



# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY 2022-2027

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*The Gender Equity and Governance Program seeks to foster inclusive societies so that all people, and especially women and girls, are able to fulfill their life aspirations. Focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, Mexico, and the U.S., we make grants to expand women’s reproductive and economic choices; increase governments’ responsiveness to the people they serve; and improve policymaking through the effective use of evidence.*

*The Hewlett Foundation has made this strategy public to partners, funders, and civil society as part of its commitment to openness, learning, and transparency. A [memo](#) was sent to the Hewlett Foundation’s board detailing this new strategy in December 2021.*

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*(Cover image) Three women showcase their fashionable clothing for sale at Kwame Nkrumah Circle Market. They’ve lined up on the sidewalk space, granting them the best exposure to potential customers, but also exposing them to the threat of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly’s taskforce that removes street vendors from streets and sidewalks as part of their recurring “decongestion exercises.” With their colourful, carefully selected clothes they hope to target young professional women who want to be stylish and professional at work.*

*CREDIT: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment*

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# Introduction

Ensuring that women<sup>1</sup> have equal access to economic opportunities and control over economic decisions is essential to their agency and well-being. In addition to the intrinsic nature of economic equality as a fundamental right, when women prosper, so do their families, their communities, and their societies — making women’s economic empowerment (WEE) an essential component of social and economic development.

Women’s economic empowerment is a familiar theme in global development. Indeed, every major sustainable development effort in the quarter century since the Beijing Platform for Action has recognized its importance. National governments, bilateral and multilateral donors, nongovernmental organizations, and foundations have all made this a focus of their efforts. Yet these efforts still have not led to improved macroeconomic conditions for women.

The Hewlett Foundation launched its [first WEE strategy](#) in 2015. Our stated goal was to help women achieve “greater agency, opportunities, and control over resources” — an aim we sought to achieve by making grants to develop critical policymaking inputs: gender disaggregated data, improved macroeconomic research, and advocacy to make gender differences visible. In April 2020, we launched a strategy refresh to gauge our progress and reassess our approach.

## OUR APPROACH TO STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

To guide our efforts to evaluate and update our strategy we retained two women-led firms, [SRI Executive](#) and [Kore Global](#), which helped us speak to and learn from a broad range of individuals and organizations in the WEE field over an 18-month period.

The refresh began with a retrospective [evaluation](#) of work to date. Current grantees were invited to provide input through interviews, focus groups, and a survey. This was followed by a landscape scan — informed by what we heard from grantees, as well as peer donors and new stakeholders — that looked at current and future trends in the WEE field.

Through this process, we learned that, despite continuing gaps in data and evidence, the WEE field has made progress over the past five years. Yet while inputs to gender-responsive economic policy (such as gender-disaggregated data) have improved, macroeconomic policies are still formulated and implemented in ways that disadvantage women. This is true in both high-income and low-income countries.

Based on what we learned, we will shift our WEE strategy from a focus on policy inputs to outputs centering on the adoption, funding, and implementation of improved macro-level policies,<sup>2</sup> with a particular focus in East and West Africa.

# I. What We Have Learned: Looking Back and Looking Around

In 2015, the Hewlett Foundation expanded its efforts to help women gain control over crucial decisions affecting their lives by launching a strategy to advance women’s economic opportunities. We sought to do this by giving greater visibility to women’s work in labor statistics and **data**, bringing to light gender-specific implications of economic policies via **research**, and enhancing the capacity of **advocacy** organizations to inform and influence economic policies on women’s behalf.

Between 2015 and 2020, the foundation made 70 grants totaling more than \$54 million in the WEE portfolio. Twenty-three percent of this funding went to data activities, 14% to research, and 63% to advocacy activities (see Figure 1 below).

While we made headway in all three grantmaking areas, our progress was less than what we expected as the work proved more difficult and complex than we had understood. This is not uncommon when entering a new field, and there are important lessons to build on.

## DATA

We focused on supporting new ways to measure women’s paid and unpaid work by improving the quantity and quality of informal economy data and promoting the use of gender data by advancing “gender-aware” frameworks and standards for data collection and use. We also fostered partnerships among key players and we engaged in fundraising for gender data.

Progress in our efforts to generate and disseminate data was slower than expected, primarily because we were too optimistic about a process that takes time under the best of circumstances. However, our efforts successfully increased awareness in the data community that labor statistics fail to adequately include women’s work, which has led to some important changes, including in how key partners worked together to produce joint guidelines for national statistics offices to better account for women’s labor force participation and contributions.

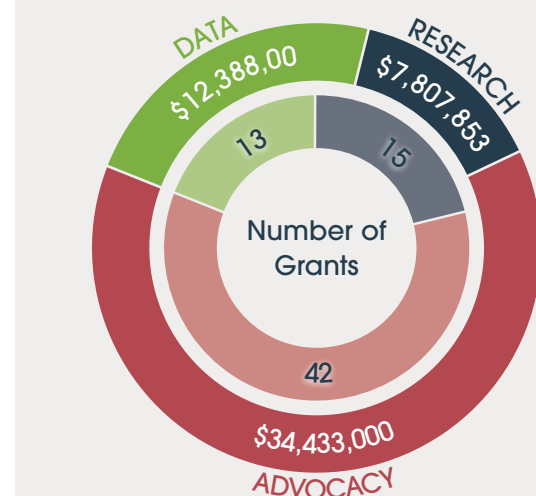
Significant gaps remain in the collection and dissemination of unbiased and gender-disaggregated data, and the new data is still not always used. This is partly attributable to the scale of the problem and the relative newness of the focus on gender data.

Key lessons from our experience include the importance of engaging data users early and supporting dissemination in user-friendly ways. We also recognize that it takes time to move from guidelines to data collection to data use.

## RESEARCH

We supported efforts to better understand the relationship between economic policies and household decision making, and we made grants to integrate gender-specific considerations into economic policy recommendations in sub-Saharan Africa. We funded feminist economists to develop new models and tools to measure women’s unpaid work in a macro-level analytic framework and we supported joint Global North-South research partnerships to diagnose constraints on women’s economic opportunities and develop policies to overcome them.

Figure 1: WEE Grants, 2015-2020



Grantee research focused on quantifying women’s unpaid work and identifying its implications for women’s economic opportunities and human capital development. The research did not, however, examine what changes to national economic policies would be needed to address this gap, nor what new policies and programs might cost or how they could be implemented — it did not, in other words, address the actual needs and agendas of policymakers. As we heard from stakeholders interviewed for our evaluation, policymakers (and advocates) need context-specific, outcome-specific, and accessible policy options and solutions.

Key lessons from our research efforts include the importance of making grants that reflect the policy priorities of low- and middle-income country policymakers and advocates. Greater attention could also be paid to the selection of researchers (or research consortiums) to increase policy salience and influence.

## ADVOCACY

Our advocacy grants sought to use research to help advocates move gender from the periphery to the center of economic policy development. This comprised: supporting the efforts of WEE advocates to raise consciousness in international financial institutions (IFIs), the U.N., and other international forums; supporting national, regional, and global alliances; and connecting the local efforts of advocates in the Global South, particularly young women, to global-level advocacy.

While macro-level economic policy is a relatively new area for women’s rights organizations, our support has helped begin building advocates’ confidence in using economic data and evidence, thus increasing their ability to engage key stakeholders and influence national economic policy. The combination of our grants and “beyond the grant dollar” activities (e.g., convening grantee partners, helping them fundraise) has also increased advocates’ presence in mainstream economic discussions. Finally, our support has been critical in fostering North-South and South-South partnerships among WEE advocates, helping them begin to coalesce around key policy themes and advocate collectively.

Yet increased capacity and access have not necessarily translated into increased influence — not yet, at least. Feminist and women’s rights organizations require more time and support learning how to make the most effective use of economic data in their advocacy. In addition, despite some progress in coming together, a critical mass of key stakeholders has not yet settled on a clear, shared agenda. Moreover, to influence policymakers, advocates need evidence that is solutions-focused, which (as noted above) has been lacking in existing research. Plus, the insular culture of many IFIs, such as the World Bank and IMF, makes influencing them complex.

Important lessons from our advocacy efforts include recognition that access to and relationships with policymakers is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change: Advocates also need context-specific knowledge and specific, costed, and generally agreed-upon policy solutions. In addition, because advocacy is a long game, with many actors and activities involved in influencing decision makers at various levels, it requires different ways to measure success. We may also need to engage with and influence IFIs differently, as they mostly listen to their own economists, not external voices. Despite these challenges, the evaluation concluded that we have found an important niche in funding advocates to bring a feminist lens to macro-level economic policy development.

In addition, **overarching lessons** include the following:

- Coupling data and research with advocacy is a good strategy, but we need to focus more on generating evidence that meets the needs and agendas of policymakers and advocates.
- We need to be more intentional in addressing power imbalances by increasing support for African researchers and advocates within our target geographies.



*Medical Students for Choice (MSFC) leaders from Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania pose for a portrait after a conference. CREDIT: Yagazie Emezi/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment*

## LANDSCAPE

The **WEE landscape** has grown rapidly over the past five years due to a confluence of political, social, and economic interest, with many new actors and funders entering the space and existing actors and funders expanding their work.

Most funders working on WEE have focused on micro-level economic policy (e.g., women’s entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, agriculture, and self-help groups), rather than macro-level economic change (e.g., tax policy, government budgets, social protection, and access to quality child care). At the same time, funders increasingly recognize that achieving progress in economic development requires paying specific attention to the differential needs of women across a variety of programs and strategies, a change that has accelerated over the past five years in microeconomic sectors. There is also increased acceptance of feminist analyses that emphasize how gender intersects with other forms of disadvantage such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

Meanwhile, there are mixed consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for WEE. On the one hand, it significantly increased women’s care responsibilities, with devastating effects on women’s paid labor. On the other hand, the pandemic also catalyzed broader recognition that addressing underlying systemic and structural issues — such as unpaid care work, informal work, and social protection — is essential for sustained economic progress and women’s empowerment.

African governments, local and regional civil society organizations, and people in the Global South generally are seeking to govern and lead more of their own development, especially important as international aid plateaus or decreases. This shift has profound implications for the importance of macro-level economic policy and makes it even more imperative to identify grantees in sub-Saharan Africa and work with country or regional partners.

Even with this shift, IFIs like the IMF and World Bank continue to wield influence over national macro-level economic policy decisions. These organizations are insular and not easily influenced by outside stakeholders, often preferring their own research and evidence. They are also bureaucratic, meaning even when internal global champions for WEE make commitments to policy change, the commitments often fail to trickle down to lending or technical assistance at the country-level. By working in partnership with IFIs’ country offices, either directly or via central teams that are well positioned to influence country teams, the foundation’s grantees may be able to do more to influence change in national policymaking.

While the WEE field has become broader, deeper, more active, and better funded since we started working in this space in 2015, we are one of very few funders with a specific emphasis on macro-level economic policy. This presents both an opportunity and a risk: the opportunity to add value and strengthen a field that focuses on systems-level and structural macro-level change, and the risk of overreliance on the Hewlett Foundation if we cannot recruit new funders.

## II. What We Hope to Accomplish with Our Partners

Our previous strategy focused on removing what we perceived as critical obstacles to macro-policy that properly values and addresses the needs and benefits of women's participation in economic activity. Our efforts did not, however, seek to directly foster the development and uptake of macro-level economic policy solutions, and we saw few such policies adopted. We are, accordingly, updating our goal for the next phase of our work to address this shortfall directly. Put straightforwardly, over the next five years our Women's Economic Empowerment strategy will seek this **goal**:

*to promote the adoption, funding, and implementation in East and West Africa of improved gender-responsive macro-level economic policy that supports all women's opportunities, well-being, and agency.*

Several obstacles stand in the way of achieving this goal:

- Stakeholders in the parts of government that make macroeconomic policy — such as ministries of finance and planning and tax authorities — view macroeconomic domains as being gender neutral, because they do not acknowledge women's differential needs and responsibilities or see the deep structural patriarchy.
- Institutions that provide resources and technical assistance such as IFIs, bilateral donors, and think tanks likewise see macroeconomics as gender neutral and so seldom incorporate gender into their analysis.
- Researchers who could influence the development of macro-level policy solutions have largely focused on enhancing individual women's agency and income, rather than addressing structural and systemic barriers.
- There is insufficient domestic pressure on governments to adopt what solutions do exist, as advocates have lacked the resources and access needed to influence government macroeconomic policymakers and IFIs.

Our new strategy seeks to overcome these obstacles and advance our goal through four distinct but interrelated and mutually reinforcing efforts. One overarching effort focuses on strengthening the field of actors working toward macro-level policy change. The other three focus on specific activities that are critical to achieving our goal: expanding the macro-level solution set via research; strengthening WEE advocates; and leveraging international and bilateral organizations to influence domestic macro-level policies. In addition, a crosscutting theme involves shifting funding, decision making, and priority setting to African organizations that are closer to national policymaking. This approach, which is illustrated in Figure 2, is described in greater detail below.

Because short-term gains can help generate the political capital needed to build momentum toward structural and systemic change, we will focus both on supporting grantee partners to help governments adopt and implement some gender responsive policies in the short to medium term, while also supporting African women's rights organizations and feminist movements to strengthen their capacity and relationships to work on longer-term transformative change.

To prioritize resources and deepen our impact, we will organize our efforts around a particular set of perceived needs and opportunities arising in connection with the economic recovery from COVID-19: unpaid care, informal work, social protection, and tax justice. These choices are meant to guide and focus our work, though we will of course remain open to exploring other compelling areas of opportunity in service of the overall goal.

We will gradually shift our work from global investments to country-level and African regional grantee partners. We make this shift because we seek to influence policies that are largely developed, adopted, resourced, and implemented at the national and local levels. Over the course of the strategy, we will focus on a few countries in East and West Africa, depending on where conditions are most promising for progress (e.g., where there is momentum in civil society, traction with policymakers, availability of contextually relevant solutions, and/or champions among IFIs or bilateral funders).

To further guide our grantmaking, we have developed a set of values to assist in decision making and to help assess trade-offs among competing priorities.



## Figure 2: Women's Economic Empowerment Theory of Change



## OUR VALUES

- **We value feminist funding principles.** In our grantmaking we will work to address power imbalances, apply an intersectional<sup>3</sup> lens, exhibit trust and respect for our grantee partners, and prioritize equity.
- **We are solutions-oriented and impact-focused.** Our strategy will contribute to impact if there is an increase in improved, adequately funded, and well implemented macro-level economic policies that advance women's well-being in Africa.
- **We are flexible and will use learning to course correct.** We will use "SMART" indicators<sup>4</sup> to track progress and exploratory grantmaking to learn what works, what doesn't, and why.
- **We must prioritize our limited financial and human resources.** To make the best use of our resources, we will focus on East and West Africa and on our identified thematic areas (unpaid care, informal work, social protection, and tax justice) to the extent possible.

## 1. Strengthening the WEE Field



***Outcome 1: A well-resourced and effective WEE field positioned to influence gender-responsive macro-level economic policy in East and West Africa.***

While the WEE field has grown and evolved over the past five years, actors supporting women's economic empowerment still do not have significant influence over macro-level economic policymaking, and the macro-level WEE field remains relatively nascent. To begin changing this, particularly given our own limited resources, we will aim to attract additional funders to support macro-level economic policy change (hence “well-resourced” in the outcome statement). This includes exploring co-funding opportunities with new donors and engaging in philanthropic advocacy to increase large-scale donor funding.

Other steps we will take to make the field more effective, beyond raising additional funds, include recruiting a greater number of more diverse actors to engage in gender responsive macro-level solutions development and advocacy; convening stakeholders to support knowledge exchange and learning; and strengthening partnerships among African advocates, women's rights organizations, feminist movements, research institutions, think tanks, and key influencers. These sorts of investments in field strengthening generally can lead to some policy wins in the short to medium term, while also building momentum toward systemic and structural change.

Progress in this outcome includes increased funding to the field and more actors engaged in the macro-level WEE field. Such successes will, in turn, contribute to progress in the three more specific efforts toward outcomes discussed below.

## 2. Expanding the WEE Macro-Level Economic Solution Set



***Outcome 2: Research institutions and think tanks in East and West Africa generate contextually relevant, gender-responsive solutions for use in macro-level economic policy formulation and implementation.***

There is a shortage of compelling, usable, and contextually relevant gender-responsive economic policy solutions, leaving WEE advocates too little to work with and making it easy for policymakers to ignore their concerns. For example, we do not know enough about what models of child care work best for women in different contexts in Africa. Nor do we know the optimal design for social protection policies that include women working in informal employment, much less the cost of implementing them.

We will work to identify, develop, and amplify evidence-based macro-policies that are responsive to the actual needs of advocates and policymakers in East and West Africa. These solutions will focus on the themes we mentioned earlier: unpaid care, informal work, social protection, and tax justice; they may shift or grow to include other areas of opportunity that emerge over time.

We will also work to improve collaboration among the researchers who develop evidence-based policy solutions and the policymakers who see to their uptake and usage. This will include funding partnerships and supporting evidence generators, advocates, and policymakers to work together to define and fill gaps in the solutions set.

The strategy will be successful if our efforts produce policy solutions in our thematic areas that are adopted, funded, and implemented in some East and West African countries.

### 3. Strengthening WEE Advocates



***Outcome 3: Women’s rights organizations, advocates, and feminist movements in East and West Africa advocate effectively for improved macro-level economic policymaking and implementation.***

Even when gender-responsive macro-level policy solutions exist, governments seldom feel sufficient domestic pressure to adopt or implement them. Women’s rights organizations, advocates, and feminist movements who could change this, however, lack the capacity, connections, and access to influence macroeconomic policymakers and their intermediaries at IFIs.

The evaluation of our previous work found that the foundation has developed an important niche in funding feminist advocates to focus on macro-level economic policy. But continued flexible funding supplemented by beyond-the-grant-dollar activities are needed to enable these advocates to define and pursue their own advocacy goals more effectively.

To advance this outcome, we will support African WEE advocates, women’s rights organizations, and feminist movements to strengthen their efforts to promote macro-level economic policy using an intersectional feminist lens, including supporting them to partner with researchers to generate policy solutions. We will, in addition, work to increase WEE advocates’ influence in macro-level economic spaces, including global, regional, and national policy forums; and to build their connections with traditional influencers in these spaces, such as IFIs. We also will fund advocates to identify and define advocacy goals, targets, and tactics; and take advantage of policy windows to push for the uptake of macro-level solutions in local and national contexts. As we move into the feminist funding environment, we will do so in a learning mode.

The strategy will be successful if more advocacy organizations, women’s rights organizations, and feminist movements begin working to promote macro-level WEE policies, and if they build stronger connections among each other and with policymakers in macro-level economic spaces (such as IFIs and ministries of finance and planning).

### 4. Leveraging the Influence of IFIs, Multilaterals, and Bilaterals<sup>5</sup>



***Outcome 4: Select IFIs, multilaterals, and bilaterals provide resources and gender-aware advice and guidance to national governments in East and West Africa on gender-responsive macro-level economic policy that aligns with national and regional priorities.***

International financial institutions and multilateral and bilateral agencies are still key influencers of country-level economic policy in Africa. But many of these organizations, and especially IFIs, undervalue the need for systemic macro-level policy change supporting women’s economic opportunities. We plan to work with a select group of these institutions to increase their understanding of and willingness to invest in gender-responsive approaches to macro-level economic policy. We also will promote knowledge sharing and encourage collaboration between these key influencers and African-based advocates and researchers.

To influence these organizations, we will support civil society organizations that have been successful in influencing them from the outside. But we also will support actors within the institutions who are looking to create opportunities for internal change (e.g., supporting gender champions in IFIs working to integrate gender-aware analysis into existing processes and projects).

In working with these institutions, we will focus on the people and departments that work most closely with national level policymakers, such as country or regional offices. We will encourage these teams to engage and meaningfully consult with local and national civil society organizations as they develop guidance, advice, and resources for macro-level economic policy. This is a new approach for us, as we have typically worked with non-operational staff in IFIs and bilaterals.

The strategy will be successful if IFIs, multilaterals, bilaterals, and our related partners start to provide gender-

responsive technical advice to policymakers in our priority geographies and to build connections with advocates, women’s rights organizations, and feminist movements at the country and regional level.

## Shifting Priority-Setting and Decision-Making Power

As our goal is to promote gender-responsive macro-level economic policy in East and West Africa, an important underlying theme concerns shifting priority-setting and decision-making power from global actors to local, national, and regional actors in Africa. They are closer to both the problems and the aspirations of the women we seek to serve.

Gender discriminatory macro-level economic policies exist in East and West Africa because most economic policymaking across the region and around the world is dominated and controlled by men, whose gender-blind approaches are further supported by neocolonial power structures in the Global North. Addressing power imbalances when it comes to whose voices are heard will put greater domestic and international pressure on African governments to develop and implement macro-level policies that reflect the aspirations of African women.

We will use our grantmaking to help shift WEE priority setting and decision making to actors closer to the national and subnational levels who are better attuned to and guided by the wants and needs of the women we ultimately seek to serve. This includes directly funding more organizations in East and West Africa; supporting and strengthening African think tanks and research institutions; and supporting African women’s rights organizations and feminist movements working on macro-level WEE issues.

As we make this shift, we will complement emerging work across the Hewlett Foundation’s Gender Equity and Governance Program to strengthen feminist movements, increase the capacity of women’s rights organizations, and directly fund more African research and advocacy organizations.



*Women from the Self Help Group Alita Kole, taking care of their crops that they own together as a group.*  
CREDIT: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment



### III. What's Changing, and What's Not

The information below provides a comparison between our previous strategy and our new strategy, detailing what areas are evolving, what we will be doing that is new, and what we will be winding down.

#### WHAT IS EVOLVING ↗

- **Strengthening the WEE field**  
The WEE portfolio was catalytic in bringing together actors and funders, particularly in the gender data space. In the new strategy we aim to attract additional funders to the WEE macro-level space.
- **Building the evidence base through research and data**  
Data and research continue to be key investments, but our strategic focus will shift from evidence generation to use.
- **Building the capacity of advocates to influence macro-level economic policy**  
Learning from the successes of the previous strategy, we will continue to support advocates influencing macro-level economic policy but will focus more on connecting advocates with evidence.
- **Global work**  
We previously focused globally and on East and West Africa. Work at the global level will continue but the balance of grants will shift to concentrate on East and West Africa, with some global work in support of the regional and national work in Africa.
- **Funding INGOs working on WEE advocacy**  
While we will continue to fund international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), over time, we will shift our portfolio to focus more on local or regional African civil society organizations (CSOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), working more directly when possible. In our work with INGOs we will start shifting funding to their country and regional offices in Africa where possible.
- **“Outside-in” influencing of IFIs at the global level**  
While influencing IFIs remains an important lever of change, we will limit our focus to those few external organizations that have proven successful and have a deep understanding of how these institutions work.
- **Thematic focus areas**  
Our focus on informal work and unpaid care will continue and possibly expand through coordination across complementary pathways for influence.

#### WHAT IS WINDING DOWN ↘

- **Generating evidence on the problem**  
Data and research are still needed to describe, understand, and diagnose the problem, but we will focus our efforts on using data and research to develop contextually relevant solutions.
- **Economic modeling and upstream research**  
Economic modeling and upstream research are still needed to understand the problem, but we will shift our efforts to research that can be applied.
- **Data-generation standards and methodologies**  
Our catalytic work helped to increase the quantity and quality of gender-disaggregated data, but other funders have moved into this space, and we will shift our focus to data use.
- **Work in other regions**  
Work and projects on specific regions and countries outside East and West Africa will not be pursued under the new strategy. Work at the global level will be in support of the regional and national work in Africa.

## WHAT IS NEW |→

- **Influencing funding**  
We will prioritize philanthropic advocacy to crowd in additional donors. We have also increased our internal human and financial resources to support this area.
- **Solutions orientation**  
We intend to focus on funding evidence geared toward specific policy opportunities or identifying existing solutions that can be appropriately adapted to other contexts.
- **Partnering with feminist movements and women's rights organizations**  
There is a growing network of feminist movements and women's rights organizations in Africa with appetite to increase their engagement and influence on macro-level economic policy. We will enter into these new partnerships in a learning mode.
- **Greater focus on East and West Africa**  
We will maintain a focus on East and West Africa, with potential for new African regional work that is aligned with our strategy.
- **Being explicit about shifting funding, priority setting, and decision-making power**  
By elevating shifting funding, priority setting, and decision-making power to a crosscutting theme, we are demonstrating the importance of moving our grantmaking more to African-headquartered CSOs, NGOs, and other policy-influencing actors in support of our goal.
- **Investing in country and regional engagement with IFIs**  
We will work with parts of IFIs and bilaterals that are closer to country-level operational work, recognizing that relationships closer to national policymakers have greater potential to influence the policymaking process.
- **Thematic focus areas**  
We will explore opportunities to support work in social protection and tax justice as they are relevant and amplified areas related to WEE and COVID-19 economic recovery in Africa.

## IV. Potential Risks

We have considered a number of different risks we must pay attention to over the life of the refreshed strategy. Three are related to the external environment and so outside our control or ability to influence:

- **Economic fallout from COVID-19.** Continuing fallout from COVID-19 will likely stall or reverse Africa’s progress on poverty reduction in recent decades, particularly for women, as female-dominated sectors have been hardest hit.<sup>6</sup> While we may be able to capitalize on “build back better” campaigns, the economic impacts of COVID-19 could stall or delay further progress on WEE issues — particularly in East and West Africa, where low vaccination rates and the spread of virus variants will likely impede grantee activity and divert attention to other pressing socioeconomic issues. The long-term implications of the pandemic remain uncertain, and we will need to monitor the evolving situation and remain flexible, accepting that our grantee partners and stakeholders may face COVID-related challenges for the next few years.
- **Shrinking donor funding.** Bilateral institutional funding has either plateaued or is shrinking, and some WEE work is being subordinated to other issues, like climate change or COVID vaccine procurement and delivery. This will make it more difficult to recruit funders for our efforts, though it may also present an opportunity for cross-sectoral funding to advance our goal.
- **Trajectory of opposition movements.** Recent years have seen the rise of movements in opposition to gender equity. While this is less of a risk for WEE than it is for gender-equity concerns like access to safe abortion care and women’s and girls’ bodily autonomy, it’s something we need to watch — especially if (as we hope) women’s rights organizations, feminist movements, and advocates begin to gain influence in economic spaces.

While there is little we can do to control these broader risks, we will monitor them closely and respond as issues emerge. There are, in addition, two risks that are more closely tied to our work that we can take steps to mitigate:

- **Failure to crowd in other donors.** As noted above, we assume we can recruit new funders, but other donors might not follow our lead, either because it is too difficult to gain traction in macro-level spaces or because they feel they can get results more quickly by focusing on micro-level interventions. To mitigate this risk, we will actively engage in philanthropic advocacy with other donors on the structural and systemic benefits of macro-level approaches and dedicate resources to communicating the results of evidence-based solutions.
- **Failure to connect grantee partners across outcomes.** Our strategy relies heavily on connecting grantee partners across complementary outcomes. To be successful, solutions developed by researchers need to be taken up and pushed by advocates and connected to policymakers via key influencers such as IFIs. These diverse groups of actors may lack the capacity, relationships, intention, or skills to work with each other to drive change at the country level. The four outcomes in the strategy are designed to encourage collaboration and mitigate this risk, but we will monitor this closely and adapt accordingly.

## V. Roads Not Taken

In developing our strategy, we considered and chose not to pursue several other options. We based these decisions on what we learned from our evaluation and landscape scan, where we see our comparative advantage as a funder, and in appreciation of the Hewlett Foundation's values and the principles we believe should guide our work.

First, we decided not to focus on issues of microeconomics (e.g., entrepreneurship, microfinance, financial inclusion, and the like). Other large-scale funders focus on these issues, while we are one of the few funders working on macro-level economic solutions for women where our grants can be catalytic and achieve greater leverage.

Second, we will not invest in helping stakeholders develop a shared policy agenda. Our evaluators thought a shared set of policy priorities would be beneficial to advocates, but stakeholders clearly expressed their preference for knowledge sharing and issue-based collaboration around context-specific solutions, rather than pursuing a broadly shared agenda.

Third, we will not focus on integrating feminist economic theory and methods into the development economics field. This is to some extent already happening organically, as development economists respond to feminist critiques. Over the past five years, for example, thought leaders in economic development theory and policy have come to better appreciate the importance of gender-disaggregated data and gendered economic analysis. Moreover, while we hope this salutary development continues, its relation to our goal of better macro-level policy is slow and indirect. Given limited resources, we believe we should place our emphasis elsewhere.

Finally, we considered whether to focus on producing changes in broad normative understandings, especially in global institutions. But we did not feel we were well positioned to successfully achieve such change, which would require a significant shift in emphasis that would detract from our articulated goal of influencing macro-level policy.



## VI. What We Hope to Learn with Our Partners

In line with the Hewlett Foundation’s principles, evaluation and learning will be critical to our work in this strategy. This will include periodic reflection, iterative assessment, and responsive course correction. Our approach to learning will be collaborative, and aim to deliver learning for ourselves, our grantee partners, and the broader field.

A set of learning questions will help us guide our plans for tracking and evaluating progress, and implementing course corrections.

Goal and Outcomes	Learning Questions
<p><b>Goal:</b> To promote the adoption, funding, and implementation in East and West Africa of improved gender responsive macro-level economic policy that supports all women’s opportunities, well-being, and agency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there synergies among our investments across outcomes and are they mutually reinforcing?</li> <li>• Are these the “right” pathways to achieve our overarching goal? What might be missing?</li> <li>• Are there early signs that opportunities for macro-level economic policy change are emerging? Can we identify and use these to better understand and accelerate the change process and identify the actors best positioned to move it forward?</li> <li>• When and how does collaboration pay off between different types of organizations? What does success look like in a collaboration?</li> </ul>
 <p>A well-resourced and effective WEE field positioned to influence gender-responsive macro-level economic policy in East and West Africa.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do general field strengthening efforts contribute to more or better policy solutions?</li> <li>• How can achieving short- or medium-term policy wins accelerate or motivate progress toward our goal?</li> </ul>
 <p>Research institutions and think tanks in East and West Africa generate contextually relevant, gender-responsive solutions for use in macroeconomic policy formulation and implementation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What forms of collaboration between evidence generators and users are most effective in generating gender-responsive, contextually relevant solutions for use in macro-level economic policy?</li> <li>• What kinds of organizations and collaborations develop macroeconomic solutions with the potential to improve the well-being of significant numbers of women with a plausible path to use?</li> <li>• Do we see more traction in certain sectors or countries? Why or why not?</li> </ul>
 <p>Women’s rights organizations, advocates, and feminist movements in East and West Africa advocate effectively for improved macro-level economic policymaking and implementation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do women’s rights organizations, feminist movements, and WEE advocates work to influence policy change?</li> <li>• How can we resource women’s rights organizations, feminist movements, and WEE advocates to increase their capacity for economic and political influence?</li> </ul>
 <p>Select IFIs, multilaterals, and bilaterals provide resources and gender-aware advice and guidance to national governments in East and West Africa on gender-responsive macro-level economic policy that aligns with national and regional priorities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What methods, strategies, and tactics work to influence IFIs from the inside? From the outside?</li> <li>• What strategies and tactics are most effective in influencing the multilaterals and bilaterals identified as the most promising partners?</li> </ul>



*Women members of a farming cooperative celebrate the end of a working day by sharing food near Divo in Ivory Coast.*  
CREDIT: Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images

## Conclusion

While the WEE field has expanded and become more robust over the past five years, we remain one of the few funders emphasizing macro-level economic policy. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased women's care responsibilities and created greater awareness that addressing underlying systemic and structural issues is essential for sustained economic progress and women's empowerment.<sup>7</sup> Over the next five years, there is great opportunity to strengthen work on structural macro-level change in East and West Africa centered on the priorities and aspirations of African women.

# Endnotes

1. The term “women” used here and throughout the document includes women; girls; and transgender, gender-nonconforming, and intersex people.
2. The feminist economist Stephanie Seguino coined the term “macro-level economic decisions” to encompass macro-level policies beyond the traditionally narrower definition of macroeconomics. In our use of “macro-level” policy here, we mean economic development efforts broad enough to have important aggregate or economywide distributional and welfare implications (e.g., taxation, transfers including social protection, public spending, and infrastructure including child care).
3. Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age — among other factors — as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. Collins and Bilge, 2020, *Intersectionality* (Key Concepts), 2nd Edition.
4. SMART indicators are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound.
5. There are a wide range of institutions that could fall into these categories. We understand IFIs to include actors such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the African Development Bank (AfDB); multilaterals to include actors such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and UN Women; and bilaterals to include institutions such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).
6. Dieppe, Alistair, *Global Productivity: Trends, Drivers, and Policies*, (Washington, DC, World Bank, 2020) <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34015> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.
7. [African Feminist Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement](#)