



photo: Asian Development Bank

KEY FINDINGS

- Women benefit significantly from access to basic infrastructure.
- Infrastructure can reduce women’s time poverty, reducing time spent on unpaid household and care tasks.
- Decent roads and safe and affordable transportation allow women increased access to paid opportunities and markets.
- Prevailing social norms may still prevent women from moving independently.

Women’s economic empowerment and public infrastructure

Public infrastructure is a key, yet under-valued enabler of women’s economic empowerment. The GrOW program highlights the role of infrastructure in reducing the time burden of unpaid care and improving access to opportunities through decent transportation and roads. For public infrastructure projects, gender analysis is critical in design and implementation to ensure equitable outcomes.

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

Women’s economic empowerment (WEE) is hindered by a range of factors. Infrastructure is one that receives relatively little direct attention, but is crucially important for women’s ability to work and rest. While infrastructure often falls into the category of ‘gender-blind’ policies, women’s access to jobs and the burden of unpaid care work at home depend on the availability of essential services.

POLICY INSIGHTS

- Investment decisions in public infrastructure have important gender implications.
- To address empowerment effectively, women’s needs need to be integrated into planning and monitoring in a systematic way.
- Physical access may not be sufficient; social norms and violence against women are key determining factors.

As the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program seeks to identify the best ways to support WEE, assessing the potential of the broadest range of policies possible is critical. This brief draws out lessons from recent GrOW research and other available evidence, to help inform policy choices that can help leverage public investment to support WEE.

APPROACH

While not a stated explicit area of research within the program, the GrOW team with the help of a consultant, reviewed GrOW projects for findings on the importance of public infrastructure. Multiple GrOW studies pointed to infrastructure as both a barrier and an enabler to WEE, and hence GrOW commissioned a review of evidence. This included a quick review of main reports from international agencies, on recommendations regarding gender and infrastructure, and experience within agencies ensuring gender is central to infrastructure investments.

KEY FINDINGS

The literature on infrastructure and WEE indicates a clear positive connection between the two, with women benefitting significantly from access to basic infrastructure near their homes. Reports from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the World Health Organization, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, amongst others, show that access to infrastructure can serve to reduce women's time poverty by reducing the time spent on unpaid household and care tasks, therefore increasing the time she can spend in paid opportunities, or to rest.

Infrastructure can reduce women's time poverty, therefore increasing the time they can spend in paid opportunities.



photo: Luke Appleby



photo: Dominic Chavez / World Bank

The same reports also point to decent roads and safe and affordable transportation for women, to allow them to access paid opportunities and markets, as well as ease care tasks like visiting health centres, community centres and schools. This can also reduce a woman's time burden and improve her safety in her daily activities.

GrOW-supported research led by a team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Nepal, India, Rwanda and Tanzania also found that women experience severe time poverty when considering paid work and unpaid care work. They find that a reduction in unpaid care work is not enough, as women in low income contexts are often employed in low skill, physical jobs characterised as drudgery.

In the same study, women identified that collecting water, wood and other fuel were their most burdensome, time-consuming household tasks, pointing clearly to the need for access to those services closer to home. When it comes to transportation, women are sending clear signals about their needs. Women in Nepal report walking up to 3 hours to reach worksites, and in Rwanda from 30 minutes to over an hour. While this is often true for male workers as well, the result for women is compounded by the household tasks waiting for them, leaving them with little time for rest.

Distance and time are not the only constraints to be addressed. In a study led by the Urban Institute on women's transit choices in Lahore, Pakistan, women report being highly fearful after dark while riding transit, and waiting at

unlit stops. They also report taking longer routes to work to avoid certain areas, and higher transport costs for similar routes as men, indicating their preference for certain types of safer transport, like ride sharing and Uber.

Distance and time are not the only constraints to be addressed when it comes to transportation. Social norms may still prevent women from moving independently.

This is supported by research led by Hina Lotia at Leadership for Environment and Development Pakistan, where the team finds that women in slums in three cities in South Asia identify transportation as one of their most significant issues. This is particularly true in slums with mud roads that are prone to flooding, leaving women trapped in unsanitary areas during wet seasons and after climate shocks.

Another study in Pakistan led by researchers at Harvard University and the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan found that women in rural Punjab province were unlikely to participate in a skills training and market linkages program if it took place outside their village boundaries. The provision of group transportation only made a small difference. In-village training was by far the most successful model, implying that even where transport is available, prevailing social norms may still prevent women from moving independently.

POLICY INSIGHTS

Few programs make a direct connection between gender equality or WEE, and access to infrastructure. While it is widely acknowledged to have a significant impact on women's responsibilities and livelihoods, few programs are designed in a gender-sensitive way, taking the needs of women into account from the outset.

There is an opportunity to have a positive impact on WEE by designing better, more gender-responsive public infrastructure programs. Infrastructure has the ability to



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bring women into labour markets, reduce the burden of unpaid care work at home, and improve their mental and physical wellbeing through a better balance of tasks.

Infrastructure programs and policies need to take gender norms into account to understand the root of inequalities.

Gender can be an explicit consideration in the design of infrastructure programs through gender analyses, identification of key gender indicators, and ongoing monitoring. This type of information can inform programs as they go to scale and seek to maximize the benefit to women. Adjustments to infrastructure programs can be low cost, with high returns for women. This is true in the design of transportation initiatives, water and fuel access initiatives.

Infrastructure programs and policies also need to take gender norms into account in the design phase, understanding both the root of the inequalities that may keep women from benefitting from certain services, as well as the gender-specific potential these services offer. This can mean engaging men in challenging discussions around women's burden of care and ways to redistribute some of the tasks, socializing women's right to safety on transit, and bringing women together in social settings to reduce isolation caused by time poverty and household care tasks.

This brief was written by Gillian Dowie and Arjan de Haan, based on findings from an evidence review written by Themrise Khan which looked at research projects funded by GrOW that reveal the impact of public infrastructure on women's economic empowerment in low-income contexts.



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Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3H9
Phone: +1 613 2366163 / Fax: +1 613 657 7749
Email: grow@idrc.ca
www.idrc.ca/grow