

## **Building Back Better? Gender Justice in Post-Pandemic Africa**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic uncovered and aggravated enduring gender inequalities across Africa, by escalating women's economic precarity, care burdens, and exposure to gender-based violence. This study investigates post-pandemic recovery efforts which was invoked as a result of the lived trajectories of women during the Covid – 19 pandemics which is tagged "building back better". The study therefore examines if the strategies put in place after the pandemic are genuinely inclusive of gender justice. This paper probes the extent to which African social systems have integrated gender-responsive mechanisms in their pandemic recovery frameworks. Utilizing African feminist theory, the study uses a comparative case approach to analyze data in Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya through two key indicators which are women's representation in parliament and female labor force participation. Findings affirm that "building back better" in Africa has often failed to cater for transformative gender justice, particularly in political agency, economic opportunity, and structural reform. The study contends for building back better strategies that will address women's agency, intersectional vulnerabilities, and structural gender injustice.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, building back better, gender justice, gender inequalities, gender responsive mechanisms.

### **1. Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic widened the gender inequality crack globally and most especially in Africa, the pandemic came unannounced and disrupted economies, social systems, and public health infrastructure. Rahman & Idid, (2021) opines that the blowout of Covid-19 has been so challenging to restrict as a result of the manner of infection and transmission which is also aided by both warm and humid weather. According to Liu, Zhou, Yao & Zhang, (2020), Covid -19 was initiated from China and got extended to all other which has also contributed and further exasperate gender inequality which adversely affect sustainable development (Benke, Autenrieth, Asselmann,& Pané-Farré 2020). As a result of the efforts made globally to prevent the widespread of the virus and avert further harm to the populace, governments around the world instigated various measures which include lockdowns, curfews, social isolation, wearing masks, among others. Despite the fact that the preventive measures and policies are employed with the overall good in mind, they unavoidably have devastating effects on women especially.

In Africa, the impacts of COVID-19 were mainly austere for women because they make up the mainstream of frontline health workers, informal traders, and caregivers. Naturally, male and female are meant to be supplement each other as creatures of God and symbiotic beings of the one human species, such that each is essential for the survival of humankind. Relatively, it is acceptable to say that both male and female gender is equal, but there have been differences identified in the society in terms of class and significance which brings about gender disparity and the inspiration behind this study.

According to Der Sarkissian (2023), Build Back Better (BBB) strategy was inceptioned in 2006 and ever since then it has been popular in the area of housing and construction but recent studies have extended it to other areas of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). Build Back Better (BBB) is an approach propounded as part of the Sendai Framework which has been widely accepted to cater for long-standing, operative, effective and workable disaster recovery (Zhou 2022). "Build Back Better" as a phrase was also adopted after the Covid-19 pandemic as a disaster recovery method to cushion and alleviate the effect of the disastrous pandemic and also offer hope for transformation and justifiable recovery. Build Back Better strategies involve evaluation of disaster recovery which is decisive to enhancing the understanding of the challenges faced during the rebuilding process after the pandemic and to better support disaster risk reduction policies and investment. As a result of the pandemic and systemic processes of post Covid-19 recovery, governments and international partners promised to "build back better," and this raises an acute question which is *Building Better for whom?* This paper examines if gender justice has been implicitly entrenched in Africa's post-COVID recovery strategies of build back better, and what it entails for future pandemic resilience.

In Africa, where gendered inequalities are deeply entrenched across political, economic, and cultural spheres, the Covid-19 pandemic further expose susceptibilities of gender inequality and also intensified them. The gender inequality gap became widened in all ramifications including political participation of women, labour force participation, as a result of unbalanced burden of voluntary care work, constrained access to healthcare and digital technologies after the pandemic and there was an increase in gender based violence as well in African countries. According to Akogwu et al (2022), the political party membership and participation of women is smaller compared to their male counterparts because of the cultural and religious attitudes of different societies that tend to relegate women, especially areas where women are still placed on house seclusion. Ramparsad (2021) opines that the burden of women got increased after the

pandemic as a result of the time allocation for women labour. In the same vein, Parry & Gordon (2021) argue that the alarming increase in records of violence since the outbreak of the pandemic is of particular and utmost concern. This intense violence against women are highlighted and tagged as a shadow pandemic which was escalated as a result of the anarchy created as a result of the pandemic (UN Women, 2020).

This study analytically examines the post-pandemic recovery struggles across selected African countries which are South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria especially in the areas of political participation and labour force participation. The choice of political participation and labour force participation was made because they are of nationwide and international concern with the possibility to hurriedly advance into a human rights violation and economic crisis for women. The study further investigates if truly the efforts put forward have addressed or failed to address gender justice. The objectives for this study are to analyze how gender inequality was impacted and reconfigured by the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, to assess the integration of gender-responsive strategies in national recovery plans and to propose frameworks for entrenching gender justice into future pandemic preparedness. Drawing on African feminism, the study explores the strategic challenges faced by African women and to crosscheck if Africa is truly building back better or simply rebuilding systems that perpetuate gendered injustice. The findings are based on a comparative analysis of data from Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya.

## **2. Contextual Background**

Historically, African women have been confronted with systemic inequalities before the advent of Covid-19 pandemic. These systemic inequalities ranges from access to education, healthcare, unpaid care work, economic opportunities, financial inclusion, political power and lots more (Thioune et al 2024). Statistically, above 70% of women in sub-Saharan Africa works in the unceremonious and informal sector with less pay and without legal protection or social safety grids as against the male gender (Chipumuro et al 2021). This situation became amplified during COVID-19 pandemic as schools were closed, movements restricted as a result of lockdown pronouncements, interrupted livelihoods, increased care responsibilities on the part of women and gender based violence became escalated. The worsened state of gender based violence, according to the UN Women (2021), was tagged as a “shadow pandemic” of gender based violence. Regardless of the problems women experienced during the pandemic, they still engaged in critical activities during the pandemic as frontline health workers, caregivers,

community organizers, and reformers but all the contributions and efforts made by women remain unrecognized and valued in formal recovery frameworks (Mcnamara et al 2021). This opinion is buttressed by Mitra & Sinha (2021) when they claim that the work of women is mostly undervalued and invisibilised because a large number of women work at the informal sector. As African governments transitioned from emergency response to recovery planning, gender mainstreaming remained rhetorical rather than operational. This paper, therefore, interrogates whether current pathways toward recovery are truly inclusive, or whether they risk entrenching the inequalities that Covid-19 laid bare

Despite the giant strides made by South African government towards the protection and enhancement of women rights in the country after the full independence in 1994, large number of women still face discrimination daily and mainly influenced by factors such as tradition, culture, historical impact of racial discrimination, post-apartheid and globalised influences. The new democratic government safeguard the recognition of women rights and endorsed it even at an international level by consenting to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1995, and, at the regional level, signed the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development (Arat 2022). Chipfupa & Tagwi (2021) posit that more than half of the population of South Africa are women and they are still being subjected to unfavourable conditions and subjugation solely on the basis of their gender. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of women in South Africa were truly enormous.

Casale, D., & Shepherd, D. (2022) speculate that the pandemic widened the gender gap in south Africa with women bearing the weightiest impact. Similarly, Amaechi et al (2021) argue that Covid-19 national lockdown gave rise to the upsurge of domestic violence in South Africa especially the rural communities. Furthermore, Chitiga et al (2021) are of the opinion that the economic situation of women became worsened with the pandemic because South Africa witnessed higher poverty level on the female gender coupled with the over-exemplification of women's occupation in the casual and informal sectors which shows that their daily life was an unending brawl. The United Nations (UN, 2020) recognizes the gendered nature of these economic vulnerabilities, and maintains that nearly 60% of women around the world work in unreliable informal employment, earn an average of 16% less than their male contemporaries because of the gendered wage gap, and are 25% more likely to live in deficiency when compared to male gender. Prior to now, the UN (2020) anticipates that the profound and

adverse effect of Covid-19 across the global economy will be destructively felt more by the female gender because of their reduced access to social protections, secured employments and their majority representation as breadwinners in single-parent households. Though the level of poverty has dropped in South Africa since the end of apartheid, but women continue to remain poorer compared to their male counterparts.

In Buccus (2021)'s work on the rebuilding of South Africa's public participation in governance in the country after Covid-19 pandemic, he mentions that despite the fact that most nations have approved existing international protocols and resolutions in relation to gender equality and political participation, there is still incessant record of low representation for women in government and this is an indicator to the failure of nations to carry out the objectives of such conventions. In African continent, countries there in are yet to attain full implementation of these female emancipation. This situation got degenerated with the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic whose instantaneous threat was geared towards public health until the consequences started spreading to other areas such as the economic and social sector and also politics. The effect of this pandemic is enormous on deprived groups, such as women and girls. With reference to Cederquist (2021), she argues that the political participation of women is essential for a good governance because philosophies on women hypothesize that they offer better representation compared to men. This underrepresentation in decision-making positions and political participation breeds enquiries on the fact that does the building back better strategies in preparation for any future occurrence of pandemic capture the interest of women and whether the women are being sufficiently represented in political representation substantively and not only descriptively. In it all, South Africa has stronger institutional mechanisms than Kenya and Nigeria, even if structural patriarchy and gender based violence persist.

Kenya witnessed momentous advancement in the liberation of women. However, the emergence of the Covid-19 in the country intimidates the improvements made over the past decades and intensify pre-existing gender discriminations. In Kenya, apart from the economic and social impacts of Covid-19 pandemic on women, Mwanga et al (2024) maintain that the pandemic had more impacts on the mental health of women with depressive symptoms and anxiety disorders during the pandemic. Largely, Kajuju & Muchemi (2024) perceive that Kenyan women have been continuously confronted with marginalization in the nation's affairs which got more prominent after the pandemic giving rise to deficient acknowledgement of their desires and hopes. Similarly, Kenyatta (2023) observes in her work that in Kenyan history, the

political participation of women in the legislature and the executive level has been very low as most government institutions did not attain the one-third gender rule of the Constitution. This low participation of Kenyan women is as a result of the dominant standards of societal norms, financial incapability of women, political parties' structures which are dominated by men, and gendered violence. Accordingly, Makate & Makate (2023) opine that Kenya as a country has more informal sector employability of about 70% with women bearing 66% of the total percentage, which implies that most Kenyan women do not have secure formal employment which makes the pandemic hit this sect of people deeply because the female headed families lose their jobs and their primary source of income which makes them vulnerable. Ondicho (2021) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic systemically strengthened pre-existing patriarchal norms and gender inequalities in Kenya which make the Kenyan women to become vulnerable in every aspect of their lives.

Generally, Nigeria women has been faced with Gender based violence predicament since after colonialism and this gender based violence has been deeply rooted in harmful cultural, traditional, religious and patriarchal norms (Egbuchulem (2024). With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown rules as prevention of the widespread of the pandemic, gender based violence became more pronounced in the country. The lockdown made women and girls to be more disposed to higher levels of violence that pre-existed before the pandemic.

Iheanacho (2021) maintains that women in Nigeria face distinctive regional challenges which upsurge occurrences of GBV in the country, this diminishes the ability of women and girls to partake in social, economic and political better life. According to Balogun et al (2021), they observe that the pandemic effect on women is enormous as a result of adequate access to health care. The manifestation of COVID-19 has led to the disruption of health systems globally and especially in Nigeria including the area of reproductive, maternal, new-born and child health (RMNCH) services. Hither to the advent of the pandemic, Universal Health Coverage (UHC) established an international objective to be achieved by 2030 which includes prominence by the WHO on the importance of women-centred care for mothers but this has been affected by COVID-19 epidemic. Iloka & Ojukwu (2021) say that the domain of politics in Nigeria has been regarded as a space reserved for the male gender, hence the low participation of women which became worsened as a result of the economic effect of Covid-19 pandemic on the world. From Lenshie et al (2021)'s perspective, they say that the pandemic has a lasting effect on the economic development of Nigeria as a country with women at the receiving end as the most

vulnerable sect in the labour market because they are being employed at the informal sector. International Labour Organisation (2020) observes that a good percentage of people work in the informal economy in Nigeria with about 1.6 billion out of 3.3 billion total work force. The above gives a contextual background of gender inequality in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, subsequent section discusses the theoretical lens for this study which is the African feminist theory.

### **3. African Feminist Theory as the theoretical lens**

This paper adopts African feminist theory to investigate how gender inequality was impacted and reconfigured by the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria and also to assess the integration of gender-responsive strategies in national recovery plans and to propose frameworks for entrenching gender justice into future pandemic preparedness. Drawing on African feminism, the study explores the strategic encounters faced by African women as exemplified in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria and to validate if Africa is truly building back better or simply rebuilding systems that perpetuate gendered injustice. The choice of African feminist theory is being made for this study because the theory provides a critical framework for understanding the complex experiences of African women. It challenges overriding Western feminist chronicles and presents a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in African contexts.

In describing African feminism, Kwachou (2023) claims that the theory postulates that the prevalence of gender inequalities and gender based violence became pronounced and sustained as a result of colonialism. From Stuhlhofer's (2022) standpoint, he says Western feminism is alleged as being tyrannical concerning concerns of African women while Knowles (2021) in his perspective says that African feminist theory contains all the set of ideas and unique experiences of black women. This applies to the countries employed as case studies for this study which are Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria. African Feminist Theory (AFT) is a framework that evaluates the challenges of African women by underscoring the intersections of gender, culture, colonialism, and power dynamics. It identifies the diversity of African cultures, histories, and experiences and the multiple forms of oppression African women face on a daily basis, such as financial exclusion, patriarchy, colonialism, and racism. African Feminist theory also seeks to decolonize knowledge production on feminism in Africa which is distinctively different from what is obtainable in the western world. In substantiating the above point, Gatwiri & McLaren, (2016) say that western feminism has been unsuccessful in

comprehending some predicaments of African women which necessitated an African feminist theory. African feminism is involved in the lived challenges and encounters of Africa women in their daily activities (Atanga, 2013). Consequently, this theory as the theoretical lens for this study addresses women's challenges and struggles holistically and specifically in Africa, by concentrating on subjugation expansively and not simply as one of the problems. To efficiently contest any one of these oppressive practices, and have a virtuous consideration of women's tussles, it is obligatory to recognize and contest male dominance, cultural and social norms simultaneously. Selecting African feminist theory as the theoretical framework of this research work will enable the understanding of gender inequality in Africa both before and after Covid-19 pandemic

#### 4. Methodology

The study adopts a quantitative comparative case study design, focusing on Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya with total reliance on secondary data. These countries were selected because of their different socio-political systems, varied pandemic trajectories, publicly available policy documents and gender data and most importantly, these countries represent Eastern Africa, Southern Africa and Western Africa. Two key indicators are employed for this study which are women's representation in parliament and female labor force participation.

##### 4.1 Data presentation and analysis on Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate)

The table and graphical representation below, presents the data on labor force participation rate before and after Covid-19 pandemic which spans from 2016 to 2024

**Table 1: Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate)**

Country Name	Kenya	Nigeria	South Africa
2016	71.417	76.994	51.115
2017	68.685	77.02	52.293
2018	65.814	77.027	51.674



2019	62.817	77.029	52.027
2020	62.108	77.097	48.681
2021	62.668	77.076	49.618
2022	62.49	77.06	50.865
2023	62.434	80.768	52.929
2024	62.158	80.713	52.992

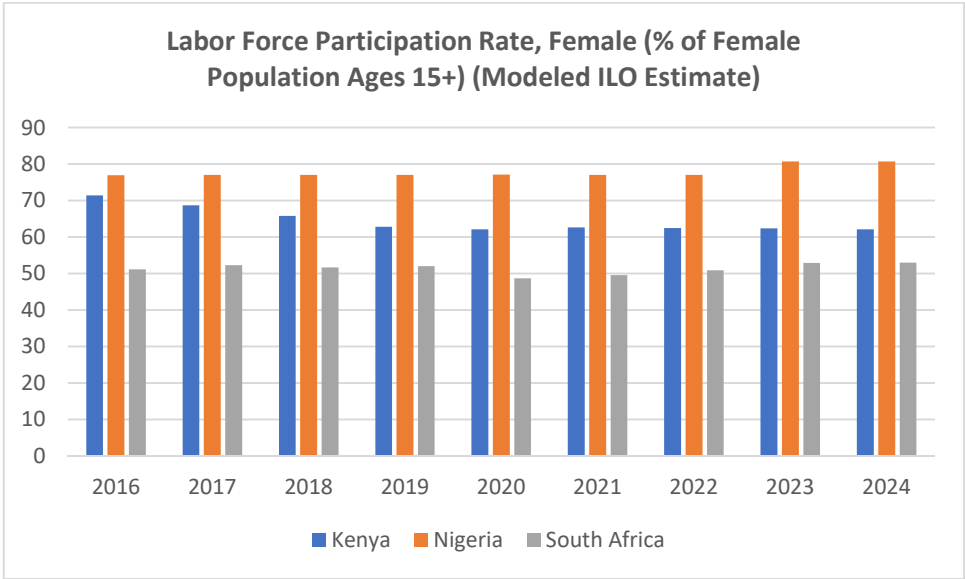


Figure 1: Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate)

This study on “*Building Back Better? Gender Justice in Post-Pandemic Africa,*” investigates how gender equity is addressed in recovery frameworks across Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa after COVID-19. A central part of this is evaluating whether women's representation and agency improved in national decision-making spaces which is a core requirement for gender-just governance in recovery planning and in preparation for future occurrence of any form of pandemic.

Country-Level Analysis

KE Kenya: Declining Participation with Minimal Recovery

From the analysis above, female LFP falls from 71.4% in 2016 to 62.16% in 2024—a ~9% drop over 8 years and the sharpest declines occurred pre-pandemic (2016–2019), and COVID years (2020–2024) which shows stagnation rather than rebound. From the above, one can

deduce that despite high pre-pandemic participation, Kenya’s recovery strategy has not significantly reabsorbed women into the formal/informal labor market. This is reflected in the persistent informality of women’s work, gendered care burdens that worsened during COVID and lack of targeted post-pandemic economic recovery programs for women. This implies that Kenya’s “building back better” has been gender-neutral and it lacks deliberate reintegration of women into the economy.

**NG Nigeria: High but Stagnant Participation, with Pandemic-Era Uptick**

For Nigeria as a country, female LFP remained above 76% between 2016–2021, followed by a slight increase to 80.7% by 2023/2024. The high rate reflects women’s strong presence in informal sectors, often out of necessity, not empowerment and the post-COVID increase suggests women returning to income-generating activities due to household economic pressures. From above, while participation is numerically high, the quality of employment and job security remains low, and there is little indication of structural improvement in economic access or protections for women. Nigeria’s post-pandemic recovery was non-transformative, leaving women exposed in precarious, informal work, without meaningful protections or economic empowerment.

**ZA South Africa: Recovery after COVID-Induced Decline**

For South Africa, female LFP declined sharply in 2020 (from 52.03% to 48.68%), reflecting economic lockdown effects, then gradually recovered to 52.99% in 2024. The initial drop aligns with global trends where women were the first to lose jobs, especially in services and informal economies. The rebound suggests intentional recovery measures, such as: Stimulus programs, wage subsidies, gender-sensitive labor policies. South Africa’s post-pandemic labor market showed greater gender responsiveness, possibly aided by higher female representation in parliament and stronger state capacity.

**4.2 Data presentation and analysis on proportion of seats held by women in parliament**

The table and graphical representation below, presents the data on the proportion of seats held by women in parliament before and after Covid-19 pandemic which spans from 2016 to 2024.

**Table 2: Proportion of Seats Held by Women in Parliament (% 2016–2024)**

Country Name	Year	Value
Kenya	2024	23.276
Kenya	2023	23.276
Kenya	2022	23.429
Kenya	2021	21.614
Kenya	2020	21.777
Kenya	2019	21.777
Kenya	2018	21.777
Kenya	2017	21.777
Kenya	2016	19.714
Nigeria	2024	3.911
Nigeria	2023	3.911
Nigeria	2022	3.611
Nigeria	2021	3.611
Nigeria	2020	7.222
Nigeria	2019	3.38
Nigeria	2018	5.556
Nigeria	2017	5.556
Nigeria	2016	5.556
South Africa	2024	44.703
South Africa	2023	45.865
South Africa	2022	46.5
South Africa	2021	46.582
South Africa	2020	46.75
South Africa	2019	46.348
South Africa	2018	42.748
South Africa	2017	41.837
South Africa	2016	42

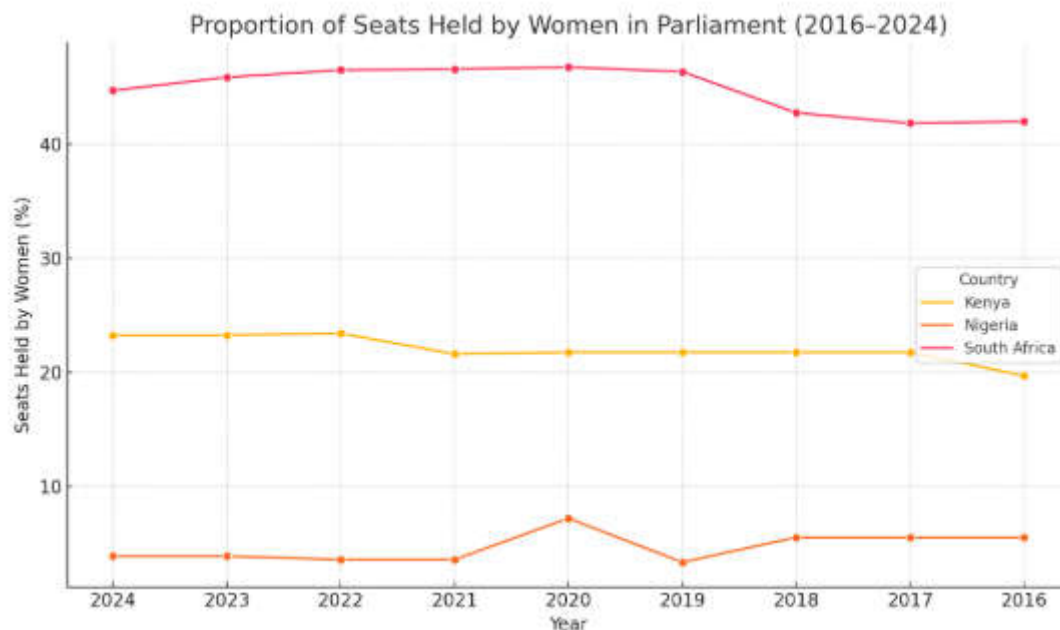


Figure 2: **Proportion of Seats Held by Women in Parliament (% 2016–2024)**

### Key Observations:

- South Africa consistently leads with above 42%, peaking near 46.75% in 2020.
- Kenya maintains a moderate level, ranging between 19.7% and 23.4%.
- Nigeria shows the lowest and most fluctuating participation, hovering mostly below 6%, with a peak of 7.22% in 2020 and sharp declines afterward.

From the analysis above, South Africa's strong performance reflect deliberate gender quotas and inclusive governance, Kenya's steady but modest representation suggests some progress but limited structural reform while Nigeria's persistently low levels highlight ongoing gender exclusion in political leadership, despite post-pandemic recovery discourse.

### South Africa: High Representation, Stable Commitment

South Africa displays consistent leadership in women's political representation, with values hovering between 42% and 46% over the 9-year period. Notably, 2020–2024 (the critical post-COVID recovery period) showed sustained high inclusion of women in parliament. South Africa demonstrates a relatively gender-just recovery trajectory. Her strong representation ensured women had a seat at the table during COVID response and recovery planning, increasing the likelihood that women's concerns, such as care burdens and GBV, were more

systematically addressed. This implies that South Africa has stronger institutional mechanisms, even if structural patriarchy and gender based violence persist.

### **Kenya: Gradual Progress, Modest Political Inclusion**

For Kenya, values range from 19.7% in 2016 to 23.4% in 2022, with slight improvements post-COVID. No dramatic shifts during the pandemic years (2020–2022), suggesting that policy culture remained moderately inclusive but not transformative. Kenya's recovery policies have acknowledged women's pandemic vulnerabilities but lacked deep structural changes. Women had limited leverage to influence core pandemic recovery priorities. This supports the study's argument that short-term reliefs were provided (e.g., maternal grants, food aid), but long-term gender equality in governance remains elusive.

### **Nigeria: Persistently Low Inclusion, Sharp Decline**

Nigeria shows the weakest representation, fluctuating between 3.38% and 7.22% from 2016 to 2024. Post-pandemic years (2021–2024) saw a drop from 7.22% to 3.91%, reversing prior small gains. Nigeria's political system remains structurally patriarchal, with minimal integration of women into decision-making bodies. This means recovery policy was developed with limited gender perspective, leading to weak gender-responsiveness and further marginalization of women during crisis recovery. This aligns with the study's claim that systemic exclusion and patriarchal policy cultures continue to wedge transformative changes, even when the need is urgent.

Higher representation (like in South Africa) correlates with greater potential for gender-sensitive pandemic response. For a country like Nigeria, despite enduring intense gender impacts during COVID-19, the country fails to reflect these needs in post-pandemic governance due to underrepresentation. The indicator provides quantitative proof of how women's political agency and participation shape national recovery priorities and "Building back better" must mean institutionalizing women's representation not just symbolically, but as a structural pillar of future pandemic preparedness.

## **5. Conclusion and recommendations**

This study examined whether post-COVID-19 recovery frameworks in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa embodied principles of gender justice through the building back better strategy in

preparation for future occurrence of any form of pandemic, through two key indicators which are women's representation in parliament and female labor force participation. It is generally known that the functions of the state have a direct influence on shaping the future and that public participation in policy priorities, are the foundation of democracy, community empowerment. Though Covid-19 has impacted on all areas of human life, the build back strategies with proper inclusion of the female gender have important consequences on the future of the country, its people and preparation towards the reoccurrence of any pandemic in future. The analysis above reveals structural disparities in how each country reintegrated and supported women in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Conclusively, findings from this study shows that South Africa demonstrates relatively strong gender responsiveness, with high political representation and a recovery in female employment levels, reflecting deliberate policy inclusion, Kenya shows moderate gains in political participation but suffered a steady decline and stagnation in female labor force participation, indicating missed opportunities to integrate gender in economic recovery while Nigeria, despite high labor participation, maintains the lowest political inclusion of women and failed to ensure secure, quality employment, reinforcing patriarchal policy structures. These patterns affirm that "building back better" in Africa has often failed to cater for transformative gender justice, particularly in political agency, economic opportunity, and structural reform.

Flowing from above, the following recommendations are suggested to serve as frameworks for entrenching gender justice into future pandemic preparedness:

- African countries should endeavour to institutionalise gender quota in leadership by legislating and enforcing minimum thresholds (e.g., 30–35%) for women's representation in parliaments and executive positions to ensure inclusive policy design in crisis and recovery.
- Gender-responsive economic recovery programs should be implemented with high targets on employment schemes, skill-building, and financing support for women, especially in informal sectors which were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.
- Gender data systems should also be strengthened by investing in reliable, disaggregated data collection on employment, political representation, and social vulnerability to inform real-time, evidence-based gender policy responses.

- Structural barriers to women's work should be addressed by tackling care burdens, mobility restrictions, and discriminatory labor laws through cross-sector reforms to boost quality participation of women in the economy.
- Lastly, regional gender policy learning should be fostered by creating platforms through the African Union or sub-regional blocs to share effective gender-inclusive recovery models, like South Africa's, across African states.

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