



# **INCLUSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE UNDER PRESSURE**

## **The business case for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)**

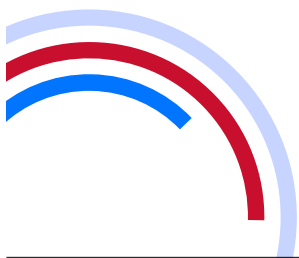
2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Oxford GESI  
Workshop Summary

August 2026

[www.climatecompatiblegrowth.com](http://www.climatecompatiblegrowth.com)



"The views  
expressed in  
this material do  
not necessarily  
reflect the UK  
government's  
official policies."



## Overview

The [1<sup>st</sup> Annual Oxford GESI Event](#) (March 2025) brought together 30 policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to explore how gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) can be better embedded in low-carbon energy and transport transitions. Participants examined the institutional and practical barriers that prevent infrastructure systems from delivering equitable outcomes.

In this 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Oxford GESI Event, jointly organised by the FCDO-funded Climate Compatible Growth (CCG) programme and United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), we bring back last year's participants while expanding the cohort to maintain momentum and move from problem-mapping to solution design. This workshop examines **how best to make the business case for GESI in infrastructure development**.

The need for this dialogue remains pressing. Current data suggests 341 million women and girls will still lack electricity by 2030, of which 85% will be in SSA [[UNWOMEN](#), p. 17]. Electricity access gaps of 10 percentage points or more between persons with and without disabilities are reported in several countries with mid-to-low levels of electricity access [[UNDESA](#), p. 42]

While this workshop did predominantly focus on gender, other marginalised groups (persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, etc) are just as important, and are often overlooked in infrastructure design. Bringing them into the fold is vital, but it increases complexity.

Meanwhile, funding for overseas gender equality projects is on a downwards trend [[OECD](#)]. As resources are constrained, every investment must work harder.

*Workshop participants in a breakout group*

Yet small investments can make a transformative difference, so investment in GESI also represents an opportunity. This is particularly so, as evidence shows that projects that overlook inclusion are less successful [[ADB](#)].

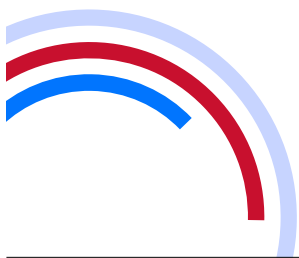
The workshop began with a panel discussion about the pressure inclusive infrastructure faces in the current geopolitical landscape. This was followed by presentations that demonstrated the business case in practice, along with breakout sessions exploring key audiences and pitching the business case.

### CCG-UNOPS Partnership

At a time when commitments to equity, inclusion, and international development are being rolled back, partnerships like this are critical. The collaboration between CCG's GESI Unit and UNOPS' Sustainable, Resilient and Inclusive Infrastructure Team is about safeguarding inclusion as a core principle of energy and transport infrastructure, even as political and financial pressures push it to the margins. By combining rigorous evidence with operational reach, we seek to ensure that low-carbon transitions do not reproduce existing inequalities, but actively work to dismantle them.

*Prof Stephanie Hirmer (CCG and University of Oxford)*





## Panel Discussion:

### Inclusive Infrastructure Under Pressure – The New Normal

**Nafisa Bhikhoo** (2X) **Veronica Di Bella** (Green Cities, Infrastructure and Energy Programme - GCIEP), **Dana Elhassan** (African Development Bank - AfDB), **Seema Gaikwad** (UNOPS), **Magi Matinga** (Energia)  
**Moderator – Marissa Bergman** (CCG and UCL)

The opening panel intentionally set a candid baseline on the ‘new normal’ constraints shaping inclusive infrastructure, to ensure the rest of the day’s solutions were grounded in what is politically and operationally feasible. Key takeaways were as follows.

### Positive momentum: Increased awareness, expertise, and market-driven progress

There is growing visibility around inclusive infrastructure. More experts are engaging with the topic, and there are more women entrepreneurs, women-led firms, and leadership roles in tech and infrastructure sectors, particularly in renewable energy which can have lower barriers to entry. Governments in Africa are also showing greater awareness of the importance of inclusion in infrastructure planning, although GESI considerations are often

considered an add-on, rather than a core principle.

At the same time, emerging tools – such as certification systems offered by 2X – are helping funders and investors to build an evidenced-based business case for inclusion. The sector is also moving away from self-reporting towards more standardised approaches that will allow investors to compare performance across projects.

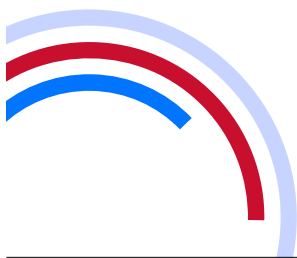
However, there is still no shared or standardised understanding of what “good” inclusion looks like, making it difficult to assess progress consistently or compare investments.

### Structural Challenges: Funding pressure and mindset

Some governments and some donors still need convincing that such investments are effective and needed to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets. Likewise, there is often a misconception that there is a trade-off between commercial viability and GESI, and budget timelines take priority. However, failing to consider such issues early in project design can increase costs and delays later in the project.



**Panel participants**  
(left to right): **Marissa Bergman**, **Nafisa Bhikhoo**, **Magi Matinga**, **Seema Gaikwad**, **Veronica Di Bella**, **Dana Elhassan**



This is happening in an environment where development funding is being cut everywhere.

*"Funding is being cut all over the place ... consequently entrepreneurs need to work differently, smarter, and more collaboratively."*

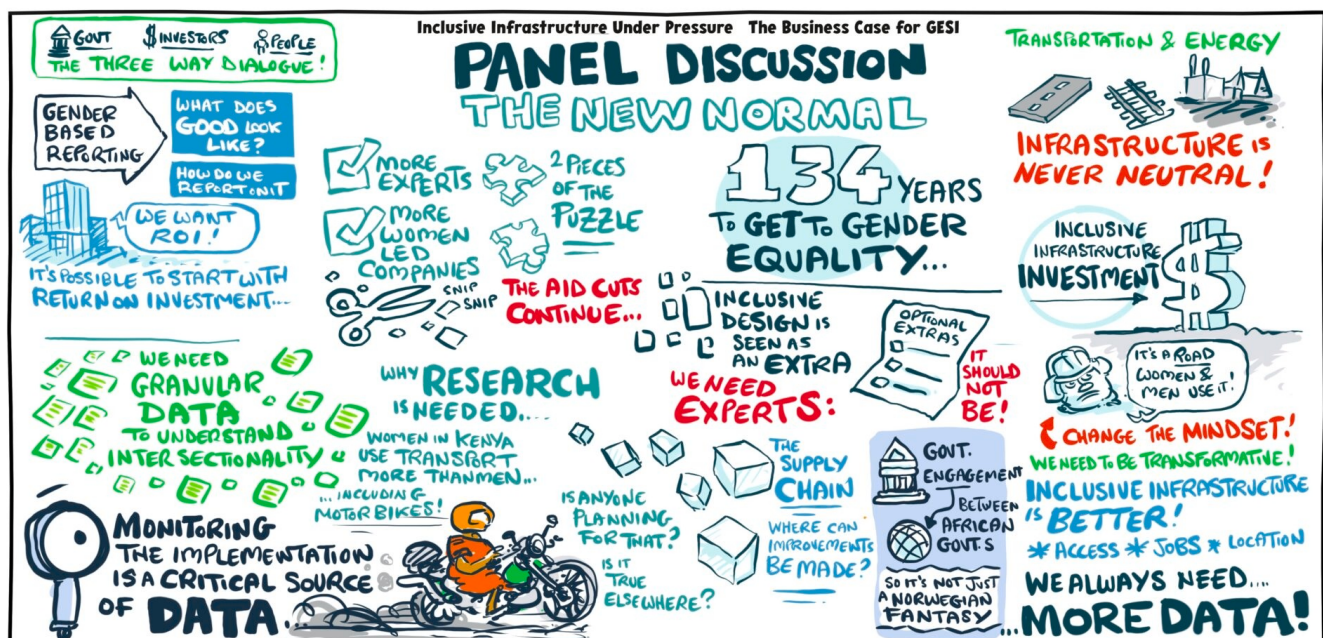
#### Data gaps and implementation capacity

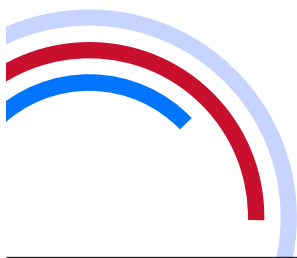
Data is needed to effectively design, justify, and evaluate inclusive infrastructure projects. Among the highlighted gaps were micro-economic detail, time-use surveys (especially for the care economy), granular data for marginalised communities, specialists to conduct community dialogue with end-users, and impact assessments on whether projects actually worked. Monitoring and evaluating GESI implementation in projects is also

inconsistent, making it difficult to knowledge share and strengthen accountability.

*"We need to drive the data and research agenda, because without that we can't run these programmes to make an impact."*

Local context matters. Demand for GESI support, government ownership, and implementation approaches vary significantly between countries, making early engagement essential. International development has hollowed out professional expertise within governments, but when governments conduct their own gender analyses this leads to better project design. Sustained dialogue between donors, governments, and implementing agencies is crucial for ensuring GESI priorities are embedded into infrastructure projects.





## Presentations: The business case in action

This session shared case studies and real-life examples of when a GESI-oriented rationale translated into tangible action, with attention to enabling conditions and obstacles.

**Solar Harnessed Entrepreneurs Project (SHE), Sierra Leone** – Sarah Maina-Kanda (*Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet*)

Energy interventions must go beyond energy access and be part of development and growth. Electricity for lightbulbs and phone charging is not transformative, and electricity needs to provide income generation opportunities for communities.

*“Honestly, the most important part is that we have engaged communities ... the women are ready to make this happen.”*

Therefore, this Sierra Leone project (GEAPP) had the ethos that sustainable energy is about demand, not just access. A project pathway was created, providing access to energy, equipment, finance, and training in order to achieve economic empowerment. It engaged with mini-grid operators, local businesses, NGOs, and microfinance institutions. Then blended finance mechanisms (with upfront funding and derisking instruments), training programmes, and market

linkages were established. Entrepreneurs could lease deep freezers and agro-processing equipment to create viable businesses that would lead to increased demand for clean energy.

### Challenges

- Power reliability, tariffs, supply hours, and connection costs
- User confusion over payment responsibilities
- Market shock: closure of a key mini-grid provider

### Lessons Learnt

- Design for productive use of energy from day one
- Constant and close coordination with partners
- GESI/system change needs sustained and longer-term effort

### Going Forward

- Value supporting ecosystems, not just standalone projects
- Include de-risking finance mechanisms, tailored tariffs, and local capacity development
- The entire community must understand the value of the project

### Solar Harnessed Entrepreneurs

Watch the project video to learn here:  
<https://energyalliance.org/sierra-leone-women-entrepreneurs/>

*Sarah Maina-Kanda*



### Key Outcomes & Impacts

**95%**

Loan repayment rate

**50%+**

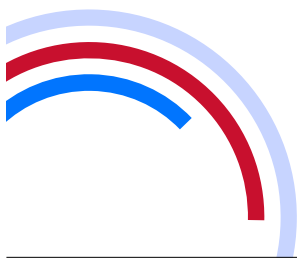
Income increase (50% of women)

**65%**

Joint decision-making on spending

**~7,000**

Women trained & empowered



**Mujeres Conductoras Programme in Jalisco, Mexico – Hannah Behr (GIZ)**

Mexico's **Mujeres Conductoras** ("Women Drivers") programme was presented as a case study demonstrating how gender-inclusive transport policies can address workforce shortages while improving operational performance. This was part of a larger TUMI (Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative) project aiming to make 100,000 e-buses available globally.

Latin America generally has a shortage of drivers. In Mexico, women make up just 6% of Mexico's driver workforce.

*"You have an industry desperate for works and a population of workers being systematically excluded from it. This was the framing that unlocked the programme"*

This framing led to institutional co-ownership and co-design. The programme covered training, licensing costs, and legal changes to qualification. Crucially, it also paid women while they were training. This was a multi-agency project, which meant there was an institutional safety net, and it was supported by the state's gender equality plan.

The project had to overcome gender stereotypes and pre-existing dynamics (eg childcare challenges).

**Join Women Mobilize Women**

A network of female change makers transforming the mobility sector:  
<https://womenmobilize.org/>



*"This was not positioned as a favour to women; it was positioned as a solution to an operational crisis"*

**Hannah Behr (left)**

Political circumstances also suspended the project from 2018–2021 due to administration change, which led to improving the institutional architecture. This is an example of a little (\$50,000 per cohort) going a long way, and the project is now being replicated elsewhere (eg Bogata). E-buses projects also have the potential to introduce further progress, such as new technology levelling the playing field for mechanic job opportunities.

*"This was not positioned as a favour to women; it was positioned as a solution to an operational crisis"*

**Key Outcomes & Impacts**

**~0%**

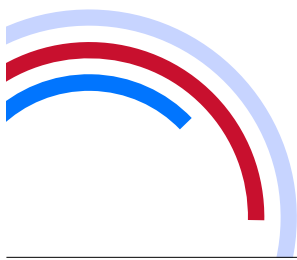
Turnover for women  
(vs 10–20% for men  
monthly)

**Reduced  
absenteeism**

(previously 25% of men  
did not show for work on  
Mondays)

**Organisational culture  
change**

Equal pay, safe spaces, flexible  
working hours, improved bathroom  
facilities: positives for all the workforce



#### **Kenhardt Solar Project, South Africa: Lessons from women in the construction workforce** – Katrina Kwan (*British International Investment*)

During project monitoring of a solar/battery hybrid facility in South Africa, the Kenhardt Solar Project, it was noted that there were a lot of women in the construction workforce. The question was why? This has been examined in a [public case study](#).

The region was known for substance/alcohol abuse, a context-specific factor. This meant many of the male workforce were considered

unemployable, leading to overrepresentation of women.

Some women faced resistance from their partners. As a result of such deep-rooted gender stereotypes, a key lesson is that multi-level stakeholder engagement with local communities is needed to secure project buy-in from everyone, not just women. While some women were retained beyond the project, in general project-level jobs are not permanent, so support is needed beyond the project lifecycle.

*"There were really meaningful shifts in perception"*

#### **Key Outcomes & Impacts**

##### **Business benefits**

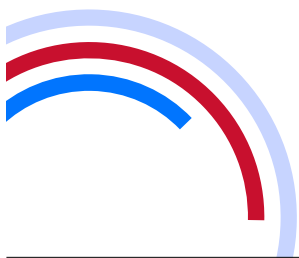
*Improved precision task quality;  
committed workforce; some women  
employed beyond project lifecycle*

##### **Social benefits**

*Improved household finances; skill  
development for women; shift in  
perspective concerning gender roles*



*(Top left): Seema Gaikwad (UNOPS); (top right) Katrina Kwan (BII) presenting at the workshop; (bottom left) Stephanie Hirmer (University of Oxford and CCG) collating a breakout session; (bottom right) Aishwarya Soni (Global Disability Innovation Hub / Nagariyal Research and Action Foundation)*



## Breakout Session 1:

### The business case for GESI – for whom and for what?

The four breakout groups (Policy, Finance, Implementation, and Evidence & Monitoring) all agreed that there is no single business case for GESI. Messaging needs to be tailored to the audience (eg policymaker versus private financier) and the initiative (eg e-mobility versus solar panels), while the underlying goal remains the same: making infrastructure more effective, sustainable, and inclusive.

#### Effective arguments for GESI in infrastructure projects

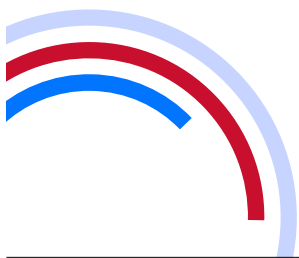
- Business viability and return on investment – demonstrating there is potential for profit
- Social value and corporate social responsibility – strengthening reputation and social licence to operate
- Demonstrating co-benefits – particularly where social outcomes can be quantified or modelled
- Using granular evidence and case studies – practical examples are more persuasive than broad statistics
- Leveraging funder influence – funding requirements can shape project design and encourage other financiers to adopt similar standards
- Aligning with existing priorities – linking GESI to national priorities and political commitments
- Context-specific messaging – framing the case around the priorities of different decision-makers and sectors

Although finance is a key aspect of making the business case, financial logic alone is insufficient. Likewise, GDP should not be the only indicator, and social value needs to be considered as part of a longer-term view. Using existing political targets can serve as an anchor for a business case.

More intersectional approaches are needed in both data and project design to reflect overlapping categories of marginalisation. There is a need for better data to improve buy-in; large-scale household surveys only go so far, and targeted improvements can create a big impact (eg improving utility data collection, linking datasets across ministries, and looking at alternative data sources, such as health facilities). National Statistics Offices could play a convening role, creating data hubs to integrate GESI into existing data collection processes and collate data sources. However, this may require additional capacity and institutional change.

At a global level, it was also noted that SDG7, which aims to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all by 2030, currently lacks a dedicated gender-specific indicator (eg workforce participation). This limits the ability to systematically track gender dimensions within energy access and transition outcomes.

Internal champions can be critical, including engineers and project managers, as building capacity across institutions is essential for lasting change. GESI works best when it is embedded in planning, implementation, and accountability systems, rather than treated as a box-ticking requirement.



## Breakout Session 2:

### Pitching the business case

Using a range of example projects, including rural mini-grids, energy access in urban informal settlements, and electric mobility, participants explored how to build and maintain support for GESI in infrastructure projects. There is no universal blueprint: the business cases should be adapted to the project context, institutional environment, actors involved, and different project phases. Nonetheless, across the different examples, several common principles emerged.

### Integrate GESI from the outset

GESI is most effective when considered as part of choosing and designing a project, rather than added during implementation. This allows inclusion objectives to shape the project and its outcomes, rather than being treated as an add-on.

### Map and engage with the right stakeholders throughout the project cycle

Who needs to be engaged at each stage and what are their responsibilities? This varies by context; for example, rural energy projects need to obtain buy-in from appropriate local stakeholders, such as the local government agencies and local community leaders. This must be matched with continuous stakeholder engagement throughout all stages of the project to maintain trust, ensure accountability, and adapt to any changing circumstances.

### Tailor the message

As previously discussed, messages need to be tailored for stakeholder needs, and projects may require multiple pitches depending on the audience. In the case of providing mini-grids for a dense informal settlement, government and utility support could be fostered by highlighting the voting power of such communities, the

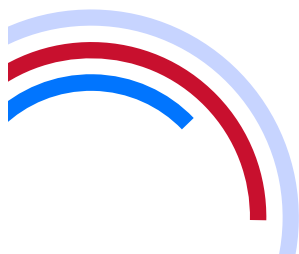
possibility of reducing theft from the grid, and supporting national decarbonisation goals. Potential investors might be persuaded by strong demand and clear routes to commercial viability. Similarly, an e-mobility project providing women with access to e-rickshaws could appeal to utilities through increased electricity demand, employers through improved access to a wider labour force, and women users through safer transport and employment opportunities.

### Use previous successful cases and clear indicators

Existing case studies can demonstrate that the project model is feasible and its impacts can be measured. Indicators should be defined early so that the expectations for the project are clear and incentivise different stakeholders. For donors, measurable social impacts are particularly important. For example, in the case of a rural energy project, this may include increased education attendance, improved health outcomes, and enhanced wellbeing through timesaving.

### Plan for long-term sustainability

Projects should be designed so that they are viable beyond short-term funding, with clear operational and financial exit strategies in place. Without such measures, the longer-term impacts of projects are more vulnerable to financial, political, social, and environmental pressures. This includes clearly defining roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders, together with robust coordination mechanisms, and putting in place systems to monitor progress and adjust projects as needed. Regular monitoring will help identify emerging challenges early and provide evidence for future investment and expansion.



## Agenda

|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Morning Session</b>   | <b>Workshop opening and Introductions</b> – Stephanie Hirmer (Oxford), Seema Gaikwad (UNOPS), and Alfie Alsop (FCDO)                                                                                                                                  |
|                          | <b>Panel Discussion: Inclusive infrastructure under pressure – the new normal.</b><br>Nafisa Bhikhoo (2X), Veronica Di Bella (GCIEP), Dana Elhassan (AfDB), Seema Gaikwad (UNOPS), Magi Matinga (Energia)   Moderator – Marissa Bergman (CCG and UCL) |
|                          | <b>Presentations: The business case in action</b> – Sarah Maina-Kanda (GEAPP), Hannah Behr (GIZ), Katrina Kwan (BII)                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Afternoon Session</b> | <b>Breakout Session 1</b> – The business case – for whom and for what?                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                          | <b>Breakout Session 2</b> – Pitching the business case                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Evening Session</b>   | <b>Breakout Session 3</b> – Finding the gap                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

## Attendees

### Organisers

Marissa Bergman (UCL / CCG)  
Seema Gaikwad (UNOPS)  
Prof Stephanie Hirmer (University of Oxford / CCG)  
Beatrice Stockport (University of Oxford / CCG)  
Romana Rauf (University of Loughborough / CCG)

### Participants

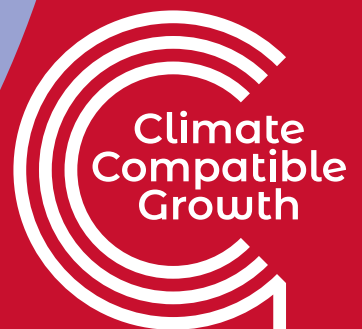
Alfie Alsop (FCDO)  
Niki Angelou (World Bank/ESMAP)  
Hannah Behr (GIZ)  
Nafisa Bhikhoo (2X)  
Prof Vanesa Castán Broto (University of Sheffield)

Kate Cooper (FCDO)  
Veronica Di Bella (Independent)  
Dana Elhassan (AfDB)  
Lucy Fellingham (Carbon Trust)  
Kate Hooper (Carbon Trust)  
Sarah Maina-Kanda (GEAPP)  
Dr Rihab Khalid (MECS)  
Dr Yesmeen Khalifa (MECS)  
Katrina Kwan (BII)  
Rachel Marcus (ODI)  
Dr Margaret Matinga (ENERGIA)  
Simon Patterson (University of Loughborough / CCG) Marie Peschke (UNOPS)  
Michaela Rychetska (University of Oxford / CCG)  
Aishwarya Soni (Global Disability Innovation Hub / Nagariyal Research and Action Foundation)  
Dr Mary Thamari (Oxford Development Impact Partners)





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