

# “Investing in Women: Accelerating Progress”

By [Tina Renier](#)

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*As we celebrate International Women's History Month 2024 under the theme: “Investing in Women: Accelerating Progress”, we should not only reflect on the voices and invaluable contributions of women and women's movements in advocating for and implementing critical policy, legislative, community, national, regional and international development changes, for the past decades.*

Although women have gained noteworthy progress in gaining tertiary education and have risen to the ranks of middle management in Jamaica and the broader Caribbean community, there are still several institutional, structural and systemic barriers that constrain women's choices, empowerment, autonomy, access to opportunities, social and economic mobility and political participation. These barriers are predicated on androcentric belief systems, ideas, norms, values, sub-cultures, and state and non-state institutions that perpetuate gender inequality.

A discussion on gender inequality without a critical interrogation of the multiple, intersecting manifestations of patriarchies relegates the discussion to simplistic, binary analyses of “man shaming” or solely focusing on the “victimhood of women”. As a result of shifting my examination to be more nuanced and comprehensive while observing alarming statistics from the 2023 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report and the 2024 Oxfam International Report which explain that it will take an additional one hundred and thirty-one (131) years to reach gender equality and additional two hundred and thirty years (230) to eradicate global poverty respectively, the importance of investing in women and strategies for accelerating progress becomes even more relevant and crucial in contemporary development.

Two weeks ago, Odem Foundation, a Jamaican-based non-profit organization whose mission is to promote community and nation-building through charitable initiatives, hosted its

annual panel discussion under the 2024 International Women's Day Theme. As a panelist, I focused on the issues of poverty eradication and social protection because women and girls are more disproportionately affected by these issues based on qualitative and quantitative findings and my lived experience as a young woman from rural Jamaica. Additionally, Planning Institute of Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions studies show that the majority of female-headed households in rural areas are the largest applicants for the Government of Jamaica's social protection programme, Programme of Advancement through Health and Education (PATH) and three (3) in every five (5) Jamaican households have expressed that their incomes are not sufficient to meet their basic needs and household expenses due to rising cost of living.

On the other hand, the Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CAPRI) states that the gender pay gap continues to be a major obstacle to women's economic empowerment in the Caribbean, using Jamaica as a case study where the average income per capita for women is USD\$6,729 while men's average income per capita is USD\$11,044. Therefore, one of the most important mechanisms for investing in women and accelerating progress, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to dedicate more national budgetary allocations to gender equality interventions, initiatives and social protection for women and girls from marginalized communities based on race, ethnicity, age group, social class, level of educational attainment, nationality/ citizenship status, gender identity, sexual orientation and geographic location.

In terms of revolutionizing data collection and analysis to support stronger intersectional, gender-based analyses to social protection, the Government of Jamaica and the broader Caribbean community could capitalize on South-South cooperation/ North-South cooperation to provide technical and financial resources to collect more gender-disaggregated data to allow researchers and policymakers to examine the differences and commonalities in men and women's economic, socio-cultural and political participation and to develop more gender-responsive and transformative policies for those who are most affected by the multi-dimensional implications of widespread crises including the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and geo-political wars. This should also be accompanied by the development and application of real-time monitoring and evaluation techniques to generate lessons learnt from the outcomes and impacts of programmes and policies that have been implemented that profoundly shape and affect women's lives and livelihoods. It must be noted that policies and programmes are not gender-neutral by their conceptual origins and ramifications.

Investment in women is not only financial or economic. Investment in women is also social and cultural and this begins with challenging the Government of Jamaica to re-imagine and approach its development imperatives beyond economic growth or the sole focus on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita as the main measure of development and address harmful beliefs, norms and expectations associated with dominant masculinities and feminities.

A focus beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita takes into account non-econometric measures of development such as standards of living, health and well-being of the population and environmental protection. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2023), the sole focus on GDP per capita excludes a discussion on who is benefitting from economic growth. Thus far, the Planning Institute of Jamaica must be highly commended for its launch of an Inclusive Growth Index Framework in February

2024. Social investment in women should encompass greater collaboration between the public and private sector, academia and civil society with marginalized communities and their engagement in community-based, gender-based and youth-based interventions that tackle the root causes of poverty and deficits in social protection while implementing longer-term initiatives to ensure mentorship for women and greater access to opportunities grounded in values of social and economic justice.

Finally, we should re-think and re-do approaches to achieving “well-being” national economies” by looking at best practices found in Canada and New Zealand if we are serious about not only achieving targets for the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development but also achieving our national development objective of making Jamaica the place to live, raise families and do business. Investing in women and accelerating progress are at the foundation of why and how we envision a more inclusive and resilient present and future.

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*Tina Renier is an Afro-Jamaican scholar-activist. She is also a Research Fellow for the Sustainable Leadership and Positive Peace Research Fellowship Programme, a UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab expert and a regular contributor to Global Research. She received a Master of Arts in International Development Studies from Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.*

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