

Gender & Climate in Sustainable Infrastructure PPPs - It takes two to tango

Full Description

Sustainable infrastructure for men and women, boys and girls

Conventional infrastructure can hardly be climate- or gender-neutral: design, construction, and operation of infrastructure projects - from highways to dams, and from power production to digital and information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure - comes with environmental costs and impacts to the affected population. It goes without saying that the quest of counterbalancing climate costs with benefits would be meaningless if the beneficiaries themselves were not properly included in the equation: maximizing the benefits is intertwined with maximizing the beneficiaries, i.e., ensuring that no one is left behind. The burden of climate risks often falls disproportionately upon vulnerable groups (e.g., people with disabilities, Indigenous people, etc.) who tend to be more severely impacted by shocks or stressors—in terms of mortality, livelihood impacts, food and water security, migration, threats to cultural identity, among others. Climate-smart infrastructure will need to be equally accessible, provide the same service levels, and create equal opportunities for men and women, boys and girls. Where gender gaps are evident—be it a consequence of accessibility, skills, income level, time poverty, safety, or any sort of socio-economic factor—sustainability is inhibited. For there is no point aiming at sustainable infrastructure in non-sustainable communities. In this context, as a pioneer in the global race towards eliminating gender gaps, the World Bank Group focuses on the principle that one should not have to choose between investing in climate or closing the gender gaps. To this end, the present high-level climate-smart toolkit is accompanied by a separate gender-smart toolkit providing guidance on incorporating gender considerations in PPP infrastructure projects. The two products may be used independently; however, each one provides entry points to the other, while it is expected that users should be able to consult them both in the preparation of PPP transactions in infrastructure.

Climate change as a gendered risk

Women and girls face higher risks and greater burdens from changes in climate, especially in situations of poverty. In fact, of the 1.3 billion people living in conditions of poverty, 70% are women who are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood, particularly in rural areas where they shoulder the major responsibility for household water supply and energy for cooking and heating, as well as for food security¹. Hence, as environmental conditions and weather-related phenomena become harsher due to climate change, chances for women to develop skills and embark on employment opportunities will reduce. This will leave less time for women to access training and education, develop skills or earn income. This is further exacerbated by the fact that women may be underrepresented in decision-making and have limited access to resources. Additionally, cultural norms may hinder women from reacting (i.e., abandoning homes or seeking refuge) during natural disasters in several regions, thereby drastically increasing their exposure to such events.

Infrastructure as a catalyst for women

Across the world, gender inequalities are evident in all facets of employment: labor share, leadership, and wages. In most societies, working women find themselves balancing between work obligations and family care, while in several cases, regulatory or cultural constraints may further reduce equal employment opportunities. Properly designed infrastructure may drastically help reduce such inequalities.

Providing better water and sanitation services, for example, can reduce the time women and girls spend fetching water, freeing their time for educational or economic pursuits².

Studies have shown that access to electricity may contribute to raising female employment by saving time from housekeeping activities and providing the means to set up home-based manufacturing. It is also well known that safe and reliable transportation infrastructure will greatly impact women's ability to physically access the labor market while saving time from other family care-related activities. At the same time, digital infrastructure could open immense windows of opportunities for participating in new markets and developing new skills. However, infrastructure investments alone will not be adequate if proactive measures are not in place to ensure that women equally benefit from them. In fact, unequal access (e.g., due to lower income) to infrastructure could even deepen gender and social inequalities. Thus, gender-responsive measures should be in place during the planning, design, implementation, and monitoring of projects to help ensure that infrastructure indeed has a positive impact. The design of these measures could greatly benefit from a strong female participation in the decision making bodies, while it is also a good practice to include proper indicators in all stages of infrastructure projects to allow monitoring of the actual gains for underrepresented populations and ensure equitable services are provided to everyone.

We need to act early on

Sustainable PPP infrastructure projects of the future are expected to be both climate-smart and inclusive to guarantee resilience throughout their long lifespans. To this end, their design has to be able to respond to the needs and priorities of all users, accounting for and addressing the different impacts they may have on women and men, boys and girls. Land or water usage rights could, in some cases, be a burden for underrepresented populations to access infrastructure if not resolved early on. Similarly, the cultural context within which the infrastructure will be operating as well as the income levels of all intended users/beneficiaries, will need to be studied at the onset of the respective design to ensure that the actual socio-economic landscape is not impeding inclusivity.

Indeed, infrastructure projects can further jeopardize women's access to and use of land. Women in rural areas can be disproportionately impacted by such changes as they often rely on common property such as land. These investments can decrease the land available for agriculture and interfere with existing land uses (e.g., subsistence agriculture, livestock grazing), which can hamper women's income-generating opportunities as women are heavily reliant on agricultural work. In some cases, maximizing resilience through climate smart PPP projects may involve challenging the existing status quo by designing the proper strategies to limit their potential negative impacts while boosting the positive ones. Guidance on addressing risks and impacts on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups is provided in the World Bank's Environmental and Social Framework and IFC's Environmental and Social Performance Standards.

Echoing the voices of men and women, boys and girls

In the quest to achieve the goals outlined in the previous paragraph, decisions made at the preparation phase will have to be based on surveys equitably representing the needs and concerns of different genders, cultures, and Indigenous populations. Where gender gaps are identified, it is essential that the appropriate stakeholders are present in interviews and consultations aiming to address them. It is important to understand that accounting for women's needs and concerns during the selection, preparation, building, and operation of PPP projects will not only result in boosting the benefits of infrastructure to the community but will also generate opportunities for women to enhance their professional and leadership skills and increase their chances of being employed in the jobs which will be created.

Private sector participation does count

The private sector increasingly recognizes that closing gender gaps in employment and leadership means better talent, more productivity, more diverse leadership, more customers, and a stronger bottom line. More firms in the private sector are changing business practices, developing PPPs and committing resources to achieve gender equality. Such business transformation will not only result in a reduction of gaps between men and women in the economy but can also lead to increased firm productivity and help private companies innovate, grow, and perform better³.

PPPs as an opportunity to accelerate equity

According to the World Bank Group's Primer on Gender Equality, Infrastructure and PPPs, private investors often rely on the government to consider and address issues relevant to ensuring that a project is gender-inclusive. The government often relies on the private sector to address these issues as fundamental to service the delivery of the project. A PPP project provides an opportunity to join public and private capacities to focus on issues relevant to women. PPP projects must be commercially and financially viable. If governments need private investors to provide additional support or services to meet the needs of women, they may need to provide additional incentives. For example, PPP payments can be linked to performance and services for women. Likewise, if the private partner performs poorly, financial penalties within the PPP contract may apply.

1 <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/womenin-shadow-climate-change>

2 Evidence comes from a World Bank rural water supply and sanitation project in Morocco. After project completion, time spent fetching water by women and girls was reduced by 50 to 90 percent. With more time and better health, female primary school attendance in the project area increased by 21 percent. World Bank. ICR Review. Report number: ICRR11535.

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