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Regional governance, gender and the COVID-19 pandemic in the global south

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ABSTRACT

Do regional institutions promote more equitable governance in the global South and, in particular, do they enable more gender-equitable governance? We examine these questions in the light of regional governance actions and policies under COVID-19, drawing on evidence from Latin America and Africa. We argue that weak regional gender equality norms contributed to the downgrading of the rights of women and girls in policymaking during COVID-19, within both member states and regional organizations, which resulted in women and girls paying an unnecessarily high price during and after the pandemic. Using interview and documentary data, we show that the existence of gender equality norms led to an initial recognition of the need for gendered protections in COVID-19 policies but that these were side-lined, and the rights and needs of women and girls deprioritized, as the pandemic deepened. We also discuss the gendered costs of deprioritization in terms of preventable everyday harms.

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Regionalism; gender; norms; feminist IPE; Latin America; Africa

Introduction

Do regional institutions in the global South contribute to more gender-equitable governance? The place of global South regionalisms in global and domestic governance has been subject to analysis over the last 30 years (Börzel & Risse, 2016), including in relation to the capacity of regional organizations to serve as norms brokers for more inclusive policy-making (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012). Yet how inclusive global South regional governance is in gender terms remains poorly understood. This meant that, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2019/2020, it was unclear whether regional institutions would serve to promote and protect the rights of women and girls during the pandemic or whether, on the contrary, those rights would be sacrificed in favour of gender-conservative, patriarchal policy making. Using the examples of Latin America and Africa, we show that the answer to our question is complex. On the one hand, institutions used regional gender equality norms to flag the importance of gender for COVID-19 policy making. But we also show that these norms were deprioritized in policy at the regional and the member state level and, consequently, that women and girls were exposed to additional gender-based harm. Identifying the weakness of gender norms, and the consequences of that weakness within global South regionalism is thus at the heart of this paper. To make our argument, we connect two theoretical

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debates: the place of norms, and gender equality norms in particular, in global South regionalism and feminist IPE, with its focus on the everyday gendered consequences of policy, thereby broadening the analytical tools used to understand regional governance itself.

The fact that women and girls paid a higher price than men in the global South during COVID-19 is not, in itself, an unexpected finding. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimated that this would be the case in Latin America at the start of the pandemic (ECLAC, 2020a). Similarly, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) concluded that ‘in Africa, the gender inequities of the COVID-19 pandemic follow different paths but almost always end up the same: women have suffered disproportionate economic harm’ (Aoyagi, 2021). The scale of gendered losses during COVID-19 and in its aftermath has significantly pushed back progress towards gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gender-based violence (GBV) has risen, in some cases doubling, since the pandemic (Blofield et al., 2022), more women than men have lost their jobs or been unemployed for longer (ILO, 2022), women and girls have taken on increased care burdens and experienced a significant reduction in access to sexual and reproductive healthcare (Kipruto et al., 2023) and girls have been disproportionately impacted by school closures and are less likely to return to school than boys (CSIS, 2022).

Regional governance organizations are not uniquely responsible for these outcomes. But belonging to a region entails accepting elements of a shared model of governance and some common aims, ideas, and vision (Prieto, 2020). Regional organizations serve in both Latin America and Africa as important sources of policy ideas, advice, finance and policy coordination, including during the pandemic. The point of adopting regional norms is understood to be to provide a shared foundation for policy making in member states. Even when norms lack coercive power (Checkel, 2001), it is sometimes supposed that they can generate compliance through ‘norm entrapment’ (Frank, 2001). Yet, in the end, this did not happen in Latin America or Africa where there was a failure to incorporate regional gender equity norms into policy during COVID-19.

Our paper unfolds as follows. We first note the limited attention paid to gender in global South regionalism, as well as the paucity of research that considers whether or how regional governance impacts on the everyday experiences of women and girls. To better understand the relationship between gender and global South regionalism, we consider the place of gender equality norms in regional governance, engaging with the considerable theoretical literature on the power of ideas that derives from constructivist international relations scholarship. We then suggest that the adoption of regional norms of gender equity has had an important symbolic – but not transformative – role in regional governance. Gender equity norms are discursively present but are not integrated into policy and are only weakly institutionalized and, consequently, they do not reach into the everyday lives of women. Policy remains informed chiefly by patriarchal policy scripts. To show why the weakness of regional gender equality norms matters, and inspired by everyday feminist IPE, we then use the lens of social reproduction to name the costs of patriarchal policies on women’s everyday lives. In so doing, we make the case for renewing approaches to regional governance by centring gender more fully within the study of regionalism and bringing scholarship on regional governance into conversation with feminist approaches to governance.

Our research was conducted between 2020 and 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the immediate aftermath. We chose to focus on two regions of the global South: Latin America and Africa. We did so, first, because gender equity norms have steadily expanded in both regions, making both regions test cases for the impact of gender norms in regional governance during COVID-19. Secondly, we have strong existing research networks in Latin America and Africa which enabled us to conduct primary research under the restrictive conditions imposed

by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the existence of prior research experience and contacts shaped the research design and research sites. We would have been unable to deliver fieldwork-based research in other regions of the global South, such as Asia, during the pandemic.

In order to trace the impact of gender equality norms in pandemic policy making, we asked how, and how strongly, regional concerns about gender equity were expressed, whether gender issues were articulated consistently throughout the pandemic and accompanied by financial commitments, and whether attempts were made to encourage member states to act in accordance with regional gender norms. The pandemic reduced the scope of field research but we were still able to conduct 15 interviews with key representatives of regional organizations, civil society actors and international organizations, all of whom spoke, generally extensively, on condition of anonymity. In order to capture the scale of impact of the everyday lives of women and girls, meanwhile, we conducted an extensive review of documentary data from international and regional organizations, and relevant NGOs during the pandemic and in its aftermath.

Building conceptual bridges to better understand the place of gender in global south regionalism

Although it is widely recognized that a gender(ed) IPE analysis is absolutely central to fully understanding and explaining the processes and practices of the global political economy (Griffin, 2007), the gaps and limitations in relation to scholarly understanding of gender and regionalism in the global South are striking. Regionalism, or the creation or the emergence of institutionalized trans-boundary cooperation between countries that understand themselves to be located in broadly the same geopolitical space, reshaped the architecture of global South governance in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Yet we still have only a partial understanding of its gendered nature and gendered impacts. To contribute to advancing that understanding, we adopt a conceptual approach that draws on the study of norms, combined with an everyday feminist IPE focus that allows us to zoom in on the consequences of policy decisions on the everyday lives of women and girls through the lens of social reproduction.

The roots of global South regionalism lay in cooperation schemes from the 1960s – in some cases even earlier – between neighbouring countries with the purpose of national economic development. This changed in the 1990s, as the authority of nation states to manage their economies weakened in the face of globally mobile capital. ‘New’ regionalism, as it was termed, served not to protect economies from outside competition but to generate and institutionalize shared practices as a way of locking-in contentious reforms and limiting competition for investments in the face of intensified globalization (Gamble et al., 1998). Yet, remarkably, the first wave of new regionalist scholarship paid limited attention to what these sweeping changes meant for women’s lives (Macdonald, 2022). One notable exception was Marchand, who warned that mainstream IPE analyses were at risk of completely ignoring the way that the new regionalism in the global South reinforced existing political economies of gendered exclusion. She argued that scholarship was urgently needed to ‘engender’ understandings of regionalism in the global South, identify its implications ‘for women already living on the margins of the global political economy’ and challenge the ‘masculinist’ writing of regionalism (Marchand, 1994 p. 65).

By the 2000s, growing attention was paid to the notion that regional governance represented more (or something other) than a functionalist project of economic integration; it was increasingly viewed as a space of cooperation and in particular, shared ideas and normative convergence (Risse, 2016), drawing on constructivist scholarship that posited globalization as an opportunity for the

transfer of progressive ideas (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). As Börzel (2016, p. 51) noted, ‘constructivist approaches of cooperation and integration ... place ideas, norms, identities and discourses as ideational drivers of regionalism centre stage’. Drawing from this scholarship, Riggiozzi and Tussie (2012) went on to suggest that region-building in the global South in the early twenty-first century was increasingly constructed on the basis of shared ideas and the articulation of regional norms in the areas of health and social policy, in what became known as ‘social turn’ regionalism (Legler, 2013; Malamud & Gardini, 2012; Sanahuja, 2012; Yeates & Surender, 2021).

Both Latin America and Africa have begun to commit to policies of gender equity and to generate regional norms from as early as the late 1970s and 1980s; but the significance of the emerging norms for regional governance is unclear – and, thus far, there has been little empirically grounded scholarship on regional normative governance that would allow for a firm conclusion. There is, in sum, a considerable debate, generally and within feminist scholars, as to the whether or how far gender equity norms open opportunities for substantive gender equality policies. On the one hand, van der Vleuten offers a broadly optimistic analysis and argues that women’s groups in both Latin America and Africa have been able to use regional level norms to open up opportunities for progressive changes (van der Vleuten, 2016). Similarly, Haastrup has argued that regional organizations in the global South offer opportunities for feminists to advocate for the inclusion of gender issues and the promotion of gender equality (Haastrup, 2023). Roggerband et al, suggest, more widely, that region-level institutions are better equipped than international organizations to engage in capacity-building and to push for norm implementation (Roggerband et al., 2014). But many feminist scholars are less convinced (van der Vleuten & van Eerdewijk, 2020). True suggests that constructivist-inspired scholarship on the power of progressive norms in general may be over-optimistic (True, 2013). She argues that an uncritical emphasis on the importance of institutional adoption of gender equality norms risks missing the complexity of contested social processes in which older norms reflective of ‘patriarchal traditions’ continue to sit alongside newer norms and to shape outcomes. Fejerskov and Cold-Ravnkilde argue that gender equality norms play a ‘ceremonial’ role that obscures the fact that established patriarchal practices remain, in fact, in place (Fejerskov & Cold-Ravnkilde, 2019):

Often ... the diffusion of gender equality norms has led to a purely symbolic or superficial institutionalisation, with a deep gulf between the official policies and the inner workings of organisations preventing gender policies from shaping organisation efforts and practices in the long term. (Fejerskov & Cold-Ravnkilde, 2019, p. 123)

To sum up, whilst some scholars are optimistic about the value of gender equity norms in regional governance, others, including a range of feminists, suggest that over-focusing on the discursive incorporation of gender equality norms in regional governance misses social and political patriarchal resistance, foot dragging in relation to implementation and long-embedded institutional conservatism inside regional organizations that can block the adoption of substantive change. Our paper seeks to take this debate further by providing evidence of the use and limited impact of those norms in policy making during a critical policy event, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ‘point’ of gender equity norms is of course, ultimately to shift the dial towards more gender-equitable policy making. The adoption and implementation of gender equality norms in global South regional governance matter, then, chiefly because they have the potential to establish a shared template for change. As such, it is important conceptually and empirically to go beyond asking whether gender equity norms are symbolically or discursively incorporated into governance processes to questions about whether they are making a difference to everyday lives. In order to do

so, bringing women's everyday life experiences into the analysis is critical. This is where we turn to feminist IPE. While there is of course 'no singular, or straightforward, way of 'doing' feminist IPE' (Elias & Roberts, 2018), feminist *everyday* IPE in particular encourages the researcher to direct their gaze on the gendered 'receiving end' of governance practices and policies (Stevano et al., 2021). It means, as Elias and Rai (2019) argue, paying particular attention to the centrality of women's day-to-day concerns, including their care responsibilities, the generally low-paid and less regulated work they do and their exposure to violence in domestic settings – in short to women's role in social reproduction, understood as 'biological reproduction, the work of caring for and maintaining households and intimate relationships, the reproduction of labour, and the reproduction of community itself – including forms of social provisioning and voluntary work [and] ... unpaid production in the home of goods and services' (Elias & Rai, 2019, p. 203). It is only by asking questions about the impact of gender equality norms on women's everyday lives and social reproduction role that we can begin to understand whether, when and how they really matter. With this in mind, we follow our analysis of the impact of gender equality norms on regional governance during COVID-19 with a discussion of the day-to-day impact of those policies.

Gender norms in regional governance in Latin America and Africa

A combination of feminist mobilization, the influence of international gender norms, and the turn to social regionalism have enabled a gradual, if uneven, incorporation of a range of gender equality norms in Latin American and African regionalism, though the process and timeline has been somewhat different between regions and norms are sometimes fragmented between institutions (van der Vleuten & van Eerdewijk, 2020). There is now an impressive range of region-level inter-governmental Declarations and Protocols on gender equality in Latin America, starting in 1977 with the Havana Regional Plan of Action. The Santiago Commitment issued in 2020¹ in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, called on regional states to

promote the enactment and implementation of legislation, multisectoral policies, comprehensive action plans and education and sensitization programmes to prevent, address, punish and eliminate different forms of gender-based violence and discrimination against women, adolescents and girls, including those with disabilities, in its various spheres: private, public, political, economic, institutional, symbolic and obstetric, and in situations of conflict, natural disaster and deprivation of liberty, as well as different types and manifestations, such as workplace harassment, sexual harassment, sexual abuse and exploitation, migrant smuggling, trafficking in women and girls, forced prostitution, rape, femicide, forced marriage and cohabitation imposed on girls and adolescents (ECLAC, 2020b).

These agreements are supported by and shape the policy direction of regional knowledge banks in Latin America, such as ECLAC and the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO), both of which regional arms of international organizations, the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organisation (WHO) respectively (see Box 1). PAHO has consistently promoted gendered approaches to health sector reform, working with civil society groups to do so, though its impact on member states has been variable and it struggles to access the funding needed to promote change effectively; just prior to COVID-19, the level of financial resources for women's and girls' health provision within PAHO had fallen by 7% compared to 2009 (PAHO, 2020a). Gender equality has been described as 'a core issue in the agenda of ECLAC, and an *idée-force*' by ECLAC itself (ECLAC, 2017). ECLAC supports the elimination of 'all types of discrimination' against women and girls and was responsible for the creation of a Gender Equality Observatory to monitor regional progress in 2007.²

Box 1**Regional and sub-regional organisations in Latin America and major gender strategies/conferences or bodies****Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)**
Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL)Buenos Aires Commitment (2023)¹⁴<https://conferenciamujer.cepal.org/15/en/documents/buenos-aires-commitment>**Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO)**

Gender Equality Policy

<https://www.paho.org/en/documents/gender-equality-policy>**Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)**

Santiago Declaration (2013)

<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5747-2013-INIT/en/pdf>**The Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR)**

Resolution (CMG) No 20-98

<https://normas.mercosur.int/public/normativas/1580>**Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)**

No specific gendered strategy

Andean Community

Declaration 711

<https://www.tribunalandino.org.ec/decisiones/normativa/DEC711.pdf>**Central American Integration System (SICA)**

Central American meeting on Gender Equality, Violence and Education:

Final Declaration (2018)

<https://redclade.org/wp-content/uploads/DocumentoEncuentroElSavadorENWeb.pdf>**Accessed at**<https://www.cepal.org/es><https://www.paho.org/en><https://celacinternational.org/><https://www.mercosur.int/>

Not currently available

<https://www.comunidadandina.org/><https://www.sica.int/>

The regional agreements on gender are, however, institutionally separate from the work of the sub-regional organizations. As a result, gender equality has barely gotten onto the agenda of the Andean Community, one of the oldest of Latin America's regional organizations, which dates back to 1969. It is more prominent in both the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), formed in 1991, and the Central American Integration System (SICA) (Hoffmann, 2019). MERCOSUR has also taken some timid steps in response to gendered violence in summits and in terms of supporting women's civil society groups (Hoffmann, 2019), and there has also been a growing acknowledgement of the need to take gender into account in health and migration policies (Herrero & Loza, 2018; Riggiozzi et al., 2023). The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), was formed in 2008 by 10 countries in response to the rise of the left in region but now only includes four countries, initially articulated some progressive gender norms. UNASUR joined forces with UN Women to argue for annual action plans to promote women's empowerment and gender equality (IISD, 2012) but the collapse of UNASUR has meant that this initiative came to nothing. Meanwhile, with regards to the umbrella group bringing the whole region together, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) gender issues form part of the bi-regional relationship with the European Union but do not feature prominently otherwise.

In African regionalism, efforts to institutionalize norms of gender equality are most evident in the African Union (AU), the umbrella organization, which brings together 53 states across the continent and where donor influence is strong (Haastrup, 2023) (See Box 2). Van der Vleuten & van Eerdewijk (2020, p. 588) argue that gender norms are discursively central to the governance structure of the AU. A commitment to gender equality is written into the AU's constitutive documents via the 2003 Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights, which provides a comprehensive set of women's rights across the economic, social, and political domains. The AU has a gender mainstreaming unit and tried to galvanize slow regional progress on gender by declaring 2010–2020 as a decade for

advancing women's rights. The AU also established the Fund for African Women to promote region-wide gender equality policies but it is stymied by the scale of the gender equity challenge and the absence of stable funding, weakening its influence year-on-year.

Box 2

Regional and sub-regional organisations in Africa and major gender strategies or bodies

African Union (AU)
Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGE) 2004

<https://au.int/documents/20200708/solemn-declaration-gender-equality-africa>

East Central and Southern African Health Community (ECSA-HC)

No specific gender strategy

East Africa Community (EAC)

EAC Gender Policy and Articles 5(e), 121 and 122 of the EAC Treaty

<https://www.eac.int/gender/gender-and-women>

Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)

Articles 154 and 155 of the COMESA Treaty and the Addis Ababa Declaration 2002

<https://www.comesa.int/gender-social-affairs-division/>

Southern African Development Community (SADC)

Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 2004

https://www.sadc.int/sites/default/files/2021-08/Protocol_on_Gender_and_Development_2008.pdf

Economic Community of West African states (ECOWAS)

Gender Strategy (2010-2020)

https://www.oecd.org/swac/data-and-dialogue/gender-west-africa/ECOWAS%20Gender_Strategy_ECOWAS_PARL_EN.pdf

Accessed at
<https://au.int/>

<https://ecsahc.org/>

<https://www.eac.int/>

<https://www.comesa.int/>

<https://www.sadc.int/>

<https://ecowas.int/>

The sub-regional trade-based organizations in Africa, the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), have been much slower than the AU to incorporate norms of gender equality. They have gender working groups, but these have no direct channels into policy-making. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has developed tools to support member states develop gender-sensitive policies and the East African Community (EAC) set out a blueprint for mainstreaming gender concerns in the planning and budgetary processes (EAC, 2018), while the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) incorporated a gender focus to its Strategic Plan (2023–2027) (ECOWAS, 2023). But their recommendations have had little impact on member states policies (Geng, 2019), and regional organizations themselves remain acutely gendered in their practices and processes (Saka, 2023). Van der Vleuten and van Eerdewijk (2020, p. 588) warned, somewhat persistently, that the failure to properly institutionalize gender norms in African regionalism meant that there was a risk that the gender would ‘easily brushed off the table’ in times of crisis.

Regional gender equality norms during COVID-19

There is no agreement as to how well global South regional organizations responded to COVID-19 in the round (Deciancio & Quiliconi, 2022; Grugel et al., 2022). We know that technical regional organizations generally performed better, as Castro Alegria and Nolte note with regards to Latin America (Alergía & Nolte, 2023), even though they frequently struggled to get member states to take their advice seriously. In Africa, the performance of regional organizations was variable (Barlow et al., 2023), with conflicts between member states and a lack of political will leading to incoherent messaging by EAC, while the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa's (COMESA) large membership (21 states all members of other RECs) limited its coordination capacity. ECOWAS was the most successful, drawing on its experiences with the Ebola crisis (Medinilla et al., 2020). In Latin America, the weaknesses within MERCOSUR hampered the adoption of

a cohesive regional response (Mariano et al., 2022). CELAC too was weakened by political paralysis (Ruano & Saltamacchia, 2021). Central America fared better with its main regional organization, SICA, able to draw more effectively on experiences of managing previous cross-border climatic crises and natural disasters (Parthenay, 2021).

But if the picture is mixed with regards to the performance of regional organizations in general, it is somewhat clearer with regards to gender. In both Latin America and Africa, most regional (and some sub-regional) organizations set out an initial view that taking gender into account would be critical to a successful pandemic response. In Latin America, as the pandemic progressed, the knowledge-based organizations such as ECLAC continued to highlight gendered dimensions of the pandemic, along with technical bodies of sub-regional organizations concerned with the promotion of women's rights, such as the Coordinating Committee on Women's Affairs in SICA, created in 2012, also flagged the importance of gender. But, overall, the sub-regional economic integration organizations, in so far as they were able to articulate a clear set of recommendations for member states, at all, ended up supporting a response that ultimately by-passed and ignored gender concerns. In Africa, meanwhile, the AU continued to provide up to date knowledge throughout the pandemic, often in conjunction with civil society bodies and NGOs, but shifted its policy focus towards downgrading gender in practice. As in Latin America, the African RECs also downgraded their initial concerns about how the pandemic would affect the rights of African women.

There were differences, then, between regional organizations. In Latin America, these played out between the technical organizations, most emphatically between ECLAC and the sub-regional organizations and in Africa, between the umbrella institution, the AU, and some of the sub-regions (with others initially following the AU). At the beginning of the pandemic, the AU and ECLAC, above all, argued consistently that many of the social, economic, and personal security consequences for women and girls of policies to manage COVID-19 for women could be avoided, or mitigated, if member states incorporated gender norms into pandemic policy making. But, at the same time, they did not confront the masculinist characteristics of governance dominant in both regions (Marchand, 1994), meaning that ambiguity, contradiction, and even double-speak gradually became the hallmark of regional responses. To take just one example, SICA, whilst its overall response to COVID-19 was impressive, its Contingency Plan which formed a blueprint for regional responses did not mention gender until page 30 of a 34-page document and even then, only under the heading 'Additional Recommendations' (SICA, 2020). This slippage became more marked over time. It meant that, without necessarily meaning to, regional organizations normalized patriarchal policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis and enabled what Johnson et al, in their discussion of Asian pandemic policy making, call a 'patriarchal reset' (Johnston et al., 2023).

Phase one: regional organizations signpost the need for gendered policies

At the onset of the pandemic in Latin America, ECLAC and PAHO provided an impressive amount of information on its potential impact on women. The Executive Director of ECLAC, Alicia Bárcena, called directly for the adoption of region-wide policies that would mitigate 'the care crisis, [the loss of] women's economic autonomy and gender-based violence',³ and advised regional governments to quickly ring fence budgets for women's sexual and reproductive health care services. Based on early data and as COVID-19 took hold, ECLAC warned:

what we are seeing effectively is an intensifying of the burden of care for women, as much because of measures like school closures, as because of confinement, and also because hospitals are at capacity, signifying a greater transfer of those [caring] responsibilities to the home.⁴

ECLAC reminded member states of their obligations under the 2016 Montevideo Strategy to design budgets with non-transferable sustainable resources aimed at reversing gendered inequalities and guaranteeing women's human rights (ECLAC, 2020a). The organization also quickly began to monitor the rise of gender-based violence: at the start of the pandemic. We were told by an ECLAC representative:

We know that there has been an increase for example in calls [to helplines] from women who are victims of violence ... we know that first we have look at the official statistics [...] but yes, we do know about the increase in phone calls.⁵

Similarly, the AU quickly flagged that the COVID-19 burden would be gendered, issuing, if anything, stronger statements than ECLAC on the need to introduce specific measures protect women and girls. It set out the heightened risks to the regions women and girls, offering detail on the challenges lockdowns and restrictions on public and social contact would pose to women (African Union, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). In June 2020, the AU issued *Guidelines on Gender Responsive Responses to COVID-19* to 'assist Member States in addressing, managing, responding and recovering from COVID-19, with Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment priorities guiding said efforts' (African Union, 2020a). One of the key challenges it highlighted was the increased burden of care; an AU representative told us:

The crisis is not only generating physical health challenges, there are going to be large significant mental health issues that come from the lockdowns and also from learners and teachers at shifting to new ways of learning. Mothers who are looking after the households are having to deliver teaching as well – adding to stress levels.⁶

The AU also expressed its fears that girls would lose access to education through lockdowns.

In July 2020, a representative of the AU's centre for girls and women's education told us:

girls are the most vulnerable, in schools they are safe, they are protected, without schools, vulnerabilities increase ... the AU is [already] seeing an increase in early marriages.⁷

At the sub-regional level, the EAC joined the AU's 'call to arms' in the area of gender-based violence (EAC, 2020), while COMESA offered toolkits for policies and training to member countries on gender and COVID-19. Overall, the RECs recommended that member states ensured that policies enabled women to 'regain and retain socio-economic stability' highlighting the need for 'gender mainstreaming and integration, sex disaggregated data' and crucially, 'gender-budgeting' (COMESA, 2021).

Phase two: downgrading gender concerns and the reassertion of patriarchal policy making

Despite this promising start, concerns about gender slipped down the agenda of most regional organizations in Latin America and Africa as the pandemic unfolded. On the one hand, it became clear that member states were not listening to the advice of regional organizations as crisis policy making took hold. On the other, as the pandemic progressed, there was also a weakening in commitment to gender equity principles within the regional organizations themselves. In fact, the priorities of regional governance organizations actively shifted away from gender. Instead of asserting the need to protect the rights of women and girls, regional organizations began to focus exclusively on a medicalized response to the COVID-19 virus, an approach that ultimately invisibilized and

disregarded the multiple gendered social, economic, health, and personal security impacts from both COVID-19 and from the lockdown policies deployed to contain it.

We can illustrate this shift by looking at the use made of regional financial resources during the pandemic. Latin American sub-regional organizations tended to ignore gender in their finance mechanisms completely. MERCOSUR, for example, mobilized US\$18m through its structural convergence fund (FOCEM) for strengthening COVID-19 testing capacities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Argentina, 2020) but failed to allocate any of this budget to protecting even basic health services for women. PAHO, which acted quickly to provide funding for increasing testing capacity, procurement of PPE and, later in the pandemic, vaccines, did not extend additional funding to meet the needs of women health workers or care workers or provide women's reproductive health services (PAHO, 2020b). Even though women comprised a majority of the healthcare workforce, PAHO policies on protection of healthcare workers did not take gender into account. PAHO and ECLAC continued to speak of the detrimental impact of the pandemic on women's right to health and identified how national-level responses let women and girls down, for example by reassigning healthcare professionals and budgets away from the provision of sexual and reproductive health services (ECLAC-PAHO, 2020); but in fact, PAHO itself did the same with its own budget. PAHO's budget shows the amount allocated to Equity, Ethnicity, Gender, and Human Rights was cut by 44%, from US\$12.6 m in 2018/2019 to US\$7 m 2020/2021, a move that clearly signalled its own de-prioritization of women's health services (PAHO, 2021). ECLAC's budget for gender equality promotion, meanwhile, remained flat during the pandemic, in the midst of what ECLAC itself argued was a gendered crisis. In its 2022 budget, the number of ECLAC roles that focused on gender mainstreaming remained unchanged. This meant that only nine out of 287 positions in ECLAC prioritized questions of gender, around 3% of its workforce (UN General Assembly, 2021).

In Africa, the picture was similar. As the pandemic progressed, the everyday rights of women and girls, including to healthcare, were almost forgotten. Regional organizations with specific health remits, such as the East Central and Southern African Health Community (ECSA-HC) entirely sidelined gender and focused on funding transboundary cooperation in order to strengthen surveillance and testing (ECSA-HC, 2020). The AU allocated a significant amount of resources to do the same via the Africa Centre for Disease Control (CDC) and the RECs also sought support for surveillance and testing through the CDC (DFID, 2020). None of these initiatives took gender into consideration. Budgets to combat the pandemic were equally insensitive to the needs of women and girls. The AU sought to coordinate new budget lines from donors to help manage the continental response to COVID-19, which it estimated would run to US\$100-150 billion, but this funding was then released to enable member states to prioritise their own needs and no guidance or recommendations were provided with regards to gender. The African Development Bank took a similar approach, making US\$10 billion available for AU member states' governments, once again without issuing a directive or advice to take gender into account.

The emphasis was, above all, on strengthening responses in relation to diagnostic capacity and ensuring the availability of front-line health care (sometimes deploying staff from elsewhere in the healthcare system, including from reproductive health services) (Omukuti et al., 2021). Doing so had deleterious effects on other services for women and girls. It meant, first, that funds were not prioritized for the protection of women and girls at a time when lockdowns, school closures, and the burden of care put them at extreme risk; and secondly, de-prioritising gender allowed existing gender programmes in the AU to be raided to pay for other services. AU departments concerned with women's health, education, and wellbeing were told in early 2020 to make cuts:

Everybody at the AU knows there will be losses to a variety of programmes but there are priorities ... the top priorities are health, personal protective equipment and ventilators.⁸

At the same time, the small amount of regional funding allocated to specifically supporting girls' rights was re-allocated to other budget lines⁹:

Budgets are being reassigned ... Generally, six percent of GDP goes on education, but we know this will not happen.¹⁰

In 2021, the AU Commission cut the resources for the Fund for African Women by half, from 1% of the AU's operating budget to 0.5%. Adding insult to injury, disbursements into the Fund were delayed, with the AU Commission itself acknowledging the harm this practice would have and that 'diversion of resources to COVID-19 may delay implementation of gender commitments that are not seen as urgent' (African Union Commission, 2020). Sub-regional organizations in Africa did not view gender as a priority either. Gender seems to have been completely absent in ECOWAS' budget for 2021; the speaker of the ECOWAS Parliament recognized the need to restore spending on a range of issues beyond COVID-19 – just not gender:

the 2021 budget should not only cover the immediate threats linked to COVID-19, it must also advance efforts on other fronts and priorities dear to our region: in particular, democracy, the rule of law, peace and conflict resolution, the fight against terrorism, poverty reduction and climate change (ECOWAS, 2022).

In SADC, the financial resources available for gender and development projects were also cut, including in its 2022/2023 annual budget, even though overall expenditure increased by \$30m USD (SADC, 2021).

Counting the cost of gender-conservative pandemic policies

Governments in both regions responded in different ways to the pandemic. All implemented lockdowns and closures of public spaces; most introduced new social policies to address some of the immediate consequences of job and income losses. As Blofield et al. (2020) note in an early assessment in relation to Latin America, the success of these measures needs to be placed in the context of fiscal resources and institutional capacity; at the same time, social protections gaps meant that half the children in the region lived in poverty pre-pandemic, meaning that COVID-19 social policies often had limited reach (Blofield et al., 2020). The success of social policy responses thus varied considerably (Blofield et al., 2023). In Africa, national responses, as well as regional ones, were shaped not only by fiscal and institutional capacities and social policy paradigms but also by donor preferences.¹¹ Social policy responses, however, had only limited effects on the lived experiences of women and girls. They provided some compensatory payments to families, women and their dependents but did not address the wider burden of care and additional vulnerabilities women and girls experienced as a result of how governments sought to manage COVID-19. As Mezzadri puts it, policy responses to COVID-19 ultimately reinforced 'the key reproductive role that informal – unpaid or poorly paid – labour' by women play (Mezzadri, 2022), whilst simultaneously downgrading their gendered needs, from access to reproductive and sexual health services to protection from intimate partner violence. Far from inevitable, these costs were the result of choices made to disregard the gender equality commitments in pandemic policy-making.

An increased burden of unpaid care work, the loss of paid work and the end of girls' education

For almost all women in Latin America and Africa, care work increased and became 'more onerous' (CEPAL, 2021). In Latin America, the number of hours women spent on unpaid care work

increased by up to a third because of the closure of schools and the additional work lockdown created in the home (World Bank, 2021). Across East and Southern African countries, 83% of women and girls saw their care responsibilities increase whereas the figure in men was around 60% (UN WOMEN, 2022). At the same time, the labour market consequences of the pandemic lockdowns were experienced unequally by women and men, pushing women into taking on more work at home (Ahinkorah et al., 2021), exacerbating already deep-rooted inequalities (OECD, 2014). Women were particularly affected by the closure of the informal sector and by the impact of containment policies on the service sector, hospitality and tourism, which traditionally employed far more women than men. Domestic workers in Latin America (96% of whom are women), were in a particularly precarious position; following the first lockdowns, 49% of them were either dismissed or suspended with little or no government protection to cover their lost wages (Acciari et al., 2021).

Women in Latin America and Africa also experienced higher rates of unemployment during COVID-19 than men. In Latin America by the second quarter of 2020, in excess of 23.6 million women's jobs had been lost. Firms have been slower to re-hire women, compared with men (ILO, 2022). During the first wave, women were 44% more likely to lose their jobs than men (World Bank, 2021), and even by the end of 2021, women's reemployment was 4% less than their male counterparts (IADB, 2023). In Africa's least developed countries,¹² the doubling of unemployment from 6.97% to 11.55% in 2020 disproportionately affected women and their dependent family members (UNCTAD, 2022). Taking Ethiopia as an example, women represented 42% of the workforce when the pandemic hit but 57% of the job losses in June 2020 alone (World Bank, 2020). And, similarly to Latin America, whilst women were significantly more likely to lose their job at the onset of the pandemic across Africa, they were also up to 20% less likely than men to be re-employed (World Bank, 2022a).

Rises in gender-based violence

Data on gender-based violence indicate an immediate and huge increase in calls to domestic violence helplines starting from the first weeks of lockdown in both Latin America and Africa. Calls increased by 70% in Chile and by 60% in Mexico during the first weekend of lockdown alone (IADB, 2020). Calls to helplines continued to increase throughout the pandemic – by 32% in Argentina (89% in Buenos Aires), 36% in Mexico, 48% in Peru, and an astonishing 91% in Colombia – though resources to support callers remained limited. Cases of femicide also increased sharply, including by 50% in Panama. Brazil alone recorded 1350 cases of femicide in 2020 (World Bank, 2022b). This trend has continued, with police data from across Brazil showing 722 femicides in the first six months of 2023, a 7% increase from the 2020 figures (Brazilian Report, 2023).

The story is similar in Africa. By June 2020 in the EAC region there was a 48% increase in calls to police or helplines (EAC, 2020) and year-on-year increases from 2019, including a 50% in Liberia and 69% in the Central African Republic (African Union Commission, 2022). Following the imposition of the national lockdown in South Africa, domestic violence shelters were inundated with calls. The Gender-Based Violence Command Centre received between 500 and 1000 calls a day, a level that left social workers struggling to cope (van Dyk, 2020). In Kenya, the UN country team reported a 775% increase in calls in March and April 2020 alone (Neetu et al., 2021). But the violence experienced by women and girls was not only physical but also emotional. Using primary data conducted in Gauteng province in South Africa, Mahlangu et al. point to these growing incidences of gendered emotional violence, which they report impacted women and girls especially hard in the lowest socio-economic groups (Mahlangu

et al., 2022). Bello et al. (2023) show that the numbers of women who felt unsafe in their homes were as high as 45% in Kenya and 39% in Nigeria. 92% of women in Kenya reported physical or verbal abuse from an intimate partner during the pandemic. Sources also suggest a significant increase in the genital mutilation of girls during lockdowns (The Lancet, 2021).¹³

The loss of reproductive health care

It is a measure of the extent of disregard for women's basic health needs during COVID-19 that policies that apparently aimed to protect the general health of the population led directly to worse everyday health provision for women and girls. The need to ensure the continued provision of reproductive health services was highlighted as critical to women's wellbeing early on in the pandemic. But, in the end, reproductive health services, in both Latin America and Africa, were one of the principal casualties of pandemic policy-making. In both regions, whilst routine healthcare generally suffered, budgets for even basic reproductive healthcare services were raided to provide for COVID-19 programmes, with catastrophic costs (WHO, 2021).

In Africa, the closure of public sexual and reproductive health clinics, the costs of private reproductive health provision, the difficulties of travel, the lack of time to make a long journey to access reproductive health services and fear or opposition to them travelling the much greater distances required made access to reproductive health hugely difficult for a majority of women, converged into a situation which prevented many women and girls from accessing services (APHRC, 2022). An early analysis by the WHO in 22 African countries between February and July 2020 pointed to a sharp increase in maternal deaths compared with the same period in 2019, with the highest increases recorded in Comoros, Mali, Senegal and South Africa (WHO, 2021). For women seeking abortions or post-abortion care, the picture was particularly bleak. Women's groups reported that in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia abortion services completely closed, often because staff were redeployed to provide COVID-19 nursing. Across East and Southern Africa, 50% of women and girls reported negative impacts on their access to sexual and reproductive health services (UN WOMEN, 2022).

In Latin America, the reallocation of budget lines away from the provision of sexual and reproductive health services reversed two decades of progress in maternal health. PAHO suggests that 90% of the deaths of the 8400 Latin America women who died in pregnancy, childbirth or postpartum during COVID-19 in were preventable (PAHO, 2023). Moreover, the most vulnerable women paid the highest price. Data shared by the World Bank show 93% of maternal deaths during the pandemic occurred among indigenous and Afro-descendant women with migrant women twice as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes (World Bank, 2023a, 2023b).

Conclusion

Our findings reveal the ambiguities and contradictions within regional organizations with regards to gender equality policies during COVID-19 and the gradual diminution of their commitment to gender equality in practice; we also evidence some of the tragic consequences of that de-prioritization. As such, we question assumptions that gender equality norms are necessarily translated into gender equality policies. We show, nonetheless, that such norms were flagged as important by regional organizations as they thought through their responses to COVID-19. Initially some regional organizations managed to discursively highlight member states' obligations to implement gender-responsive policies during the pandemic. But this commitment was accorded less and less

priority as the pandemic progressed. Moreover, regional organizations themselves quickly reasigned their own (small) budgets for women's services to COVID-19 services. They failed, as such, to articulate a sustained defence of women and girls' rights, based on regional gender equality norms. Whilst there were differences between regional organizations, the overwhelming trend across both regions was for regional organizations to prioritize responses that ignored women's and girls' gendered needs and rights. The everyday consequences of downgrading gender in regional governance at exactly the point when protection was more needed than ever are stark: women and girls paid a higher price than men socio-economically, in terms of their basic health rights, in education and in exposure to violence, and those costs have persisted even as the immediate health crisis caused by COVID-19 fades.

These findings give rise to two important reflections. The first refers to questions of the embeddedness and entrapment of gender equality norms within regional governance in the global South. We suggest there is a need to interrogate the assumption drawn from constructivist research that regional institutions generally act as norms brokers for progressive policies. Our research shows clearly that, with regard to gender equality norms, there were highly consequential limitations to their commitment in practice. While regional organizations have discursively adopted a range of gender equality norms, these have not transformed how those organizations operated, leading to policies that caused multiple gendered harms to women and girls during the COVID-29 crisis. At the same time, our research suggests limited entrapment of regional gender equality principles within member states. Secondly, our research indicates the vital importance of linking discussions of regional governance with analyses of the gendered everyday in order to understand whether and how far norms travel and the extent to which they reach into policy and change lives. As such, we call for more consistent engagement with feminist scholarship in regionalist studies and in particular, for scholarship that identifies the central importance of getting regional governance policies right for women and girls and the consequences when they are failed.

Notes

1. ECLAC's Santiago Commitment is underpinned by the Montevideo Strategy 2016, whose framework commits Latin American states to a Regional Gender Agenda within a sustainable development framework.
2. <https://oig.cepal.org/en>
3. Interview with an ECLAC representative from Social Affairs, July (2020).
4. Interview with an ECLAC representative from Social Affairs, July (2020).
5. Interview with an ECLAC representative from Social Affairs, July (2020).
6. Interview with an African Union representative, August (2020).
7. Interview with an African Union representative, August (2020).
8. Interview with an African Union representative, August (2020).
9. Without access to schools, 90,000 girls were forced into marriages in East and Southern Africa and there were 542,000 additional teenage pregnancies across Africa as a whole; Save the Children, *COVID-19 places half a million more girls at risk of child marriage this year, warns Save the Children*, <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/covid-19-places-half-a-million-more-girls-at-risk-of-child-marri0>
10. Interview with an African Union representative, August (2020).
11. Anonymized NGO interview for peer review.
12. Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone Somalia, South Sudan, STP, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zambia.

13. Interview with an African Union representative, August 2020.
14. The Buenos Aires Commitment was adopted at the fifteenth session of the regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean and follows the Santiago Commitment adopted in 2020. These conferences are organised by ECLAC and UN Women aiming to reaffirm member states' commitments to the Declaration and Plan of Action adopted at the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995).

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