

Investing in women-centric transport: **key to economic growth**

Imagine a world where everyone had an equal opportunity to advance their goals and dreams, more so one where everyone could contribute meaningfully to the growth and sustainability of the society.

By Nangamso Matebese-Maponya,
Infrastructure Finance Professional



When I imagine that world, I see a world where we all benefit from the diverse skills and unique abilities of everyone playing a role. I see thriving economies, with no hunger, less dependency and improved quality of life. That is what the Sustainable Development Goals aspire for this world and that is what we all dream of witnessing in our lifetimes.

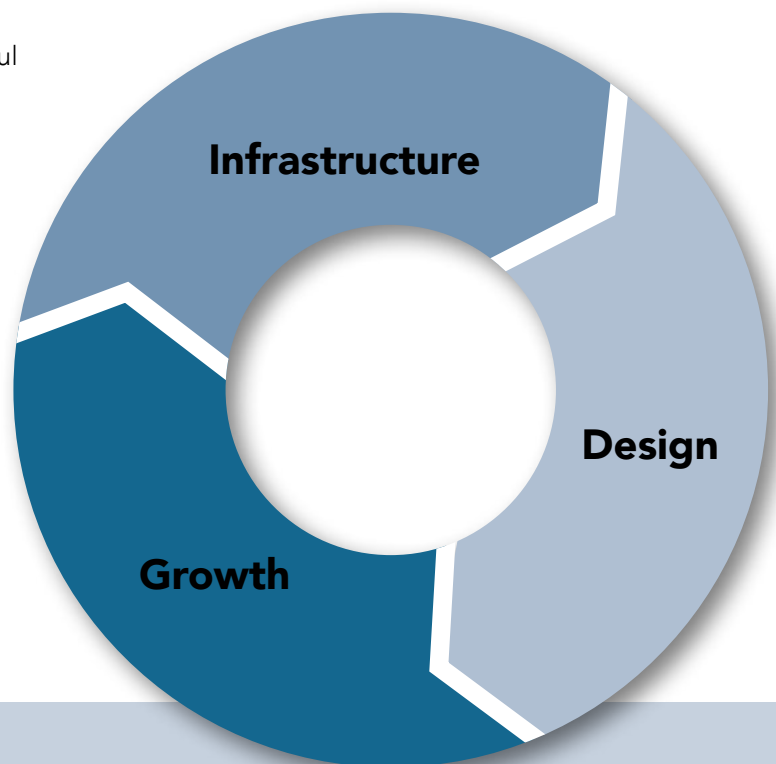
Women's economic empowerment is central to realising women's rights and gender equality. It includes women's ability to participate equally in market activities, access to productive resources, decent work, and control over their own time, lives and bodies. In addition, empowerment entails an increased voice, agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to institutions (UN Women, 2018).

Empowering women and closing gender gaps in the world of work are key to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Women's Economic Empowerment, 2016). This is particularly true for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 which is specifically aimed at promoting gender equality, and Goal 8, on promotion of productive employment and decent work for all. Also relevant are the goals related to ending poverty, ensuring food security and providing

access to basic education and health.

There is no doubt that pivotal to unlocking the potential to achieving these goals and sustainable growth is reliant heavily on closing the gender gaps in society's key sectors.

A strong assertion is made by Women's Economic Empowerment (2016) that when more women work, economies grow, and families thrive. Women economic empowerment therefore boosts productivity; increases economic diversification and income equality, in addition to other positive development outcomes. (IMF, 2018).



Africa's economic growth

Despite many attempts and efforts demonstrated in advancing development, Africa's growth remains lagging behind those of many countries across the world and accounting for most poor people worldwide. Women economic empowerment in the continent is being driven mostly by social and civil society groups, particularly led by women themselves and not always considered as fundamental to the economic development and growth of countries on the continent.

Chief to Africa's slow growth is poor social and economic infrastructure development, with women and children being at the bottom of the food chain in the considerations of the development designs and plans; inherently, making women economic empowerment a secondary part of the entire growth plan.

Gender in transport infrastructure

Some of the key issues in infrastructure development are the gender and age-neutral designs, which indirectly discriminate against those who have unique needs (mostly women, children, some vulnerable groups) and, in a way, perpetuates inequality. For instance, in the case of transport infrastructure, where issues related to safety, cost and travel time affect women more than men; disadvantaging and hampering their growth potential.

In transportation policies and planning, gender is rarely an issue considered. It could therefore be fair to argue that there are limited systematic gender inclusion procedures for transportation, in terms of training of professionals, participation of users, and the design and planning of systems, services and equipment, implying an overlook of gender in the entire ecosystem, embedding further inequality.

In South African and most African urban areas, most women walk 15 minutes and at least half a kilometre to reach a bus, train or taxi stop/station; and wait at each stop for at least another 15-30 minutes, which is close to the international average walking distance and waiting time. However, because they require more than one route to complete a journey, they walk and wait double the standard distance, which might increase their chances of a negative experience on the journey, with likely impact on their safety and many forms of harassment.

These experiences impact on many life choices, including field of study and type of work they end up doing, which in many cases would be informal work.

Women have a vital role to play

Among other facts, women constitute half of the population in Africa, however in 2018, only about 33% of African females were afforded the opportunity to play meaningful roles in the mainstream economy. That said, there are numerous attempts by women to drive radical change in many sectors of the economy, including taking up positions of leadership and driving large businesses that contribute to the improvements of their livelihoods and their families' socio-economic status, in turn contributing towards economic growth.

The role women play in these sectors have a positive impact, not only through the diversity they bring into the business sector but with them, they echo the voices of the many marginalised groups, therefore contribute to improving equitable access to infrastructure and economic participation for those.



Investing in women-centric transport

One of the drivers of economic development in countries across the world is sustainable mobility, broadly defined as the form of transportation systems that are sustainable in terms of economic, social, environmental and climate impacts. Providing equitable access to transportation therefore has a potential to drive wholesome economic participation and growth.

Women's participation in the transport sector therefore highlights those discriminatory designs and practices, voicing those unique challenges and finding ways to correct them.

An example is how technology is increasingly being considered to improve safety for female drivers in both passenger and freight transport, and how electro-mobility (e-mobility) is embraced, with the hope to improve (among other things) costs, time and safety. Some of the solutions proposed include improving lighting and reducing the walking distance around the transport nodes, installation of surveillance cameras and panic buttons to improve safety.

Observations

As an infrastructure finance professional, these are some of my recent observations:

- a growing interest from women to participate in the development and ownership of transport infrastructure and businesses, driving further growth and transformation throughout the sector.
- a growing number of skills development and business incubation initiatives and programmes, helping increase the pool of skilled women business owners, engineers, operators, planners, designers and general workers.
- the drive to promote policies and practices that aim to support women-owned and led businesses – through procurement and access to market.
- In investors forums, women participation in major infrastructure projects has taken centre stage. Wherein investors are increasingly insisting on

seeing more women as not only owners of the project companies, but leaders in developing and delivering quality and sustainable infrastructure, across different sectors.

All these allow for participation in the various parts of the infrastructure value chain, bringing small and informal business owners into the mainstream economy.

The economic and social imperative for women's economic empowerment is clear. Greater gender equality boosts economic growth and leads to better development outcomes, contributes to reducing income inequality and boosts diversification and, in turn, supports economic resilience (IMF, 2018).

The world that I imagine is that which I live in today and the one which I dream to see more of. The world where women are increasingly taking a strong position to drive economic growth by empowering themselves, creating opportunities for others and working with everyone to reduce inequality and dependency of any form. ■



Nangamso Matebese-Maponya is an Infrastructure Finance Professional, with over 14 years' experience within development finance institutions in South Africa. She has participated and led several infrastructure projects in the continent, across different sectors.