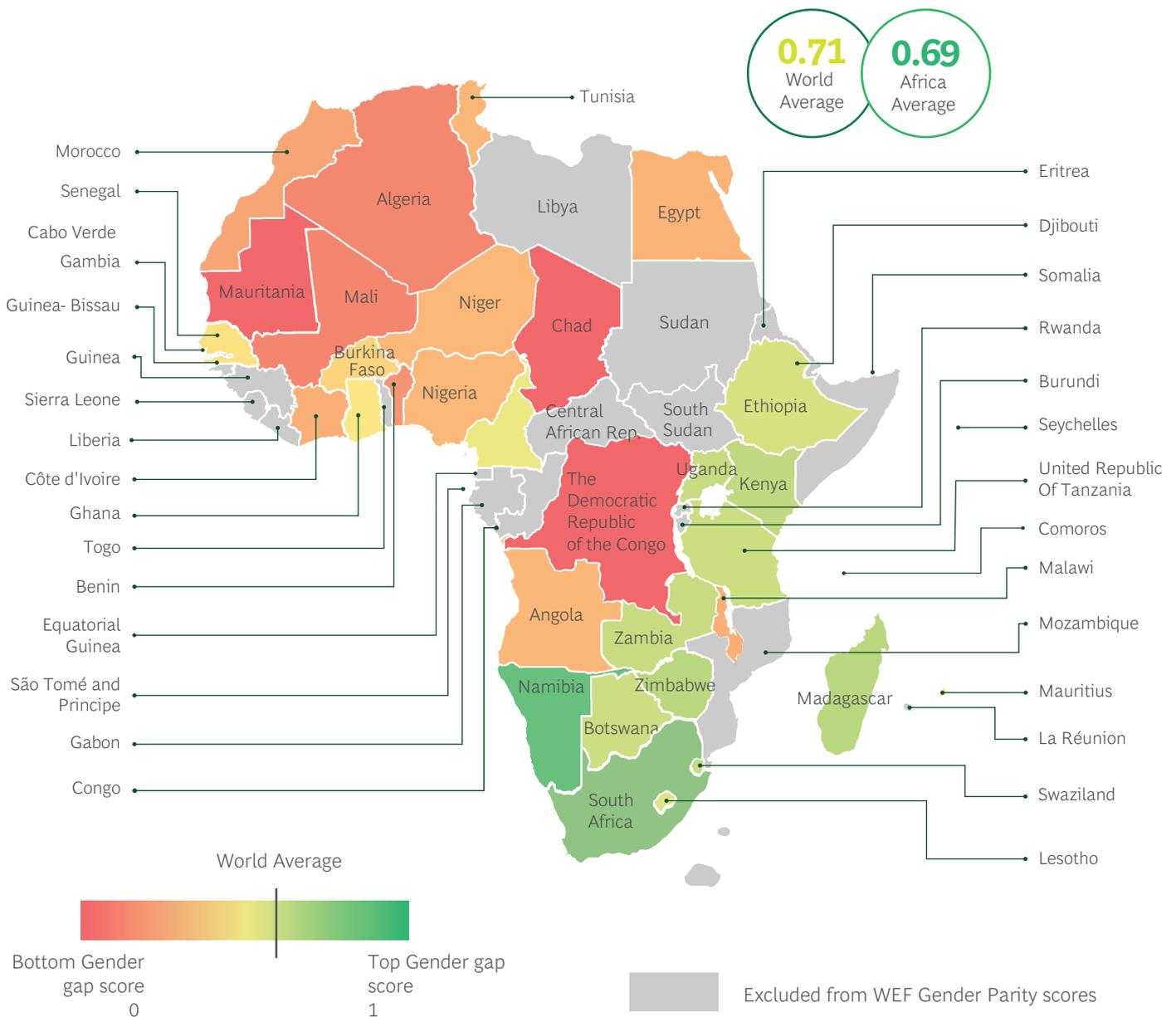


## The African Back Story

At the continental level, Africa's gender gap today is similar to the world average. According to the Gender Gap Report 2022 published by the World Economic Forum (WEF), the African gap is .69 and the world average is .71, with 1 representing gender parity. But these numbers obscure an important fact: individual African countries are quite diverse when it comes to gender equality. (See Exhibit 1.) Out of 146 countries included in the WEF report, Rwanda ranks sixth, Namibia eighth, and South Africa twentieth. Yet at the same time, half of the 50 lowest-ranking countries are African, including Nigeria at 123rd, Morocco at 136th, and Congo at 144th.

From 2010 to 2016, Africa was closing the gender gap faster than any other region in the world. In 2016, that rapid pace slowed owing to a commodity crisis, followed by the global downturn and the onset of the pandemic. Women's economic participation, as measured by labor force participation rates and wage levels, began declining in sub-Saharan Africa. The continent's gender gap soon became one of the slowest improving worldwide.

# Exhibit 1 - Different realities for women in Africa



Source: World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2022

COVID 19 has caused gender equality worldwide to regress by one generation, according to the WEF. But in Africa, the situation is far more severe because the decline in women’s economic participation started before COVID 19, and recovery has been slower.

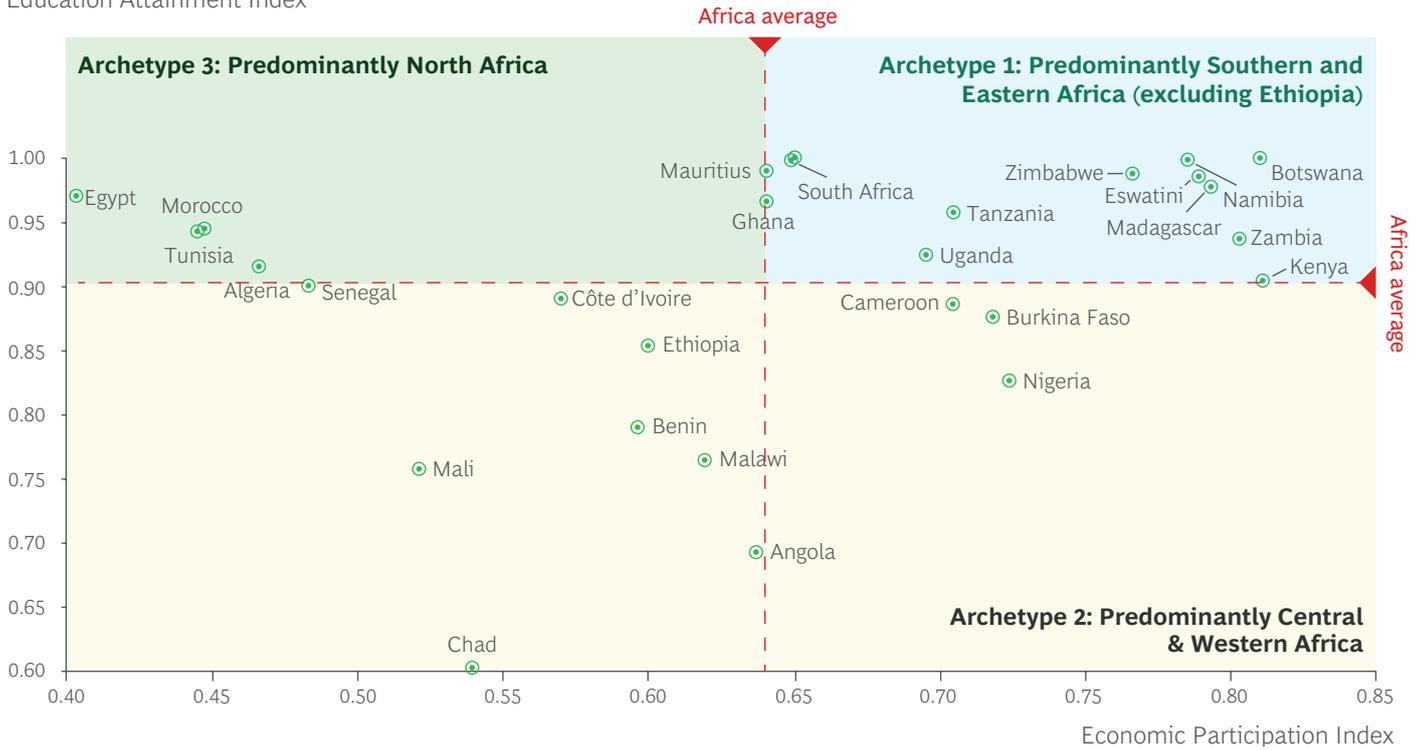
As the world returns to normalcy, Africa needs to intensify its efforts to close the gender divide. By our calculations, if African women’s economic participation were to resume the pace of 2010 to 2016, the continent could close the gap 60 years faster than it is likely to do if it maintains the current rate.<sup>1</sup>

To better understand the path to the economic empowerment of African women, we combined an analytical and ethnographic approach through: (1) an analysis of WEF’s gender data; (2) a survey of 6000 men and women in six African countries about their perceptions of the roles of women and the roadblocks to their economic empowerment; and (3) in-depth focus group interviews with 50 women across the six countries.

1. If Africa’s evolution maintains the slow pace of the last six years, it will take more than 150 years to close the African gender gap. But if women’s economic participation were to resume the pace of 2010 to 2016, the gender gap could be closed in less than 90 years, 60 years faster.

# Exhibit 2 - Africa has three Gender Gap Archetype countries

Education Attainment Index



Source: WEF Gender gap indexes 2022, BCG Analysis

## Three Archetypes

When we viewed the various roadblocks in combination with the WEF’s gender rankings, we found that African countries can be grouped into three chief archetypes. (See Exhibit 2.)

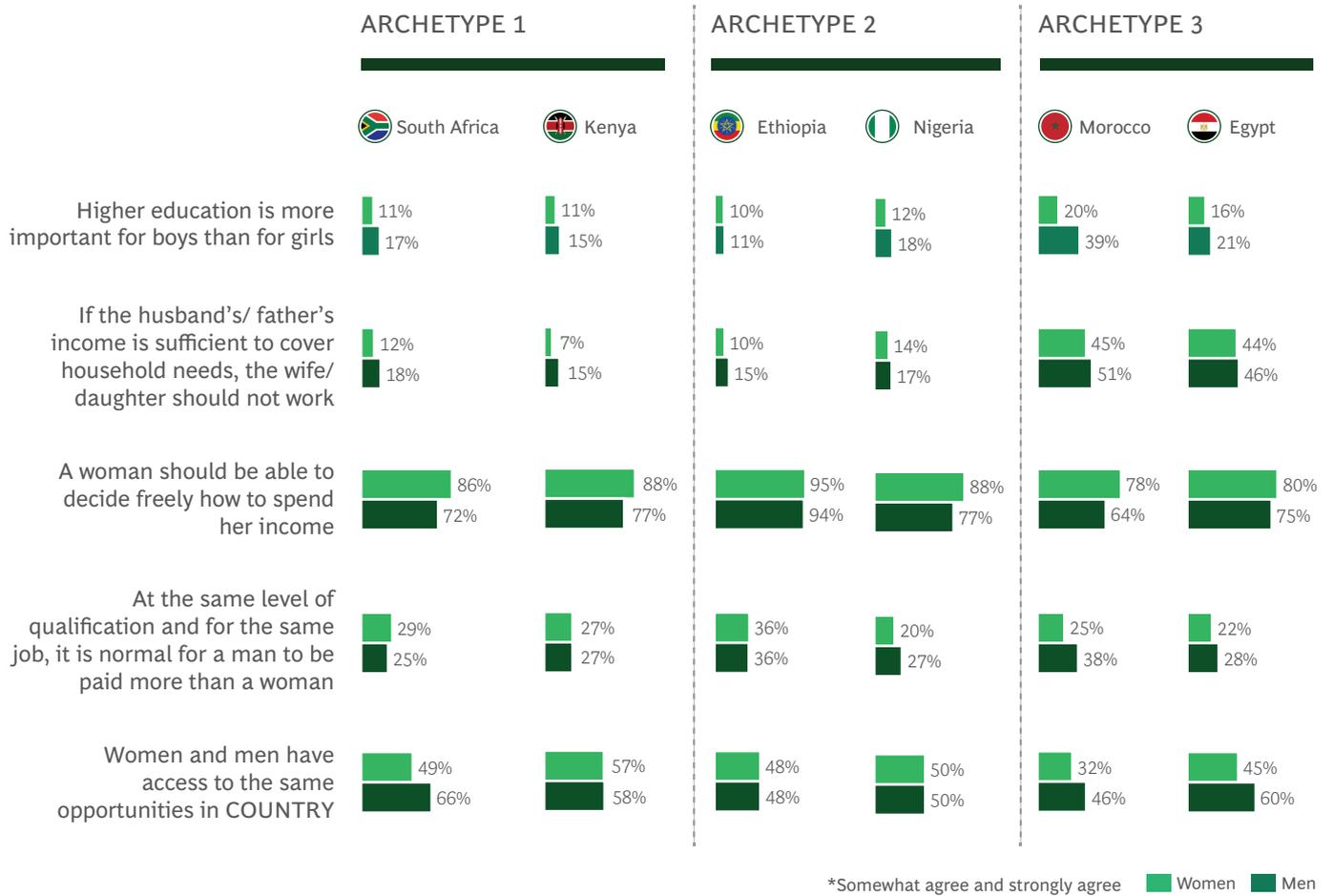
### ARCHETYPE 1: PREDOMINANTLY SOUTHERN AND EASTERN AFRICA (EXCLUDING ETHIOPIA)

When it comes to gender parity, countries like South Africa and Kenya are among the most advanced countries in Africa. Moreover, they surpass the African average when it comes to the percentage of girls who receive primary and secondary education that provides the key to the skills they need to enter the workforce.

Survey respondents from this segment have egalitarian views on the right to education. Between 85% and 90%—the highest percentage of the three archetypes by a few percentage points—said that education is as important for girls as it is for boys and that women should work even if the husband or father can provide for the family. (See Exhibit 3.)

# Exhibit 3 - A Glimpse into African Men and Women's Perceptions of Respective Roles in Society

Question: How much do you agree with each of the following statements?



Source: Africa Consumer Sentiment 2022

When it comes to women’s economic empowerment, this segment has made significant progress not only because of consistent efforts to promote girls’ education but also because of various initiatives and programs that support women workers and entrepreneurs. As of 2021, women constitute 49% of Kenya’s overall labor force. And in South Africa, 44% of those employed in the formal sector are women.

The narrative around women has evolved over time and has helped broaden their access to education and job opportunities. Popular terms like “Mbokodo” in South Africa (“solid as a rock”) illustrate the celebration of strength and resilience of South African women.

Yet women in this archetype still face significant roadblocks, with violence by far the most daunting. Nearly 75% of the women in this segment said they face gender-based violence, and over 30% face violence at home (compared with 25% and 4%, respectively, in North Africa).

Over 60% of teenage girls reported facing harassment at school, which is the primary reason for dropping out. In addition, 50% of women in these countries believe that they don’t have access to the same opportunities as men.

Clearly, there is tension between economic progress and attitudes toward women’s role in the household. Interviews with survey participants provide further illustration.

“There used to be pressure on women to be responsible for their household,” a woman respondent from Johannesburg noted. “Now, women have more access to education and jobs, which is a good thing for us. But this increases the expectation on women, as we are expected to take care of life inside and outside the household.” Another South African woman said, “Violence and patriarchy are clearly the two biggest concerns for us women. We are navigating sexism and discrimination in all areas of our lives,” said a third.

To address this tension and help women keep moving toward economic empowerment, the narrative needs to keep evolving as well. Economically empowered women need to be seen as critical for a better socio-economic life for all, not a threat to it.

“We should be partners with men and hold hands,” a respondent in Nairobi noted. “This is better for our families, communities, and countries.”

## ARCHETYPE 2: PREDOMINANTLY CENTRAL & WESTERN AFRICA

Women in countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia have extremely low levels of education—the lowest in Africa as well as globally. Forty percent of girls drop out after primary school. Some 50% leave before the age of 18 (vs. 30% and 20% in North and Southeastern Africa, respectively), and only 5% manage to reach university.

Girls are more likely to drop out of school because of financial constraints. Seventy percent of respondents in this segment said that they dropped out to provide additional income for the household. So, although over 80% of women in this segment are employed, their lack of education limits them to very low-paying jobs and provides little in the way of economic empowerment.

Compounding matters, these women mostly work in the informal (undocumented) sector. As a result, they were the first to lose their jobs during the current economic downturn and suffered the largest decline in economic participation.

When asked about the major roadblocks that women face in these countries, 42% of survey participants—the highest percentage of the countries we surveyed—spoke of their lack of independence.

One person remarked, “Women don’t have equal rights to men and the ability to decide for themselves.”

Our interviews suggest that two types of independence are at play, personal and financial. Personal independence, that is, being single, is often perceived negatively.

“In Nigeria, a single woman will have a hard time getting a lease for example, as landlords will be sceptical,” noted a female respondent in Lagos. “I feel like I need marriage to give me an identity and a positive role in the eyes of society,” one woman said.

Social norms may also be the reason that women are expected to cover domestic duties instead of holding a job. “For example, in a household, if the man earns a good income, it is expected for the woman to have children, become a housewife and stay home, not look for a job and be financially independent,” a woman from Addis Ababa explained.

This issue starts early in a girl’s life. For example, our interviews revealed that parents sometimes believe that getting their daughters married early will improve their economic status and as a result don’t send them to school. Ironically, that decision can limit these girls’ earning potential. “We need to empower women to pursue their dreams,” a woman from Lagos declared. “Every girl should have the right to education and health and family planning. They should be able to choose what they want to do with their future.”

For women in this segment to become economically empowered, the narrative must shift from viewing women solely as guardians of the household to seeing them as independent and economically empowered individuals.

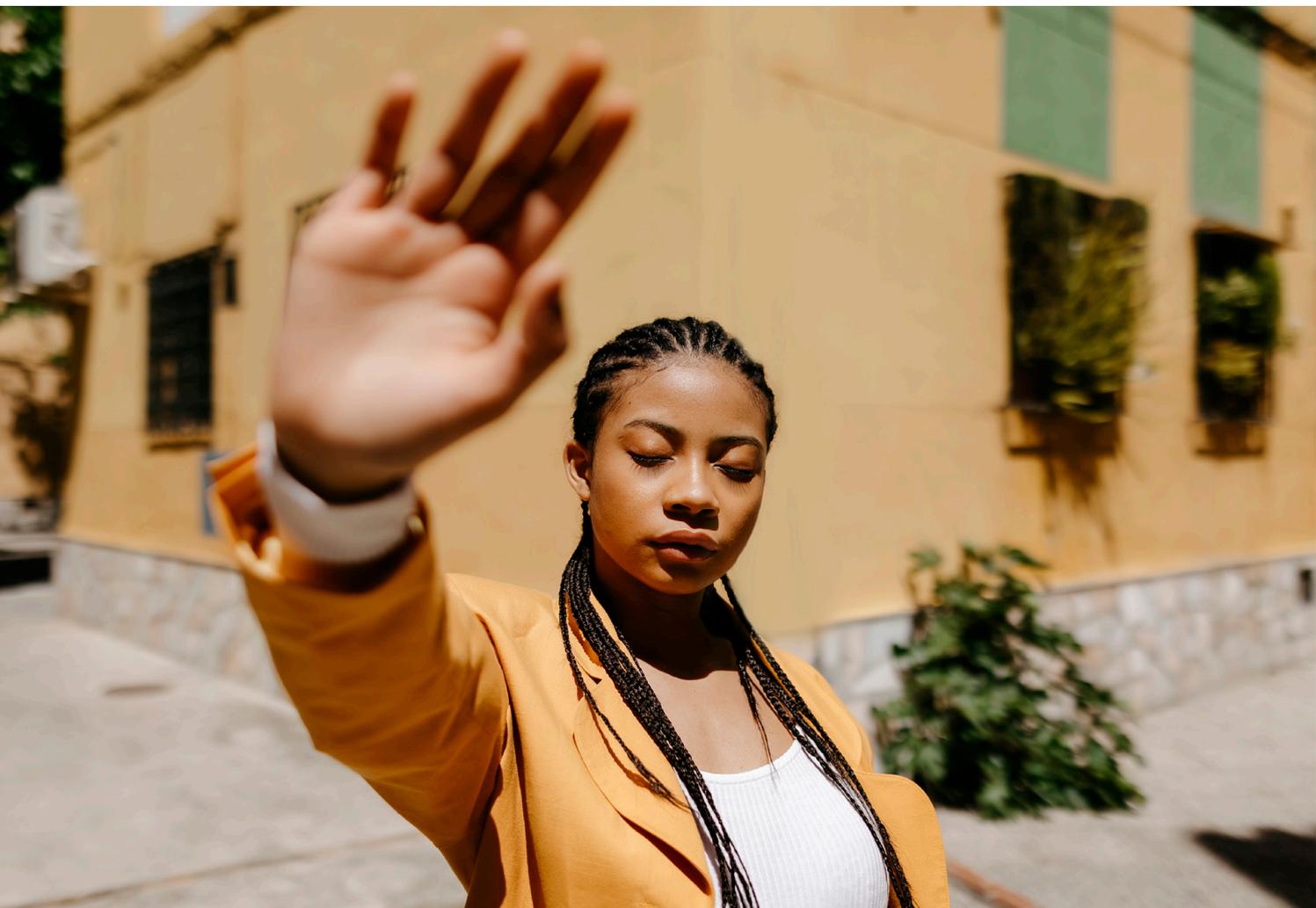
## ARCHETYPE 3: PREDOMINANTLY NORTH AFRICA

Over the past 20 years, countries like Morocco and Egypt have significantly expanded girls’ access to primary and secondary education. As a result, these countries have some of the highest educational attainment scores on the continent today. Yet women remain largely outside the workforce. In Morocco, for example, the percentage of working women was only 21% in 2022, putting it among the bottom 20 countries worldwide.

The key obstacle appears to be a deeply rooted belief that women belong at home—a view held by men and women equally. Approximately half of the survey respondents from Morocco and Egypt said that women should not work if the husband or the father earns enough income to cover household needs. (By contrast, on average only 12% of women and 15% of men in sub-Saharan Africa have this view.) Nearly 90% of the men we surveyed in North Africa said that women should go to school to be educated and respected, rather than for the purpose of becoming financially independent.

“Kids are a woman’s life in Morocco,” said a female focus group participant from Casablanca. “Women are educating the new generations [that] if women are good, society is good. This is proof that the best role for me as a woman is to be the mother to a successful son.”

To enable women in this segment to become economically empowered, the narrative needs to expand beyond the emphasis on motherhood. Women need to be valued as educated individuals who contribute economically to the household and to the country at large. This represents a step-change in the narrative, but it is key to closing the gender gap and paving the way for prosperity.



## Violence and Insecurity, the Common Denominators

While the challenges that women face vary in different parts of Africa, domestic violence and a lack of safety and security in public places exist everywhere, affecting women of all ages, incomes, and levels of education.

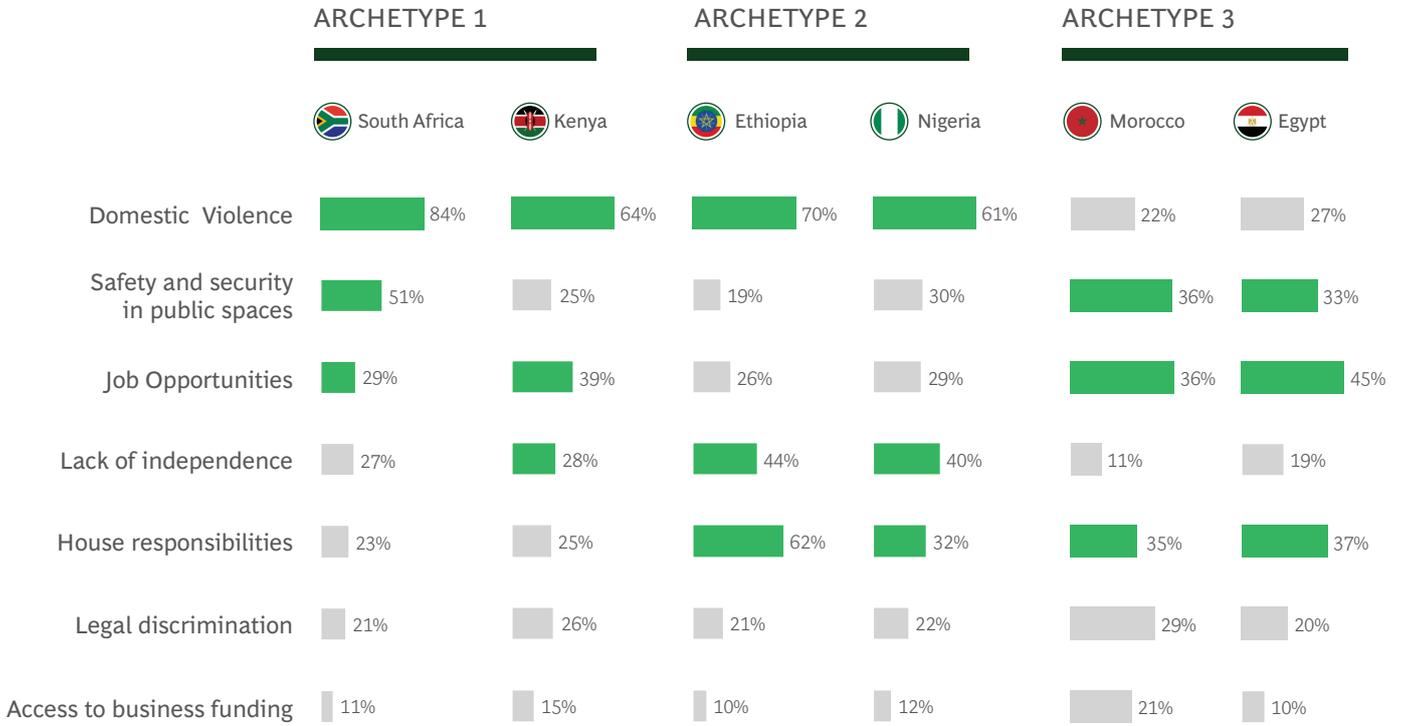
Domestic violence is an enormous problem in sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa is by far the hardest hit, with 84% of women there saying that it is the number one roadblock they face, followed by Ethiopia (70%), Kenya (64%), and Nigeria (61%).

In North Africa, the bigger issue is security in public spaces. Thirty-six percent of women in Morocco and thirty-three percent of women in Egypt say that public safety is one of the top three challenges they face. (See Exhibit 4.)

# Exhibit 4 - The Biggest Challenges Faced by African Women

Question: Which are the 3 main challenges women face in your COUNTRY?

(Women respondents only)



Source: Africa Consumer Sentiment 2022



## Finding Solutions

Currently, most national investments and international aid on behalf of women's empowerment in Africa target infrastructure needs (health, education, jobs, and so on). While these areas are indeed important, voluntary actions addressing social norms and women's role in society are also vital. Three levers stand out as key.

**Legislation** is a powerful means for addressing social norms. In addition to enforcing different behaviors, it generates debates in communities and raises awareness.

Equal treatment of women under the law is clearly critical to women's economic empowerment. It can help improve their workforce participation, expand their access to management positions, reduce the pay gap, and increase access to finance for female entrepreneurs, to name a few

laws that establish targets have proven quite effective. For example, Spain's recent gender parity legislation mandates that listed companies with more than 250 workers and an annual turnover of €50 million or more ensure that their top management and boards are 40% women. Spain also has promoted gender parity for professional and technical workers, with women constituting half of this workforce.

Legislation in favor of equal pay and extended parental leave can send a powerful message about the role of women as key contributors to the economy, especially in North African countries.

It can also help combat violence against women. Brazil, for example, enacted the Maria da Penha Law in 2006 to prevent and protect women from physical, sexual,

psychological, and economic abuse. Considered one of the most comprehensive and progressive laws against domestic violence in the world today, it is both preventive, with provisions for protection orders and counseling services, and corrective, with punishments for perpetrators and legal remedies for victims. Since the passage of this law, more than 1 million incidents have been reported.

Some African countries have passed gender-based violence laws that mandate police forces to create departments devoted to gender issues and to dedicate resources to education, training, and awareness-building programs. Yet these programs are not always successful because they are underfunded and understaffed. Women who were victims of violence we spoke to complained of the difficulty of finding counselors and other resources. “We need more access to justice for women and to make sure laws are executed”, said one female respondent from Johannesburg.

Corruption also presents another significant obstacle. “Corruption is so high that if the other party has more money than me, they will be heard and not me,” noted a woman from Nairobi.

**Educational initiatives** can help change gender stereotypes if the formal curriculum for boys and girls as well as training for teachers emphasize gender equality and non-stereotyped gender roles. This approach can be particularly effective in Africa, given the high proportion of youth and the focus of many governments on education as a national priority.

In Morocco, where 30% of the population is under the age of 15, the Kingdom has announced \$9 billion in funding for education from pre-schooling to tertiary. Similarly, in Ethiopia, where 45% of the population is under 15, the government has made education a top priority in its development agenda, allocating 5% of its total GDP to it.

For a best-in-class example, consider Finland, which is ranked second in the world in 2022 in closing the gender gap and first in educational attainment. Fifty years ago, the country’s National Agency for Education established a program to discourage traditional gender roles and encourage acceptance of gender diversity. The agency regularly publishes a guide about gender equality to instruct educators on how gender equality measures can be carried out in practice.

**Media**, especially social, is now used by more than half the African population, and so has the potential to impact society’s perceptions and beliefs about women enormously. For this reason, it’s essential for the media to stop portraying women as victims; increase the representation of women in debate panels; condemn all discriminatory and misogynistic speeches; and showcase positive role models of working women.

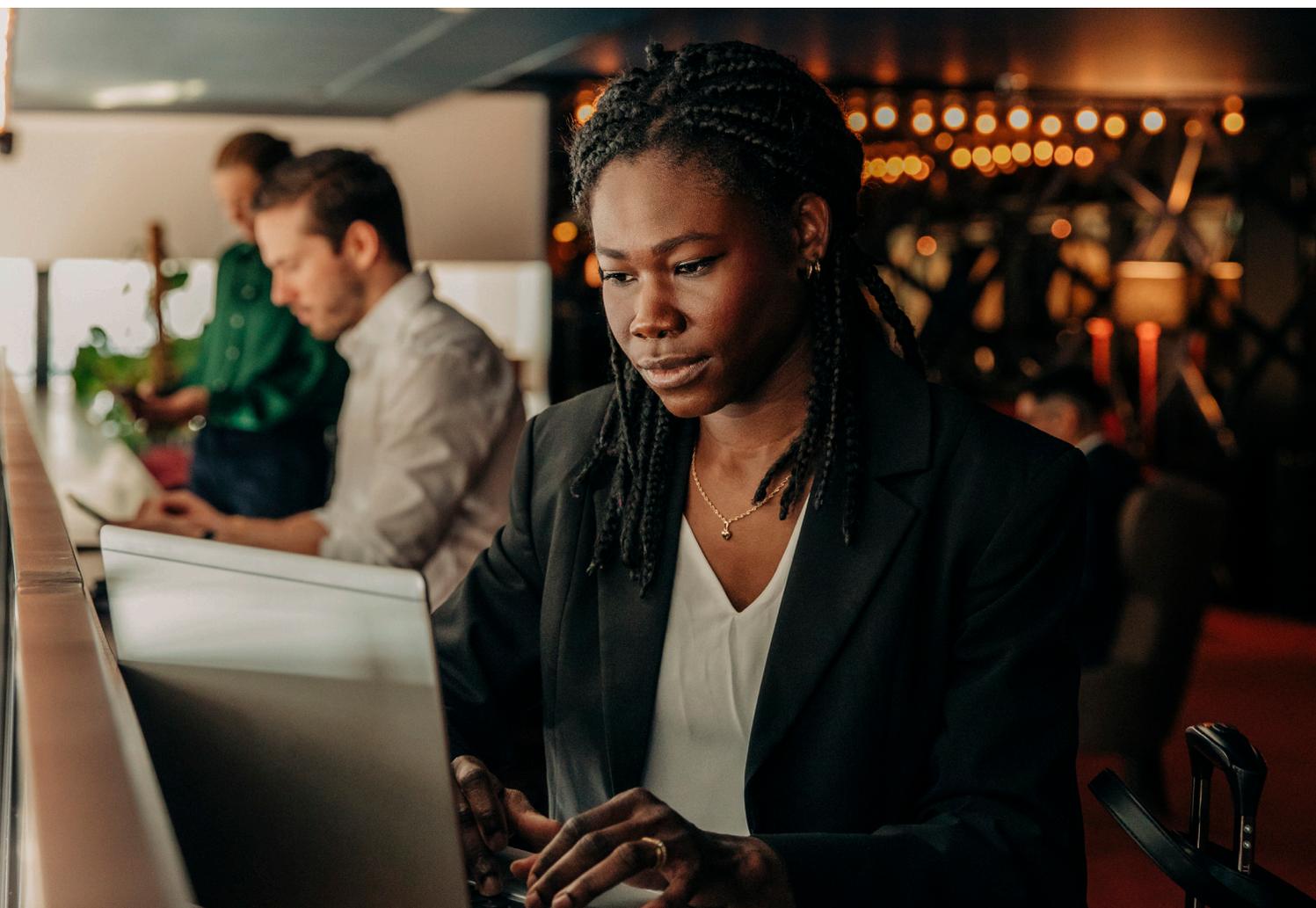
#MeToo, for example, has empowered women everywhere to speak up against gender discrimination and sexual abuse. This campaign has received media coverage across Africa and helped to raise awareness about the challenges that women face in the region. And the #IAmAWomanInAfrica campaign launched by UN Women in 2018 has encouraged thousands of women across the continent to share their stories of resilience and success on social media.

In addition to deploying these three levers, countries should make a concerted effort to embed new norms into all their gender parity initiatives. For example, many African countries provide grants to parents to ensure that their children complete their schooling. In most cases, the “head of household,” that is, the father, receives the grant. By contrast, the Bolsa Familia program in Brazil awards the grant to the mother, thus promoting her role over household resources and decision making. Such measures do two things at once: they support girls’ education while conveying the message that women can be responsible for domestic financial decisions.

**The path to empowerment is a long one. African countries need to continue working to expand women’s access to education, job opportunities, health care, transport, childcare support, and other basic rights and needs.**

**But they must also make a concerted effort to address social norms systematically so that both men and women take part in the journey.**

**Empowering women will do more than achieve gender equality—it will help improve the prosperity of African economies and societies. When women are economically empowered, everyone benefits.**



## About the Research

**B**CG conducted the research presented in this report to fill in the gap in terms of studies focused on women’s—and men’s— perceptions of the role of women in African societies.

Our first step was to leverage the [WEF’s Global Gender Gap Report 2022](#). We analyzed the data along two major dimensions of the gender gap, women’s educational attainment (including literacy rates, enrollment in primary, secondary, and tertiary school) and economic participation.

Our next step was to launch African Women’s Voices, a survey of 6,000 women and men in urban areas as well as in-depth focus group interviews across six sample countries (South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco, and Egypt) to better understand their views regarding the major roadblocks to women’s economic empowerment and the roles of men and women in society.

# About the Authors



**Zineb, Sqalli** is a Managing Director and Partner in BCG's Casablanca office. She leads BCG's work in Gender Equality and Women Empowerment, globally. Zineb has over 14 years' experience in management consulting advising governments, NGOs and corporations – in generating value from a higher economic participation of women. Zineb is a TED Speaker and delivered a talk on impact of climate action on gender equality.



**Zoë Karl-Waithaka** is a Managing Director & Partner in BCG's Nairobi office and a core member of BCG's Social Impact practice focused on food systems and agricultural development. She has over 10 years of experience in management consulting advising public, private, and social sector clients across the African continent on defining strategies and implementing mechanisms to sustain results over time with an emphasis on opportunities for rural populations, women and youth.



**Phillipa, Osakwe-Okoye** is a Principal in BCG's Lagos office. She has more than ten years of financial services and management consulting experience across Africa, the UK, and the US. Phillipa advises multinational and African businesses on strategy design, portfolio optimization, cost management, people performance, and delivering large-scale organizational transformations. Phillipa is an active contributor to gender topics, specifically at the intersection of social impact, government and financial inclusion efforts. Phillipa also plays an active role in helping to shape BCG's internal Women Initiative to support gender diversity in Africa.



**Nomava, Zanazo** is an Expert Consultant in BCG's Johannesburg office and a core member of BCG's Centre for Customer Insights in Emerging Markets, where she focuses on the development and deployment of consumer understanding to build strategies. She has extensive experience supporting and advising public, private and social sector clients in transforming their social impact agendas in Africa, with a particular focus on unlocking key barriers to the economic empowerment of women. Nomava is a TED speaker and plays an active role in building and shaping our thought leadership and proprietary insights to support our work in Gender equality and Women Economic Empowerment.



**Najwa, Jamrani** is a Senior Analyst in BCG's Casablanca office and a member of BCG's Centre for Customer Insights in Emerging Markets focused on Africa, where she builds strategic insights, megatrends, proprietary data, tools and methodologies for understanding African consumer. Najwa plays an active role in building and shaping our thought leadership and proprietary insights to support our work in Gender equality and Women Economic Empowerment.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to specially thank their BCG colleagues for their valuable contributions to this report. In particular, they thank Amane Dannouni and Tolu Oyekan and the editorial, PR, marketing, and design teams.



