

Infrastructure: A Game-Changer for Women's Economic Empowerment

Submission to the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment Working Groups

Briefing Note

In 2016, the DFID **Infrastructure and Cities for Economic Development (ICED)** facility developed a background paper for the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel (HLP) on Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) on the potential of infrastructure investment to be a game changer for WEE.¹

This briefing note presents specific recommendations for five of the seven drivers of women's economic empowerment, demonstrating where infrastructure investment is the most transformative. The five drivers are: tackling adverse norms and promoting positive role models; recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid work and care; changing business culture and practice; improving public sector practices in employment and procurement; and strengthening visibility, collective voice and representation.

1. Infrastructure Investment is a Game-Changer for Women's Economic Empowerment

Infrastructure underpins almost every aspect of economic growth and human development.² Roughly USD 1 trillion a year is spent on infrastructure in developing countries, more than half financed by developing country governments and a third by the private sector.³ **Yet, the gaps are huge.** An estimated 783 million people in developing countries lack clean water; 1.6 billion are without electricity; 2.5 billion do not have adequate sanitation; and nearly 1 billion lack access to an all-weather road.⁴ **Two to three times the current annual spend on infrastructure** in developing countries⁵ is essential for inclusive and sustainable growth.

Infrastructure investment in priority sectors - energy, water and sanitation, transport, affordable serviced land and housing, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) - **can accelerate WEE**⁶. It :

- Reduces the time women spend on unpaid work and care, freeing up time for productive work;
- Increases women's physical mobility leading to improved access to markets, goods, services and jobs;
- Expands market activity and new job opportunities for women in formal and informal sectors, including in traditionally male-dominated sectors;
- Increases and stabilises workers' incomes by improving productivity and access to customers and suppliers for existing enterprises;
- Reduces exposure to risk of gender-based violence and other health and safety risks that disproportionately affect women and impact on their economic participation; and
- Transforms women's involvement in planning, policy and decision-making to ensure that investment leads to improved infrastructure that can have potentially transformative impacts.
- Increases investment in social infrastructure - health, education, and care services – critical for a healthy and productive workforce.

These changes can broaden women's aspirations, break down stereotypes and catalyse positive social norm change.⁷

¹ Biswas, S. and Mohun, R. (2016) Infrastructure: A Game-Changer for Women's Economic Empowerment. A Background Paper for the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment. London: ICED

² Ibid.

³ OECD (2015) *Official Development Finance for Infrastructure*, OECD Report to G20 Ministers and Central Bank Governors

⁴ Op. cit. note 1.

⁵ Op. cit. note 2.

⁶ Op. cit. note 1.

⁷ Ibid.

2. Infrastructure Investment Can Contribute to Five of the Panel's Key Drivers

Driver 1: Infrastructure can help tackle adverse norms and promote positive role models for women when investments are planned from the outset to help loosen restrictive gender relations.

Improvements in infrastructure can address social norms and improve women's participation in economic activities. Providing women with a suitable and safe place to work can promote women-owned businesses. In Bangladesh, women's corners were constructed in markets to address social norms that make it difficult for women to set up stalls next to male shopkeepers.⁸

Construction of new infrastructure facilities yields new opportunities for labour market participation that can overcome norms around so-called appropriate jobs for women. In India and Ethiopia, large numbers of women are employed in construction projects.⁹ Involving women as contractors, semi-skilled and skilled workers and supervisory engineers demonstrates their potential to successfully break through gender barriers and enter traditionally male-dominated sectors.

New employment opportunities for women in the transport sector can also overcome cultural norms that restrict women from traveling long distances or from using public transport on their own because it is unsafe or deemed inappropriate. Across Africa and Asia, women are taking on roles as bus drivers, ticket collectors and taxi and motorised rickshaw drivers.¹⁰ Having women transport employees can also increase women passengers' safety, and in turn, their physical mobility to access jobs.

Effective actions:

- National governments can ensure infrastructure investment recognises the diverse needs, constraints and opportunities of women and men in their care *and* productive roles.
- Private sector companies can include women's practical as well as strategic needs in surveys that inform infrastructure design and planning.
- Private sector companies can support innovative approaches that improve women's mobility, employment and empowerment through initiatives such as female taxi drivers.
- Businesses can adopt interventions, such as campaigns and the use of role models, sensitisation and mentoring and training schemes to support women to enter into new and better paid roles.

Driver 3: Infrastructure investment can reduce the time women spend on unpaid work and care and increase economic productivity by freeing up women's time

Access to efficient or clean energy technologies can improve women's productivity, health and safety while performing unpaid work and care. This frees up women's time to engage in paid work¹¹ or educational opportunities and participate in community life and decision-making. In Bangladesh, access to affordable electricity reduced time spent by women on household tasks by 70% freeing up their time to undertake paid work in and outside the household.¹²

Transport interventions, including appropriate service routes and schedules, the proximity and affordability of transport options, as well as the appropriate planning and safe design of transport routes can reduce the time and energy required to make care related journeys, including to health and social facilities.¹³

The provision and maintenance of formal and informal spaces for child and other care services, such as mobile crèches in India¹⁴ can both release women caregivers for remunerative activity and provide paid

⁸ World Bank (2010) Mainstreaming Gender in Road Transport: Operational Guidance for World Bank Staff. Washington, DC: World Bank

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fontana, M. and Natali, L. (2008) Gendered Patterns of Time Use in Tanzania: Public Investment in Infrastructure Can Help. Brighton: IDS.

¹² Asian Development Bank (2015) Balancing the Burden? Desk Review of Women's Time Poverty and Infrastructure in Asia and the Pacific. Asian Development Bank.

¹³ Op. cit. note 1.

¹⁴ ODI (2016) Women's work Mothers, children and the global childcare crisis. London: ODI.

decent employment for caregivers on a large scale – a win-win opportunity for WEE. The provision of formal childcare increased labour force participation of educated women in Arab communities in Israel.¹⁵

Effective actions:

- National, sub-national and municipal infrastructure planning and investment can plan for infrastructure that frees up women’s time for greater access to the labour market.
- Employers can provide safe transport, subsidised childcare and other social services to give women more flexibility in their work choices and enable women to retain and advance in their jobs.
- Government employment creation programmes can prioritise social infrastructure, such as building schools or sanitation improvements, benefitting women and their families.

Driver 5: Infrastructure can facilitate changing business culture and practice to improve women’s economic opportunities in both formal and informal sectors.

Infrastructure investment can influence and change approaches to gender in the workplace. In Kazakhstan, Almatyelectrotrans (AET) adopted new company policies and procedures, including a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment and provision of women’s toilets on all its routes to improve women’s capacity to remain in work.¹⁶

Infrastructure can also provide innovative business opportunities for women or help women entrepreneurs formalise or grow their businesses and provide employment for others. Women’s businesses are primarily concentrated in sectors characterised by low technological levels, profit margins and revenue growth. In Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda, the Solar Sister Initiative has helped an all-women workforce launch clean-energy businesses, earn an income and have greater financial stability and independence by providing women with access to new productive capital, income-generating opportunities, and capacity building for women’s enterprises.¹⁷

Access to reliable energy can also help entrepreneurs to upgrade production technologies. Once electricity is made available, ICT infrastructure can provide access to finance, information and transport, enabling entrepreneurs to overcome mobility constraints and tap into wider markets.

Effective actions:

- National governments can put in place non-discrimination and equal opportunity measures in recruitment and employment policies and procedures for infrastructure investment.
- Municipal governments can employ women contractors for infrastructure projects especially communal infrastructure such as latrines.
- Donors can promote capacity building and training for women in construction and skilled occupations.
- Private sector companies can devise work plans and construction schedules, provide safe transport to work, female toilets and worker residences that enable women to work within existing social norms.

Driver 6: Infrastructure can improve public sector practices in employment and procurement for women-friendly workplaces and enterprises

Public funding for infrastructure in developing countries accounts for 70-80% of total infrastructure spending, with the balance coming from the private sector, often in the form of public-private partnerships (PPP).¹⁸

Women’s involvement in infrastructure developments can be increased through proactive recruitment and outreach. In Peru, women were provided employment opportunities in road maintenance by modifying the job requirements to include women’s experience in agriculture and household management, while excluding the requirements for literacy.¹⁹

¹⁵ Schlosser, A (2011) “Public Preschool and the Labor Supply of Arab Mothers: Evidence from a Natural Experiment”. Tel Aviv: The Eitan Berglas School of Economics, Tel Aviv University.

¹⁶ Op. cit. note 1

¹⁷ Op. cit. note 1

¹⁸ Op. cit. note 1

¹⁹ IFC (2012) Gender Impact of Public Private Partnerships: Literature Review Synthesis Report. Washington, DC: IFC

PPP and public financed infrastructure projects can support women's economic activity and income generation in supply chains by ensuring contracts are awarded, or are at least available, to women-owned enterprises. In Lesotho, a PPP development of a National Referral Hospital set up performance monitoring targets for the participation of businesses run by women as part of the supply chain.²⁰

Effective actions:

- Donors can finance capacity building for governments to negotiate innovative PPP contracts that eliminate gender biases and create incentives for women's economic empowerment.
- Private sector companies can develop contractual clauses addressing working conditions, terms of employment, gender training of contractors, non-discrimination and equal opportunity in access to jobs and wages.
- National governments can review and modify procurement rules and policies on eligibility criteria for contract bidding that exclude informal sector firms, of which a relatively high number are women owned.
- National governments can include quotas in infrastructure contracts for skilled women workers and women-led enterprises, monitor them and apply sanctions to contractors who fail to deliver.
- NGOs and Civil Society Organisations can provide support to women-led businesses on how to identify, bid and negotiate on infrastructure contracts.

Driver 7: Increasing women's visibility, collective voice and representation can lead to demands for improvements in infrastructure

Bottom up, women-led, community driven approaches led by networks of the urban poor (the majority of whom are poor women) such as Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) or Mahila Housing SEWA Trust have been very successful in negotiating collectively with municipal authorities for improved infrastructure²¹. By collecting, mapping and analysing data about low-income settlements, SDI have successfully negotiated with local authorities to improve physical conditions of informal settlements. They have also transformed women's involvement in municipal governance processes.²²

The process of demanding effective infrastructure investment can in itself be empowering. Mobilisation builds women's solidarity and voice, supports them in pursuit of economic activities and helps make them more profitable. At the same time, women's organisations and groups can work with key actors in the infrastructure sector to inform and improve infrastructure investment.

Effective actions:

- Donors can provide funding and support to build and grow women's organisations that collectively bargain for improved infrastructure services, particularly in informal settlements.
- Donors can finance programmes which enable and encourage women to influence decision-making processes and leverage their collective voice.
- NGOs and Civil Society Organisations can strengthen the position of women workers (informal, formal, paid, unpaid), through collective action, so that they can influence policymaking in support of infrastructure that tackles the barriers to their access to economic opportunities.

This briefing note demonstrates how infrastructure investment can support women's economic empowerment. For further support, advice and information from ICED please contact Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed (zahrah@sddirect.org.uk) and Susan Joekees (joekessus@gmail.com).

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Op.cit. note 1.

²² Op.cit. note 1.