



# Advancing Gender-Equitable Social Policies in Uganda: Evidence from Education, Health, Labour and WASH

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## Executive Summary

In Uganda, social policies have historically been treated as secondary in national policymaking, often gaining serious attention only in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, these policies are fundamental to improving human welfare, reducing inequality, and securing long-term national development. Despite the introduction of various social protection programmes, poverty and vulnerability remain widespread, undermining Uganda's growth and prosperity. Research conducted by a consortium of East African scholars under the GETSPA project finds that Uganda's social policies in education, health, employment, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) have not sufficiently addressed gender inequality. Critical issues such as women's disproportionately unpaid care work, gendered labour segmentation, pay and asset gaps, limited land ownership, and gender-based violence are often overlooked in policy design and implementation.

A historical analysis of Uganda's social policy trajectory (1940-present) reveals a narrow, fragmen-

ted approach with limited focus on equity and inclusion. Gender considerations are rarely embedded as a core principle, thus weakening the transformative potential of these policies. To build a more inclusive, resilient, and equitable society, Uganda must shift toward gender-transformative social policy frameworks that address structural inequalities and actively empower all citizens. This entails:

- Mainstreaming gender in all stages of social policy design, implementation, and evaluation.
- Enforcing compliance with existing frameworks, including the National Gender Policy (2007) and the Equal Opportunities Policy (2006).
- Adopting inclusive and participatory policymaking processes which engage diverse stakeholders across sectors and communities.
- Enhancing sectoral integration to ensure coordinated, sustainable impacts across all transformative sectors.

By embedding gender equality in social policy, Uganda can strengthen resilience, promote economic justice, and foster shared prosperity in the post-COVID era and beyond.

## Introduction

Across Africa, social policies have historically failed to address gender inequality in a meaningful way. In many countries, policies overlook the disproportionate burden women bear in reproductive labour—both biological and social—and neglect to recognise, reduce, or redistribute this unpaid work.

Policies have also largely overlooked systemic issues such as the gender segmentation of labour, the gender pay gap, and disparities in asset ownership between men and women. Critical issues such as gender-based physical and psychological violence remain insufficiently addressed also and are frequently disconnected from their broader economic and social underpinnings.

Moreover, state institutions responsible for social policy frequently adopt a paternalistic welfare approach to gender inequality or, worse, perpetuate these disparities through their own structures. Gender inequalities are thus deeply embedded in institutional and cultural frameworks—from marriage and land tenure to inheritance laws and labour relations. This reflects a broader trend in Africa, where social policy is often treated as a residual concern rather than a core driver of development.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the vital role of social policies in safeguarding human welfare, exposing the fragility of existing systems and exacerbating long-standing gender disparities.

In Uganda, despite having a social protection policy and other related frameworks in place, poverty and vulnerability remain pervasive, threatening the country's long-term development. These persistently high levels of inequality suggest that current policy measures are insufficient.

COVID-19 exacerbated challenges across multiple areas of social policy in Uganda. While government responses—largely shaped by social protection frameworks—included food distribution, cash transfers, and business support, the limited scope and geographical coverage, as well as the poor quality of these efforts and allegations of corruption, hampered equitable access and effectiveness. The pandemic also brought renewed attention to gender disparities in paid work and highlighted the burden of unpaid care and reproductive labour borne by women. These developments call for a critical reassessment of Uganda's social policy trajectory.

In this policy brief, we trace the evolution of social policy in Uganda from the colonial era to the present, analysing shifts in policymaking and implementation. By examining historical trends and contemporary gaps, we seek to inform strategies for enacting gender-equitable and transformative social policies that address structural inequalities and foster inclusive development.

## Methodological Approach

The research we conducted adopted a qualitative approach, focusing on an analysis of Uganda's social policy trajectory across four key transformative sectors: **Education, Health, Employment** and **Water, Hygiene and Sanitation (WASH)**.

These sectors were selected because of their historically significant role in shaping human development outcomes and their potential for long-term transformative impact. To contextualise and analyse the way policy evolved, the study employed a historicised framework, categorising Uganda's social policy development into five distinct periods:

- 1940–1961 (Late Colonial Period)
- 1962–1980 (Post-Independence and Early Nation-Building)
- 1981–2000 (Structural Adjustment and Post-Conflict Reconstruction)
- 2001–2018 (Neoliberal Reforms and Social Protection Emergence)
- 2019–Present (COVID-19 and New Policy Imperatives)

**These periods reflect significant shifts in political, economic, and ideological orientations, which in turn have strongly influenced how social policies have been conceptualised, designed and implemented in Uganda.**

The study relied on multiple data sources, including policy documents and archival materials, published and grey literature, and key informant interviews (KIIs) with purposively selected stakeholders from government, academia, civil society, and development partners. It was guided by key research questions, including how social policy has been conceptualised and framed across different historical periods; how priorities have shifted over time; which policies have been most pivotal in shaping Uganda's development trajectory and why; and how social and economic policies have interacted or conflicted, influencing different social groups by gender, class, and spatial location. The research also examined how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the direction and content of social policy, and the extent to which this moment of crisis created opportunities for long-term transformation.

## Historical Trajectory of Social Policy in Uganda

For most of the colonial period (1940-1961), active social policy in Uganda was largely absent from the agenda, and the limited social protection schemes that existed were designed exclusively for white settler populations. The conceptualisation of social policy during this era was narrow and exclusionary, a trend that persisted into the early post-independence period (1962-1980).

Following independence, and continuing into the early 1990s, Uganda's approach to social policy remained limited in scope. The primary focus was on basic education (mainly primary), basic health services and included only minimal social protection mechanisms deemed essential for social development. Then came the Structural Adjustment period (1981-2000) when social policy was given more attention, but again within a narrow framework. It was primarily understood through the lens of social protection aimed at poverty alleviation, often delivered through cash transfers, public works programmes, skills training and limited support for education and health.

Broader and more transformative aspects of social policy remained constrained by the commodification and individualism promoted by adjustment policies. This approach was ill-suited for a context in which the state remained institutionally weak and vulnerable to informal political and economic pressures.

In more contemporary times (2002-2018), global development frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have influenced domestic policy thinking. The promulgation of the National Social Protection Policy in 2015 marked a turning point by institutionalising social protection as a key element of welfare provision. This also led to a broader and more inclusive understanding of social policy, which continues to evolve to the present day.

## Shifting Values and Policy Priorities in Uganda's Social Sectors

The dominant policy guiding all sectors – education, health, employment, and water, hygiene, and sanitation (WASH) – during colonisation was access. This era saw efforts such as the nationalisation of education and the development of new water infrastructure. These services were mostly concentrated in urban areas and largely served the white settler population, and little or no attention was given to gender disparities or rural inclusion.

In the post-independence period, particularly during the administration of Milton Obote (1962-1970) and the introduction of his Common Man's Charter, Uganda pursued a socialist ideology that emphasised access, equality, equity, and quality. There was also a deliberate attempt to Africanise the economy and expand social services.

However, these gains were severely undermined with devastating effects on all sectors during Idi Amin's regime (1971-1979) due to political instability, economic collapse, and widespread repression.

Market-oriented reforms were introduced during the structural adjustment period, aimed at stimulating economic development. However, the commodification of public services under these policies negatively impacted access, equity, and quality, especially for the most vulnerable. In response, the government introduced corrective measures in the social sector. Notably, Universal Primary Education (UPE) was launched to improve access and equity. However, challenges in education quality and learning outcomes still persist.

Between 2001 and 2018, international initiatives such as the MDGs and SDGs emphasised equity, access, and inclusion. During this period, the Ugandan government implemented several sectoral reforms to align with these global goals, including:

- Universal Secondary Education (USE) introduced in 2004,
- The National Employment Policy (2012),
- The National Health Policy (2010),
- RUWASA (Rural Water and Sanitation Programme), and
- Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAs) in planning and service delivery.

This period also witnessed a notable increase in budgetary allocations to the social sector, which was increasingly funded through domestic revenue mobilisation. However, despite impressive nominal figures, the social sector budget as a percentage of GDP has declined since 2010, raising concerns about sustainability and prioritisation. Significantly, this period also marked a turning point for gender mainstreaming in policy and programming. The adoption of the National Gender Policy (2007) and the Equal Opportunities Policy (2006) helped embed gender equity into national development frameworks more systematically than in the past.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new wave of policy innovation, particularly in the use of digital technologies to support access and quality in the education, health, employment, and WASH sectors. For example, e-learning platforms were introduced in schools, and digital tools were deployed for health and WASH service delivery. However, digital access remains highly unequal, especially in rural areas,

where women make up the majority and are often left behind due to limited access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, skills, and resources.

## The Evolution of Key Sectors of Social Policy

Since the colonial era, Uganda's education, health, employment, and WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) sectors have played a foundational role in shaping the country's social and economic progress. These sectors have driven transformative change, influencing livelihoods, economic productivity, and gender equity. Documented evidence highlights their substantial contributions to Uganda's Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII), demonstrating their critical role in advancing equitable development.

However, despite their historical significance, these sectors now face severe challenges that hinder their optimal performance. Institutionalised corruption, inefficient service delivery, and a rapidly widening wealth gap, particularly under the current government, have eroded their impact. These systemic issues disproportionately affect marginalised groups, exacerbating inequalities and undermining Uganda's long-term development goals.

We also found that from the colonial period to the present day, the relationship between economic and social policy in Uganda has evolved through both direct and indirect pathways. For example, the education and health sectors have been central to capital building of people. Trained and healthy citizens are employed—both formally and informally—across all sectors of the economy, including water, agriculture, and industry, thereby driving sector-specific growth and contributing to broader economic and national development. This interconnection was particularly evident during the era of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which focused on poverty reduction and macroeconomic stabilisation. Despite these gains, the associated austerity measures of SAP imposed significant social costs, including reduced public spending on essential services.

This necessitated the implementation of compensatory social policies to cushion vulnerable populations. These unintended social consequences of economic reform underscore the need for a robust civil society, including gender activists, that can

advocate for inclusive policies and the protection of marginalised groups.

## Participation in Social Policy

Social policy choices in Uganda have largely been shaped by the extent of stakeholder participation in the policymaking process. During the colonial era, citizen participation was minimal, as most policies were developed by colonial administrators (primarily from the colonial offices) and designed to serve the interests of the colonisers rather than the indigenous population.

Following independence, policymaking, implementation, and monitoring began to involve broader citizen engagement. However, this progress was abruptly disrupted during Idi Amin's regime, when major decisions were issued through military decrees and tribunals, effectively excluding the public from governance processes. This changed in the 1980s when citizen participation re-emerged in the policy arena. The process gained further significance with the adoption of global development agendas, which involved multilateral and bilateral development agencies. These global influences helped to integrate international values such as inclusivity, human rights, and accountability into Uganda's development policies.

The shift also introduced a multi-actor approach to policymaking, demonstrating the importance of collaboration among three key groups: the state, the community, and the private sector. This 'policy triad' underscores the complexity of governance and the need for inclusive, coordinated approaches to development.

Political ideology has also been a major determinant of policy direction. The period from 1962 to 1979 was guided by the *Common Man's Charter* and focused on pro-poor, welfare-oriented policies aimed at promoting equity and access. In contrast, the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s introduced market-oriented policies that reduced the state's role in social service delivery, an approach that still influences some aspects of policymaking today.

Gender-based civil society organisations have been instrumental in pushing for the rights of women and other marginalised groups. Organisations such as the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), UN Women, and Oxfam have led advocacy efforts. However, many of these groups are foreign-based

and are sometimes viewed as elitist and disconnected from grassroots realities. Meanwhile, local feminist groups often face significant challenges, including leadership disputes and limited institutional capacity, which hinder their effectiveness in influencing national policy.

## Implications of Social Policy on Women and Other Social Groups

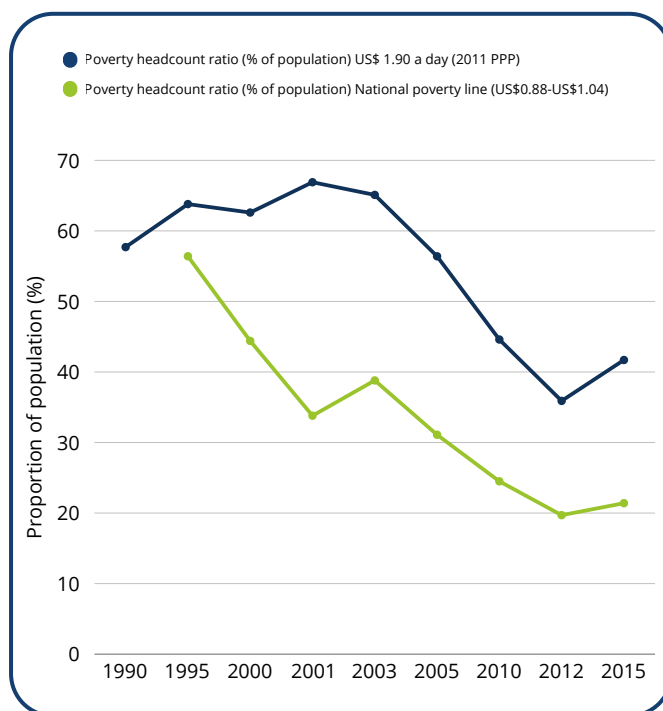
The impact of social policies in Uganda has been significant, particularly in improving the welfare of marginalised and vulnerable populations. Notable progress has been made in expanding access to education and healthcare services for women and children, enhancing employment opportunities, and improving water and sanitation services for low-income communities. These interventions have collectively contributed to raising living standards and promoting social inclusion.

Several challenges, however, persist. In the education sector, concerns about quality, high dropout rates, and low completion rates—especially at the elementary level—continue to undermine progress. Similarly, in the health and WASH sectors, the quality and accessibility of services remain a challenge, particularly in rural areas where women represent the majority of the population.

Importantly, despite efforts to promote equity, gender parity has not yet been fully achieved across these sectors. Structural inequalities, limited resources, and uneven implementation of gender-responsive policies continue to hinder progress toward inclusivity and equal opportunity. Nevertheless, the combined impact of policies in the four key sectors—Education, Health, Employment, and WASH—and spillover effects from broader development initiatives has contributed to a sustained decline in poverty levels since the 1980s, as illustrated in the figure above.

## Sectoral Innovations and Policy Responses During COVID-19

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a wave of rapid and unprecedented interventions across all sectors. This period became a catalyst for innovation, with transformative changes occurring within a remarkably short timeframe. In the education sector, the adoption of e-learning—particularly in higher education institutions and universities—emerged as a lasting legacy.



At the primary and secondary levels, the government secured airtime on designated radio and television channels to facilitate distance learning, ensuring continuity in education despite school closures.

Additionally, the dissemination of guidelines to parents on how to support their children's learning at home significantly enhanced parental engagement in the education process. Innovations in public health, such as the local production of face masks, hand sanitisers, and sanitation equipment, contributed to improved hygiene practices and community resilience. In the employment sector, the issuance of guidelines to employers on managing workforce-related challenges was a critical step. However, these guidelines largely overlooked gender-specific concerns, highlighting a gap that needs to be addressed in future policy frameworks.

The use of technology—including mobile phones, radios, and televisions—for the timely dissemination of COVID-19 information proved effective and should be institutionalised across all sectors. For this to be sustainable and equitable, the government must invest in expanding digital infrastructure and improving access, particularly in rural areas, where women constitute the majority of the population.

## Conclusion

In summary, the trajectory of social policy in Uganda has evolved from a narrow, value-limited approach to one that embraces broader, more inclusive principles across four key sectors: Education, Health, Employment and WASH. These sectors have played a vital role in driving economic development and safeguarding the welfare of the most vulnerable populations. Nevertheless, gender parity remains an unfulfilled goal, despite the existence of both global and national policy commitments. Addressing this persistent challenge is essential in the post-COVID-19 era to ensure inclusive and equitable development.

## Recommendations

Based on our analysis, we propose the following key recommendations to advance equitable and sustainable development:

### 1. Mainstream gender in policy development and monitoring

- Mandate gender-responsive budgeting and impact assessments across all sectors, ensuring alignment with Uganda's *National Gender Policy (2007)* and *Equal Opportunities Policy (2006)*.
- Establish an independent monitoring body to track compliance and publish annual gender equity reports.

### 2. Promote inclusive and participatory policy processes

- Adopt participatory approaches in policy design, implementation, and evaluation by engaging women's groups, youth, marginalised communities, and private sector actors.

- Create sectoral gender advisory councils to ensure policies address intersectional disparities (e.g., rural women, persons with disabilities).

### 3. Address persistent gaps in access, quality and inclusion

- Target budgetary increases to underserved regions and populations, with transparent audits to curb corruption.

### 4. Integrate economic and social policy objectives

- Design responsive social policies that empower individuals economically, thereby contributing to broader economic development.

### 5. Sustain innovations and invest in digital infrastructure

- Sustain innovations introduced during the pandemic by permanently integrating digital solutions into sectoral planning, with subsidies for low-income users.
- Increase investment in e-learning platforms, and internet infrastructure.
- Integrate gender considerations into all policy and programmatic frameworks

### 6. Strengthen civil society and gender advocacy networks

- Support civil society networks that advocate gender equity and accountable governance.
- Strengthen collaboration between CSOs and government to ensure gender issues remain central in all sectoral policies and interventions.

## Further Readings

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