

## Briefing Note



# Gender and Inclusion: Empowering Marginalized Groups in African Higher Agricultural Education

## Executive Summary

African Higher Agricultural Education Institutions (HAEIs) are critical for shaping resilient food systems, advancing rural livelihoods, and developing Africa's future leaders. Yet, persistent gender disparities, limited inclusion of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and persons with disabilities (PWDs), and weak safeguarding systems constrain their transformative potential. Women remain underrepresented in leadership, while marginalized populations face systemic barriers to access and success. Key recommendations include institutionalize gender, inclusion, and safeguarding (GIS) frameworks across governance and operations, embed Young Women-Centric Design (YWCD) approaches and mentorship pathways, expand access for refugees, IDPs, and PWDs through bridging programs, blended learning, and recognition of prior learning, establish a continental Community of Practice (CoP) to share knowledge, coordinate interventions, and scale impact, strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive learning using disaggregated data.

## Introduction: The Strategic Imperative

RUFORUM and partners, including the Mastercard Foundation, recognize that inclusive excellence in African higher education is essential for achieving Agenda 2063, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4 & 5), and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25). Universities must produce graduates who are not only academically competent but socially responsible, resilient, and capable of advancing equitable development.

The Empowering Inclusive Excellence workshop (27–28 November 2025) convened university leaders, development partners, and practitioners to co-create strategies addressing gender, inclusion, and safeguarding (GIS), focusing on women, refugees, IDPs, and PWDs.

### **Problem Description: Persistent Gaps**

Despite progress, HAEIs continue to face systemic barriers:

1. Gender Inequality in Leadership – Women comprise only 24% of academic staff and 2–3% of Vice-Chancellors in sub-Saharan Africa.
2. Limited Inclusion of Marginalized Groups – Refugees, IDPs, and PWDs face enrollment rates below 10%, despite Africa hosting over 30% of the world’s refugee population.
3. Weak Policy Implementation – GIS policies exist but are poorly enforced, monitored, and financed.
4. Inaccessible Infrastructure & Support Systems – Lack of disability-friendly facilities, psychosocial services, and safeguarding frameworks impedes participation.
5. Cultural Norms and Bias – Entrenched social norms and unconscious bias further marginalize vulnerable groups.

These barriers constrain universities’ ability to contribute effectively to inclusive development, agricultural productivity, and resilient communities.

### **Policy Options: Choosing a Path Forward**

To advance inclusive excellence, institutions can consider three approaches:

1. Status Quo / Incremental Approach – Maintain current practices; low risk but limited systemic impact.
2. National-Level Integration – Embed GIS and inclusion policies within domestic frameworks; context-sensitive but inconsistent cross-border impact.
3. Continental Coordinated Framework (Recommended) – RUFORUM-led network approach to harmonize pathways, recognition systems, financing, and inclusive governance. This approach ensures systemic, scalable, and sustainable impact across African HAEIs.

### **Key Recommendations for a Coordinated Transformation**

Based on the preferred continental framework, the following five actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. From Policy to Practice
  - o Operationalize GIS frameworks with clear responsibilities, financing, and culture change initiatives.
2. Institutionalize Young Women-Centric Design (YWCD)
  - o Embed ASK HER principles and leadership pathways across programs, ensuring active participation of young women.
3. Strengthen Support Systems
  - o Build accessible infrastructure, psychosocial services, disability support units, and safeguarding offices.
4. Expand Refugee, IDP, and PWD Inclusion
  - o Target 70% refugee/IDP participation and 30% host community inclusion in HAE programs.

- o Implement bridging programs, blended learning, RPL, and partnerships with refugee-led organizations and UN agencies.
5. Activate Continental GIS Community of Practice
- o Launch the platform with defined operational modalities, annual action plans, and leadership buy-in from Deans and Vice-Chancellors.
  - o Integrate disaggregated data collection and M&E systems for continuous learning and adaptive management.

## Action Framework and Conclusion: From Deliberation to Implementation

Inclusive excellence is central to RUFORUM's and partners' mission to transform African higher education. By mainstreaming GIS, adopting young women-centric approaches, and leveraging a continental CoP, universities can unlock the potential of marginalized groups, produce leaders and change agents, and drive equitable development.

RUFORUM calls on university leadership, development partners, and policymakers to commit to coordinated, evidence-driven action, ensuring that no young person is left behind in Africa's higher education systems.

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