

Countering Gender-Based Misinformation to Strengthen Impact Assessment

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Abstract

This paper examines how gender-based misinformation and related forms of information distortion can weaken the quality, inclusiveness, and credibility of impact assessment. Drawing on examples from Suriname, Bolivia, and Haiti, it shows how stereotypes, assumptions, indirect representation, and overreliance on conventional project indicators may obscure differentiated needs and impacts, and presents adaptable tools practitioners can use to reduce participation barriers, validate information, and integrate gender-sensitive findings into project design.

1. Introduction

Impact Assessment seeks to provide an objective basis for decision-making by identifying, predicting, and evaluating the environmental, social, and economic consequences of development projects. A fundamental component of this process is meaningful stakeholder engagement, which relies on the effective participation of stakeholders with diverse needs, experiences, and perspectives.

Stakeholder engagement and assessment outcomes can, however, be undermined by information distortion arising from technical complexity, communication barriers, misinformation, or deliberate disinformation. The consequences of these distortions are particularly significant in relation to gender. Persistent stereotypes, unequal access to information, and barriers to participation can silence women's perspectives, mask differentiated needs and vulnerabilities, leading to incomplete or biased assessments. Accordingly, international financial institutions and multilateral development banks increasingly require the systematic integration of gender considerations into impact assessment.

This paper explores how gender-based misinformation and related forms of information distortion can affect assessment outcomes and examines practical approaches that practitioners can adopt to identify, address, and counter these challenges, thereby strengthening the quality, inclusiveness, and overall effectiveness of impact assessment.

2. Recognizing Gender-Based Misinformation in Impact Assessment

Gender-based misinformation rarely emerges during formal stakeholder consultations themselves. Rather, it often develops much earlier, as project information begins to circulate through informal discussions, community networks, social media, and local power structures. By the time the formal engagement process begins, narratives may already be established, influencing perceptions and shaping how diverse groups participate in the assessment process.

Information distortion can occur throughout the impact assessment cycle. During project planning, assumptions and stereotypes may influence how affected populations are identified and characterized, while inadequate disclosure may create uncertainty and encourage the spread of rumors. Consultation processes may inadvertently reinforce these narratives if certain voices dominate discussions or act as intermediaries for others, allowing distortions to become embedded in baseline studies, data analysis, and assessment findings.

The effects are particularly significant for women and other vulnerable groups. Gender perspectives may be filtered through community representatives, family members, or local leaders rather than being obtained directly from those affected. As a result, differentiated needs, vulnerabilities, and impacts may remain poorly understood, leading to inaccurate baseline conditions, inadequate mitigation measures, stakeholder mistrust, and increased financing, compliance, and reputational risks.

From a practitioner's perspective, several indicators may suggest that misinformation or information distortion is influencing the assessment process. These include the repetition of nearly identical narratives across different stakeholder groups, reliance on intermediaries rather than direct engagement with women and vulnerable populations, inconsistencies between consultation findings and field observations, the absence or marginalization of women's

participation, the use of information from unclear or unverifiable sources, and the circulation of project-related rumors through social media or community networks before formal disclosure takes place.

Recognizing these warning signs at an early stage enables impact assessment practitioners to adapt engagement strategies, validate information through multiple channels, and ensure that the assessment reflects the perspectives and experiences of all affected groups. In this way, addressing gender-based misinformation becomes not only a matter of improving communication, but also an essential component of producing credible, representative, and effective impact assessments.

3. Field Evidence: Countering Gender-Based Misinformation

The concepts discussed above are not merely theoretical. Environmental and social assessments conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean revealed recurring patterns of gender-based misinformation and stereotyping across different sectors and cultural settings. Despite differing contexts, assumptions about women's roles, indirect representation, and reliance on incomplete or unverified narratives frequently obscured the experiences and priorities of affected populations.

The following examples illustrate how apparently credible baseline assumptions were challenged through targeted engagement and field validation. In each case, the direct inclusion of women's perspectives altered the understanding of project conditions and informed more appropriate assessment outcomes.

Case Study 1. When "Access" Does Not Mean Access: Rural Electrification in Suriname

During an environmental and social assessment for a rural electrification project in Suriname, initial consultations suggested that electricity was not a major concern, as most households reportedly had access to generators. However, these discussions were largely dominated by male community representatives, and women's perspectives were not directly captured.

To better understand household realities, the assessment team created women-only engagement spaces through culturally familiar activities, including meal preparation, informal gatherings, and walk-and-talk discussions. These conversations revealed that, although generators were present, the limited availability of fuel meant that electricity was available for only short periods each day. Women explained that this affected children's evening studies, food preservation, food preparation, and small-scale income-generating activities that depended on reliable electricity.

The assessment demonstrated that the issue was not the presence of electrical infrastructure, but the reliability of the service, highlighting how targeted engagement can reveal differentiated needs and impacts that might otherwise remain overlooked.

Case Study 2. Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Renewable Energy: Pokigron, Suriname

During the environmental and social assessment of a solar energy project in the community of Pokigron, project planners and community leaders generally assumed that women lacked the skills and capacity to contribute to the operation and maintenance of the facility. Consequently, potential employment opportunities for women were largely overlooked during the initial stages of project planning.

To better understand local capacities and expectations, the assessment team conducted direct consultations with women through dedicated engagement activities designed to encourage open participation. Discussions focused not only on employment aspirations, but also on existing daily activities, skills, and practical experience that could be transferred to project-related tasks.

These consultations revealed that women were already actively involved in a range of activities requiring organization, responsibility, and regular maintenance, and that they were both willing and capable of contributing to the project. In particular, practical entry-level opportunities such as solar panel cleaning, site maintenance, and facility support were identified as realistic and culturally appropriate roles.

The assessment demonstrated that the perceived lack of skills reflected a stereotype rather than an evidence-based finding. Without directly engaging women, these opportunities would likely have been overlooked.

Case Study 3. Looking Beyond the Assumption of Equality: The Water and Sanitation Sector in Bolivia

During the preparation of a Gender Strategy for a water and sanitation service provider in Bolivia, a commonly held perception was that men and women worked under essentially the same conditions and enjoyed equal opportunities for participation and professional development. Consequently, little attention had been given to identifying potential gender-specific barriers within the organization.

To test this assumption, the assessment team conducted a structured survey involving both female and male employees and compiled sex-disaggregated information on workforce participation, employment conditions, career opportunities, workplace safety, and perceptions regarding equality and inclusion. The information was complemented by an institutional review of existing policies and grievance mechanisms.

The analysis revealed that the apparent equality masked important structural differences, illustrating how gender-based misinformation and information distortion can become embedded within institutions and accepted as the norm. Significant gender gaps existed in workforce representation, participation in decision-making, access to career advancement opportunities, and awareness of workplace rights and protection mechanisms. Many of these issues had remained largely invisible because previous data collection processes had not specifically sought to identify them.

The study demonstrated the value of sex-disaggregated data in identifying institutional barriers and challenging assumptions that might otherwise remain unexamined.

Case Study 4. When Infrastructure Does Not Mean Access: Rural Electrification in Northern Haiti

During an assessment of rural electrification initiatives in northern Haiti, the prevailing assumption was that the installation of Solar Home Systems (SHS) would provide equitable access to electricity for all households. Project indicators focused primarily on the number of systems installed and their technical performance.

To verify these assumptions, the assessment team conducted site visits and applied an observation-based approach to understand how the systems were actually being used within the local social and security context. Discussions with community members complemented these observations and helped explain the practical challenges associated with the technology.

The assessment found that the high level of theft required households to remove and store their solar panels inside the house every evening and reinstall them each morning. While this practice protected the equipment, it also created an unforeseen barrier for elderly people and others with limited physical capabilities, who were often unable to move the panels independently. As a result, access to electricity was not necessarily equal, despite the installation of identical systems.

This experience demonstrated that the presence of infrastructure does not automatically translate into equitable access and highlighted the importance of validating project indicators through field verification.

4. Practical Measures to Counter Gender-Based Misinformation in Impact Assessment

The case studies presented in this paper reveal that gender-based misinformation can emerge through a variety of mechanisms, including social stereotypes, institutional assumptions, indirect representation, and an overreliance on conventional project indicators. They also show that no single engagement technique is sufficient to address all situations. Rather, practitioners should apply multiple engagement and validation techniques to reduce participation barriers, improve information quality, and strengthen the validation of assessment findings. Drawing on practical field experience, the following approaches have proven effective in enhancing the inclusiveness, credibility, and reliability of impact assessment processes.

4.1 Promote Inclusive Participation

- Use women-centered communication channels and direct invitations to ensure women receive project information independently.
- Schedule consultations at times and in locations that are safe, accessible, familiar, and compatible with women's domestic responsibilities.
- Where appropriate, provide childcare support or child-friendly spaces to reduce participation barriers.

4.2 Create Conditions for Open Dialogue

- Include female facilitators and interviewers to create a more comfortable environment for discussion.
- Organize women-only engagement spaces when cultural norms may inhibit participation in mixed groups.
- Integrate consultations into culturally familiar activities, such as meal preparation, informal gatherings, or walk-and-talk discussions, allowing conversations to develop naturally.

4.3 Strengthen Data Collection and Verification

- Combine stakeholder engagement with field observations and triangulate findings using multiple sources of evidence, including stakeholder input, institutional data, and grievance mechanisms.
- Conduct confidential one-on-one interviews or sex-disaggregated surveys where sensitive issues may not be openly discussed.
- Frame questions indirectly, such as asking about women in the community rather than personal experiences, to encourage more open discussions of sensitive issues.

4.4 Integrate Findings into Project Design

- Consult women directly regarding employment opportunities, impacts, training needs, and livelihood preferences rather than relying on assumptions.
- Incorporate gender-disaggregated indicators into baseline studies and monitoring programs.
- Assess whether project benefits are accessible and usable by different population groups, considering local social conditions, and use the findings to design targeted mitigation, enhancement, and safeguarding measures that respond to the differentiated realities of affected populations.

5. Conclusions

The experiences presented in this paper demonstrate that gender-based misinformation extends beyond the intentional spread of misinformation. It can emerge through stereotypes, institutional assumptions, indirect representation, and overreliance on conventional project indicators, influencing how affected populations are understood and how assessment findings are interpreted.

The case studies show that information distortion can occur throughout the impact assessment process and may remain undetected when practitioners rely solely on conventional consultation approaches or aggregate data. As a result, differentiated needs, vulnerabilities, capacities, and barriers may be overlooked, affecting baseline information, mitigation measures, and the equitable distribution of project benefits.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond gender as a compliance exercise and adopting systematic approaches to information verification and validation. By combining inclusive engagement, field verification, and gender-sensitive data collection, practitioners can challenge assumptions, improve information integrity, and strengthen the reliability of assessment findings.

As impact assessment increasingly seeks to support inclusive and evidence-based decision-making, recognizing and countering gender-based misinformation should be considered a core element of good assessment practice. Doing so enhances the credibility of assessment outcomes and contributes to more equitable and sustainable development decisions.

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