



Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Market Systems Development: Synthesis Brief #2

“Looking Now”

The Global GESI in MSD Conversation Series brings together practitioners and funders from around the world to reflect on how gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) has evolved within market systems development (MSD). The second session of the three-part series was designed to take stock of the current moment (2020-2025). The discussion built on the [first session](#) which focused on how GESI in MSD has evolved between the period 2012-2020. This synthesis captures the key takeaways from the scene setting interviews and breakout group discussions unpacking the external and internal forces currently shaping GESI in MSD, the trade-offs that teams are navigating in response. It also sets the stage for the final session which will look to the future of GESI in MSD.

External Pressures: Navigating a shifting landscape

Major shifts in the external environment in recent years have created both headwinds and openings for GESI work. Multiple participants shared how global crises such as COVID-19, conflicts, and climate emergencies have reconfigured donor priorities and risk appetites. The global pandemic put care work on the radar for MSD programs and provided space for practitioners to work on social norms more broadly. More recent political changes, however, have narrowed or eliminated altogether the space for this work in certain contexts.

Explicit efforts to roll back GESI commitments, particularly in how inclusion is framed and staffed, are contributing to growing disillusionment and exhaustion among practitioners. Language once central to inclusive programming is increasingly scrutinized or deliberately erased. In response, teams are feeling pressured to downplay GESI in order to retain room to operate in more restrictive environments, even as they remain committed to inclusive outcomes. This contradiction has left many feeling morally compromised, disheartened, and worn down.

“There was an intention to remove the word ‘GESI’ from reports... even reduce GESI staff. It was disheartening.” - Scene setting speaker

*“We’re being asked to deliver inclusion, but without saying the word inclusion.”
- Participant*

At the same time, there are donors that continue to uphold a strong inclusion agenda, providing critical counterpoints to more restrictive trends. Participants cited Australia and the European Union as maintaining clear mandates around GESI. In a moment when some programs are being asked to strip GESI from reports or roll back staffing, these donors offered refuge, a source of encouragement, and space to keep pushing forward. They represent not just funding, but a signal that inclusive development still has institutional champions.

Competing priorities are crowding the agenda. Participants flagged the growing dominance of climate resilience and fragility narratives, among others in MSD programs. While these are vital

concerns, they often pull focus and funding away from inclusive approaches unless inclusion is explicitly mainstreamed.

“There’s an increasing push toward climate, fragility, and green growth and GESI risks getting crowded out.” - Participant

GESI work is unfolding under intense and often contradictory conditions. In some settings, it faces growing scrutiny, constrained mandates, or even active rollback forcing practitioners to temper ambition with realism. In others, there is genuine momentum and a push to do more and do better. Practitioners are navigating these diverging realities by forging new forms of balance between ambition and feasibility, risk and opportunity. According to participants, this moment is about adapting with integrity and embedding inclusion in ways that are durable, context-responsive, and genuinely owned.

“This moment is a test. What lasted? What didn’t? Are inclusive behaviors embedded or were they donor-driven all along?” - Scene setting speaker

Internal Pressures: Rising expectations and friction

Expectations are rising faster than resources. Many participants expressed concern that the scope of GESI responsibilities has expanded significantly, with increasing demands to address not just gender, but also disability, youth, social protection, and intersecting forms of marginalization. Yet this expansion has not been matched by adequate investment in time, staffing, or leadership buy-in.

“The pressure to do more across gender, disability, and youth keeps increasing, but the support doesn’t.” - Participant

“We all want to do gender, disability, social norms but we’re often doing all of it without knowing enough about any of it.” - Participant

Friction across strategic and operational areas. Participants described subtle and sometimes overt tensions between GESI specialists and broader program teams: friction that arises from disconnects in how inclusion is understood, valued, and operationalized. GESI advisors spoke of being brought into processes too late, asked to retrofit strategies, or positioned as compliance checkers rather than thought partners. This dynamic can generate defensiveness or quiet resistance, particularly when inclusion is framed as an external requirement rather than a shared commitment.

“The GESI expert is often seen as the one adding more work, not as an integrated part of the team.” - Participant

This friction also plays out across key operational domains where inclusion is too often deprioritized or sidelined completely. Participants emphasized that without visible leadership backing and clear integration into areas such as procurement, staffing, budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation, GESI efforts can easily lose traction. In fast-paced delivery environments, the pressure to produce quick and efficient results often leads to inclusive practices being seen as a hindrance rather

than a driver of impact, and as a result, they are frequently deprioritized or overlooked. As a result, GESI is increasingly at risk of being sidelined in the name of performance.

“If GESI isn’t in the logframe, it’s not in the budget. It doesn’t get done.” - Participant

Capability gaps and constrained framing exacerbate tensions. Even when teams are broadly supportive of inclusion, many still lack the tools, confidence, or institutional support to translate that commitment into practice. This often leaves GESI champions to carry the work alone. The result is not only strain and burnout but also growing isolation within teams that may want to do better but don't know how. These capability gaps are further compounded by how inclusion is framed. When GESI is reduced to just a narrow economic rationale or when language is deliberately softened, the deeper, values-driven purpose of the work can be lost. This dilution can be disheartening, particularly for staff grounded in rights-based approaches. Further, it reinforces the sense that inclusion is negotiable rather than central to effective systems change.

“There’s consistent pressure to frame GESI only in economic terms and limited capacity to speak to the rights-based side.” - Participant

These internal pressures point to the need for a deeper cultural shift: one that fosters shared ownership, capability, and accountability for inclusive development. Participants noted that meaningful GESI outcomes are unlikely to come from technical fixes alone. What’s needed is ongoing investment in the conditions that allow inclusion to take hold; the hard and soft infrastructure that shape how teams function and make decisions.

What’s needed:

- **Acknowledging and adequately resourcing the growing scope of inclusion work.** As programs take on intersecting issues of gender, disability, youth, indigeneity, LGBTQ+ inclusion the expectations placed on teams and GESI advisors continue to expand.
- **Strengthening foundational processes** such as onboarding, team learning, performance measures, and leadership development so that GESI is not only part of strategy, but also part of daily operations
- **Meaningful backing for GESI staff and advisors.** This includes institutional support, peer networks, and a seat at the table from the outset.

How Programs are Responding: Rethinking, reframing and recalibrating

Despite increasing external and internal pressures, participants shared a diverse and encouraging set of strategies that programs are using to adapt often with a blend of pragmatism, creativity, and persistence. Rather than retreating in the face of constraints, many are shifting how they work.

Rethinking roles and redistributing responsibility. Successful programs are moving beyond the traditional model of hiring a standalone GESI advisor and are instead embedding GESI capacity within core teams, treating inclusion as a cross-cutting function that shapes all aspects of implementation. This shift is helping to normalize GESI practices, elevate shared ownership, and reduce the perception that inclusion is “someone else’s job.” In some cases, teams are rotating GESI focal points, pairing technical and inclusion leads, or creating cross-functional working groups to foster broader engagement. This redistribution of responsibility not only lightens the load on individual GESI staff but also creates more entry points for others to contribute. Participants emphasized the importance of cultivating allies across functions from MEL Advisors to Sector Leads who can champion inclusion from different vantage points and reinforce it through everyday decisions. When inclusion is embedded across roles, rather than confined to a function, it is more likely to take root and scale.

“Hiring GESI people as core team members, not as an ‘extra’, has helped pull the whole team toward more inclusive practice.” - Participant

Programs are prioritizing, ‘right-sizing,’ and sequencing their GESI ambitions in response to external and internal pressures. This means focusing on where they can have the most meaningful impact rather than trying to do everything at once, especially with limited resources. Participants were candid about the need to stay grounded amid mounting priorities, tighter timelines, and increasing operational constraints. While the aspiration for transformative change remains strong, there was broad recognition that these realities demand hard choices and strategic trade-offs. Increasingly, the pressure to deliver measurable results is pushing programs to emphasize more tangible forms of inclusion such as access and participation at the expense of deeper, slower work on shifting power dynamics and social norms. These types of choices require honest conversations early on, particularly with donors. Being transparent about what is feasible, what trade-offs are necessary, and who bears the risk of slow or difficult progress is seen as critical to maintaining both integrity and impact.

Investing in internal culture. Participants shared examples of deliberately slowing timelines or reallocating effort to strengthen team cohesion, reflective practice, and a shared understanding of inclusion. They emphasized that internal team biases significantly influence how GESI is framed and operationalized yet teams are rarely given the time or space to unpack the deeper motivations and assumptions behind their approaches. While acknowledging that these shifts can be difficult to negotiate with donors and leadership, participants viewed them as essential for embedding more durable, values-driven ways of working.

“Sometimes you have to push back on timelines to build a team culture that can sustain inclusion.” - Participant

Strategic use of language and framing to (re)gain buy-in. Recognizing that different stakeholders respond to different incentives, programs are tailoring how they communicate GESI goals whether to

donors focused on results, governments prioritizing economic development, or private sector actors seeking new markets. This includes adapting terminology, such as framing inclusion in terms of risk mitigation or business value, or embedding it within broader agendas like resilience, employment, or social protection. Participants emphasized that stakeholder positions are not static. As political climates shift, and economic pressures mount, so too do partner priorities and openness. This is especially true for private sector actors navigating tighter budgets in a volatile global economy. Programs are learning to read these dynamics and adjust their messaging; positioning inclusion as both relevant and responsive to evolving agendas. Practitioners described language as both a barrier and a tool: something to be continuously calibrated to signal alignment, reduce resistance, and preserve space to advance GESI.

“We message governments in terms of lost economic value and investor risk if they don’t include women.” - Participant

Progress, not perfection. Programs are increasingly embracing the idea that meaningful systems change is rarely linear or flawless. Rather than viewing trade-offs as failures or compromises, they are beginning to see them as inevitable and even necessary elements of working in complex, real-world contexts. Grappling with the time it takes to shift norms safely and sustainably, especially amid political, economic, and social headwinds, is part of the challenge. Further, change grounded in equity and inclusion can’t be rushed without risking harm or backlash. The goal is intentional progress that maintains integrity and delivers impact where it matters most.

“True success is when GESI is so integrated that it’s just how the system works; not something we have to advocate for every day.” - Scene setting speaker

“Don’t let perfection be the enemy of good impact.” - Participant

Looking Ahead

The work of inclusive systems change is more necessary, more urgent, and more complex than ever but also harder than before. This reality echoed throughout the discussions and will continue to shape the dialogue as the global conversation series enters its final session on July 15th. Across contexts, participants reflected on the shifting landscape and the strain this places on internal program efforts and individual GESI professionals. Yet this moment, while challenging, is also clarifying. It reveals both the resilience of inclusion efforts and also their vulnerabilities.

“What survives isn’t the policy, it’s the norm.” - Scene setting speaker

Inclusion must be embedded not only in goals and indicators, but also in the deeper architecture of how systems learn, adapt, and respond to change. That means investing in relationships, not just results; in culture, not just compliance; and in long-term systems thinking, not short-term fixes. In the final session of the global conversation series, we’ll explore what programs and practitioners need and from whom to bring this vision to life.