



Photo by Rick Osentoski-Oz

# Escalating Global Inequality & Inequity

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was already extremely unequal due to entrenched **systems** of inequality, racism, and discrimination.

The existence of discrimination in many forms—gender, race, disability, religion, against Indigenous populations—exacerbates unequal growth by limiting the ability of people to reach their potential and live in dignity. Further, the pandemic has amplified inequities, and recovery from COVID will be unequal given that the richest nations are **three years ahead** of the poorest nations in the vaccine race. The COVID-19 virus itself disproportionately **impacts** those with fewer resources and access to healthcare. The pandemic is pushing **millions more** people into extreme poverty and may trigger cycles of higher income inequality and lower social mobility among vulnerable populations. The effects threaten to be long-lasting.

Specifically, COVID-19 has damaged the progress made toward children and youth development. Prior to the pandemic, **45% of children** from 70 countries did not have access to what UNICEF categorizes as critical needs, including education, healthcare, housing, nutrition, sanitation, and water. By September 2020, around **150 million children** lost access to services and entered into multidimensional poverty. Due to school closures, the percentage of children without access to education and WASH services increased from **47% to 56%**, and **368.5 million students** lost access to their most reliable source of nutrition at the peak of the virus. Additionally, with millions forced out of school due to the pandemic, it's estimated that pandemic will reverse **20 years** of gains made for girls' education; **20 million girls** are projected to remain out of school after the pandemic, increasing the risk of child marriage and other gendered forms of abuse. The loss of safety nets and income has also resulted in an **increase** in domestic abuse, negatively impacting children's physical and mental states.

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Inequality and inequity gaps are increasing both within and between countries, with vaccine access and healthcare systems expanding the wedge between rich and poor, making the poor poorer as the **richest get richer**. Systemic racial inequalities and injustices are not new, but there is now a revitalized focus given the critical point that we have reached due to the pandemic and domestic movements following the murder of George Floyd in the U.S. Additionally, as a result of COVID-19, the global gender gap has increased by a generation. It is now estimated that it will take at least **135 years** to close the gap, with political empowerment being the widest gap.

To better address these rising inequities, the U.S. must integrate diverse voices and explicitly consider how its development and humanitarian policies and programs impact local populations. This includes creating policies with a strong emphasis on marginalized populations, including women, girls, and youth. The needs of children and youth in particular warrant specific attention by breaking down internal silos to build more integrated and inclusive programming.

Policymakers must also be deliberate about ensuring locally-led development by engaging communities and including youth-led organizations as stakeholders alongside local governments, civil society organizations, universities, and the private sector, ensuring the formulation and implementation of long-term solutions.

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