Strengthening Women's Participation in Affordable Housing Delivery

Insights, Case Studies, and Emerging Recommendations from Kenya

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK



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Executive Summary

Women remain significantly underrepresented across many parts of the housing delivery system, despite increasing participation in higher education and growing recognition of the importance of gender-responsive housing. While much attention has focused on improving women's access to housing and finance, considerably less emphasis has been placed on strengthening women's participation within housing design, construction, professional practice and leadership.

This project brought together representatives from academia, housing developers, investors, training providers, professional organisations and civil society through a Nairobi workshop, a series of interviews with practitioners, and a review of practical case studies from Kenya and internationally. The workshop explored where women leave the participation pipeline and identified practical opportunities for organisations to work together to improve progression from education into employment and leadership. Case studies from organisations including Women in Real Estate (WIRE), Buildher, Women Academics in Construction (WAiC), Zima Homes and Ghana's YIEDIE programme demonstrate that many effective approaches already exist, while highlighting the value of stronger collaboration, knowledge sharing and coordinated action across the sector.

Rather than identifying a single barrier, the workshop highlighted a series of interconnected challenges operating across the participation pipeline. Gender norms begin shaping career aspirations during childhood, influencing subject choices and perceptions of who belongs within technical professions. Although women's participation in higher education has increased substantially, many graduates continue to face weak transitions into employment, limited exposure to industry, and insufficient mentoring and professional support. Within construction, women encounter additional barriers relating to recruitment, workplace culture, progression, pay and retention. Across each stage, participants identified weak connections between schools, universities, TVET providers, employers, professional bodies and government as a recurring constraint on women's progression.

Participants consistently identified women's underrepresentation as a systemic issue rather than the consequence of any single barrier. Strengthening participation will therefore require coordinated action that improves the connections between education, training, industry, research, investment and policy, supported by stronger evidence of where women leave the participation pipeline and which interventions are most effective. This report draws together findings from that work, identifying practical opportunities for collaborative action across the housing sector while providing the foundation for a Community of Practice that enables organisations to learn from one another and work together to strengthen women's participation across the housing ecosystem.

Building on these findings, the proposed Community of Practice provides a practical mechanism for taking this work forward. The recommendations are organised around three themes: Campaigns, Visibility and Representation; Education to Practice, Progression and Leadership; and Construction Training, Employment and Retention (summarised in Table 1). Together, they set out an initial programme of collaborative action that builds on the experience of organisations already leading work in this space, strengthens partnerships, shares learning and evidence, and identifies opportunities for organisations across Kenya's housing ecosystem to work together in addressing common challenges.

Table 1: Strategic Themes and Headline Recommendations

Theme	Why it Matters	Key Recommendations
Campaigns, Visibility and Representation	Women's contributions to the housing sector remain under-recognised, while limited visibility and persistent stereotypes continue to influence career aspirations and policy priorities.	Establish a Community of Practice to strengthen collaboration and existing initiatives; create directories of women professionals and women-led projects; engage girls earlier through schools; and embed women's participation as a recurring theme within housing, urban development and investment forums.
Education to Practice, Progression and Leadership	Although more women are entering built environment education, many continue to leave the participation pipeline before progressing into professional practice and leadership.	Expand mentoring and professional networks; strengthen university-employer partnerships; improve internships and graduate pathways; strengthen evidence on career progression; and support organisations to adopt more inclusive employment practices.
Construction Training, Employment and Retention	Women's participation within construction remains constrained by recruitment, workplace culture, progressionopportunities and limited evidence on what works.	Strengthen recruitment pathways; build the evidewnce base for women's participation in construction; promote inclusive site practices; support career progression; enable women to establish and grow construction businesses.



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This project was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) through the University of Warwick. It builds on earlier collaborative work between the University of Warwick and Reall to strengthen gender-responsive approaches to affordable housing delivery.

The findings and recommendations presented in this report are informed by the views and experiences shared by participants but remain the responsibility of the authors.



Image credits: Some of the Nairobi Workshop Participants (SHOUT Group)

1. Introduction



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Affordable housing has the potential to be truly transformative. Secure, affordable and adequate housing can improve health outcomes, increase economic resilience, support educational attainment, strengthen community cohesion and provide households with a platform from which to pursue wider social and economic opportunities.[1] For women in particular, access to safe and affordable housing can contribute to improved security, greater financial stability, increased autonomy and enhanced wellbeing.

However, the developmental benefits of housing extend beyond the households that ultimately occupy new homes. Housing delivery also creates employment, business opportunities and livelihoods throughout the housing value chain. Strengthening women's participation across these activities therefore offers both an equality objective and an opportunity to broaden the social and economic benefits of housing investment, including for lower-income households that may not yet be able to access formal housing themselves. It also has the potential to strengthen the quality, responsiveness and wider developmental impact of housing systems.

Women remain underrepresented in the design, construction, and delivery of housing, limiting the extent to which housing reflects their needs, preferences, and lived realities. At the same time, there is a clear disconnect between education, training, and practice. While women are increasingly represented in built environment education, far fewer transition into industry roles. On construction sites, women's participation remains limited and is often concentrated in unskilled roles, with few pathways for progression.

Across the globe, there is growing momentum to address gender within housing systems, often driven by investor and ESG requirements that increasingly track social and gender outcomes. While much of this attention has focused on improving women's access to housing and finance, there is growing recognition that housing design and delivery must also better respond to the needs and preferences of women. Comparatively less attention, however, has been given to strengthening women's participation within housing delivery systems.

This project builds on previous Innovate UK-funded work from the University of Warwick, in partnership with the affordable housing investor Reall, which led to the development of a Gender in Affordable Housing Toolkit to support practitioners to integrate gender considerations into policy, design, and delivery.[2]

Building on this foundation, funding from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) extended this work by bringing together academia and practitioners to identify practical approaches to increasing women's participation in affordable housing delivery and to establish a Community of Practice that strengthens collaboration across the housing sector.

[1] Habitat for Humanity International (2021) Housing and the Sustainable Development Goals: The Transformational Impact of Housing. Atlanta, GA: Habitat for Humanity International. Available at: https://www.habitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/Housing-and-Sustainable-Development-Goals.pdf (Accessed: 25 June 2026).

[2] Rothwell, N., Elias, J., Atkinson, B. and Robinson, H.J. (2024) Creating Accountability to Gender in Affordable Housing: A Toolkit for Practical Change. Coventry, UK: Reall Ltd and University of Warwick. Available at: https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/187544/13/WRAP-creating-accountability-gender-affordable-housing-toolkit-practical-change-2024.pdf (Accessed: 25 June 2026)

2. Approach

This project examines women's participation across the housing delivery system, from education and skills development through to employment, professional practice and leadership. It seeks to identify practical opportunities to strengthen participation at each stage of this pipeline.

While the primary focus is on women, the project adopts a broader understanding of gender, recognising that women's experiences are shaped by social norms, institutional practices and expectations that affect both women and men. Strengthening women's participation therefore requires engagement across the housing system, including by employers, educators, professional bodies, investors and policymakers, alongside women themselves.

2.1. Community of Practice

This project sought to establish a Community of Practice (CoP) bringing together key actors across the housing delivery system, including academia, developers, contractors, training providers, and investors. The ambition is to support knowledge exchange and enable practical linkages between higher education, training, research, and housing delivery. It will help identify practical ways to support women's transition into industry, while strengthening feedback loops between practice, teaching, and research.

Initially piloted in Kenya, with potential for expansion to other countries, the CoP will act as a convening and learning platform. Rather than delivering programmes directly, it will encourage organisations to share experience, reflect on practice and develop practical collaborations that strengthen women's participation across the housing delivery system.

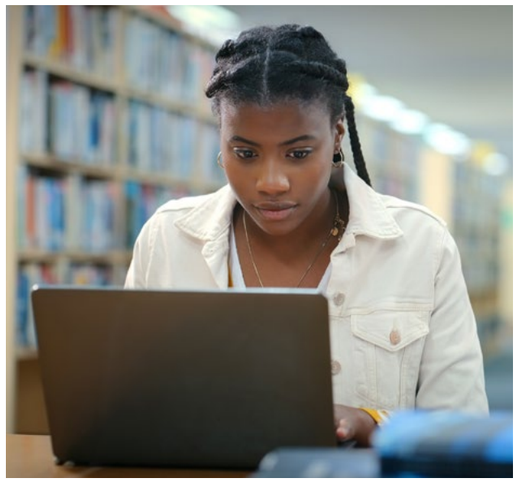


Image credits: iStock

The Community of Practice will focus on four interrelated areas of inquiry and action:

1. Examine education-to-practice transitions, including where and why women drop out between education and industry, and how recruitment, internships, and early career pathways operate in practice.

2. Explore skills development and training pathways, including the role of vocational and informal training models and how project-based training can support progression from unskilled to skilled roles within housing delivery.

3. Consider participation in construction and delivery, with a focus on the constraints affecting women's participation on site and the practical adjustments that can improve inclusion, safety, and retention.

4. Strengthen collaboration across the participation pipeline. This will involve identifying opportunities to connect universities with developers, and training providers with contractors, and exploring mechanisms such as site-based exposure, placements, informal mentorship, and collaboration between training programmes and live projects.

Through these activities, the Community of Practice will improve understanding of where and why women face barriers across the participation pipeline, strengthen collaboration between organisations, and support practical approaches that improve women's access to, retention in and progression within housing delivery roles. It will also generate practice-informed recommendations and increase the visibility of women's existing participation across the sector.



Image credits: Nairobi Workshop (SHOUT Group)

2.2. Workshop and Interviews

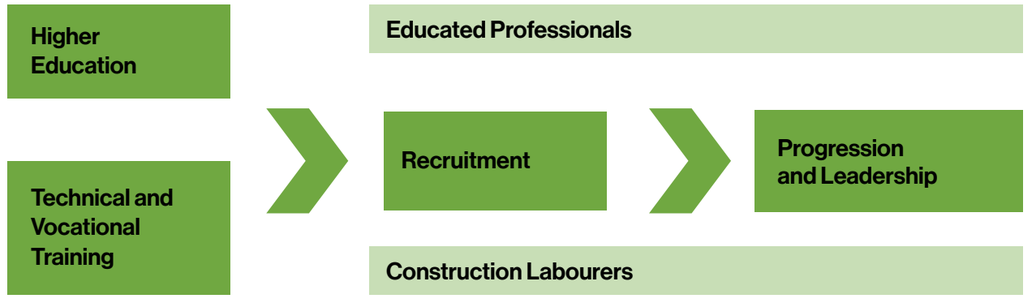
Within the pilot phase, an initial workshop was held in Nairobi to convene potential members, explore key challenges and opportunities, and develop practical ideas for how participating organisations can support each other to strengthen women's participation in affordable housing design and delivery.[3]

The Nairobi workshop brought together housing sector actors from academia, housing developers, investors, training providers and wider NGOs, associations and other actors (see Appendix 1). Participants explored where women are most likely to leave the participation pipeline and identified practical opportunities for organisations to strengthen women's progression from education into employment and leadership. Together, these perspectives helped identify the key barriers, opportunities and priorities shaping women's participation across the housing delivery system.

As illustrated in Figure 1, discussions focused on the transition points between education, recruitment, employment and leadership, recognising that women may exit the participation pipeline at multiple stages.

Alongside the workshop, a series of semi-structured interviews was undertaken with practitioners and sector experts (see Appendix 2). These interviews helped shape the initial focus of the Community of Practice, informed the design of the workshop, and began building an evidence base on the barriers and opportunities affecting women's participation across Kenya's housing sector. They also provided practical examples and organisational perspectives that complemented the workshop discussions.

Figure 1: Pathways for Women's Participation Across the Housing Sector



[3] The project has research ethical approval from the University of Warwick (Application Reference: HSSREC 318/24-25)

3. Findings

The findings in this section synthesise the themes that emerged from the workshop discussions and individual interviews. They are primarily grounded in the experiences and perspectives of participants, while also drawing on practical examples from a series of case studies reviewed during the project. These case studies, presented in Appendix 3, illustrate approaches that have been used in Kenya and internationally to strengthen women's participation across different stages of the housing delivery system and help contextualise the findings and recommendations that follow.

3.1. Why Women's Participation Matters

Women's participation in housing delivery can improve outcomes across the value chain. One developer observed that involving female professionals in the design process consistently led to better-designed and better-functioning spaces, particularly in relation to caregiving considerations such as the needs of children and elderly dependents, who are disproportionately cared for by women. Participants also highlighted the broader benefits of gender-responsive design, suggesting that greater participation by women in the design of housing and surrounding urban spaces, alongside greater attention to the needs of women and children, can generate wider improvements in safety, accessibility and access to services for all users.

The benefits of women's participation also extend beyond the delivery process itself. Women already play a significant role within housing markets as purchasers, landlords and financial decision-makers, yet these contributions often remain under-recognised. Participants observed that women increasingly own and manage rental property, while a substantial proportion of home purchases for owner occupation or letting are driven by women. Female buyers were anecdotally seen to take more time over financial decisions and, once committed, significantly less likely to default on payments. Developers and property managers reported a preference for letting properties to women rather than couples or men, citing higher standards of property maintenance.

Despite this economic influence, women buyers frequently prefer to remain anonymous in transactions, with male relatives or partners often serving as the formal face of the deal. This invisibility contributes to the persistent underestimation of women as market actors and compounds existing barriers to financing.

These findings reinforce the importance of viewing women not only as beneficiaries of housing, but as participants throughout the housing delivery system. Greater participation can improve the quality and responsiveness of housing, while also strengthening the commercial performance and long-term resilience of housing organisations. At the same time, recognising women's existing influence as purchasers and decision-makers challenges persistent assumptions about who shapes housing markets.

The experience of **Zima Homes** (see case study in Appendix 3) illustrates these principles in practice. Integrating women across design, community engagement and delivery has helped create housing that is more responsive to residents' needs, demonstrating how greater participation can strengthen both housing outcomes and wider social outcomes.



Image credits: iStock



Image credits: Mentors and Mentees (Women in Real Estate)

3.2. Early Exposure and Career Aspirations

Many of the barriers to women's participation emerge long before young people reach higher education or enter the labour market. Career aspirations and perceptions of who belongs within architecture, engineering and construction begin to develop from an early age through schools, families and wider socialisation. Participants suggested that boys are more often encouraged towards technical activities and girls towards nurturing roles from an early age, shaping career aspirations and contributing to gender disparities in technical professions.

This highlights the importance of engaging girls much earlier through age-appropriate exposure to built-environment careers, including school visits, engagement with practitioners and opportunities to observe construction and housing projects. Such activities were viewed as important mechanisms for challenging gender stereotypes, broadening aspirations and helping girls understand the range of professional and technical careers available within the housing sector.

Participants noted that women's underrepresentation is neither inevitable nor historically fixed. They reflected on the historical paradox that women were central to construction in many traditional African building practices, yet have become progressively excluded from design, construction and decision-making within the modern built environment. This illustrates how changing social and institutional norms have reshaped perceptions of who belongs within the sector.

Representation emerged as a critical lever for change: women and girls need to see women in positions of leadership and technical expertise in order to believe those pathways are available to them. This is demonstrated by initiatives such as **Women's Work: London** (see case study in Appendix 3), which uses public engagement and storytelling to make women's contributions to the built environment more visible and challenge assumptions about who belongs within the sector. Similarly, professional networks such as **Women in Real Estate** (see case study in Appendix 3) illustrate how mentoring, leadership development and professional networking can strengthen women's progression while increasing the visibility of women across the sector.

3.3. Higher Education and the Transition to Professional Practice

Significant progress has been made in women's participation in higher education over the past fifteen years, particularly within professions traditionally dominated by men. Several interviewees attributed this change to a combination of deliberate policy interventions, wider societal shifts in expectations regarding women's careers, and increasing visibility of women within the built environment. Construction management and related built environment disciplines now attract significantly more women than in previous generations, reflecting wider progress in women's participation across built environment education.

This trend is reflected in wider evidence from Kenya's built environment professions. Work from WIRE shows that over the past two decades, women's participation in built environment education has increased substantially. At the University of Nairobi, the proportion of women graduating in civil engineering rose from 9.3% in 1999 to 26.3% in 2019, while architecture increased from 12.0% to 31.8% over the same period. However, increased participation in higher education has not yet translated into equivalent participation within the housing and construction sectors. Women account for just 7.9% of registered professional engineers, 7.6% of professional architects and 10.2% of professional quantity surveyors nationally. Representation is even lower among consulting firms, where women own only 1.5% of engineering, 3.3% of architectural and 2.3% of quantity surveying practices.[4]

The learning environment within universities was identified as an important influence on women's experiences and aspirations. Female role models remain underrepresented within many built environment disciplines, with one participant from an architecture background observing that she had been taught almost exclusively by men and that practitioners invited to speak to students were similarly almost all male. Increasing the visibility of women from both academia and industry through teaching, guest lectures, mentoring and professional engagement could help strengthen students' sense of belonging and broaden perceptions of career possibilities.

The **Women Academics in Construction (WAiC)** network (see case study in Appendix 3) illustrates how strengthening women's progression within academia can have impacts beyond academic careers alone. By supporting women researchers, educators and academic leaders, the network helps build a more diverse teaching and research community, increases the visibility of female role models, and enables women to play a greater role in shaping the education of the next generation of built environment professionals.

Participants consistently highlighted retention and progression after graduation as the principal challenge. Many of the difficulties experienced during this transition were attributed to persistent assumptions that women are less likely to pursue long-term careers within the built environment professions, particularly due to anticipated career interruptions associated with pregnancy, childbirth and caregiving responsibilities, alongside wider cultural expectations regarding women's career aspirations and family responsibilities. Anecdotally, many women who completed architectural qualifications ultimately pursued careers in adjacent creative professions, including design, photography and fashion, rather than entering architectural practice.

Many students also have relatively limited exposure to professional practice before graduation. Partnerships between universities, employers and professional bodies were seen as an important means of improving students' understanding of career pathways and creating smoother transitions into employment. Professional bodies were also seen as important intermediaries, with potential to strengthen links between universities, employers and students while supporting mentoring, placements and early career development. Initiatives such as the **RIBA West Midlands Housing Competition** (see case study in Appendix 3) demonstrate how collaboration between universities and industry can expose students to real-world housing challenges before graduation, helping students build professional networks and gain practical experience before entering employment.

[4] Nyole, A. (2025) A Survey on Women Representation in the Built Environment. Nairobi: Institution of Engineers of Kenya. Available at: https://iekenya.org/sites/default/files/iek-documents/2025-02/A%20SURVEY%20ON%20WOMEN%20REPRESENTATION%20IN%20THE%20BUILT%20ENVIRONMENT%20ADELINE%20NYOLO_0.pdf (Accessed: 7 July 2026).

Internships emerged as a particularly important transition point between higher education and professional practice. Female students frequently undertake placements as the only woman within a project team and may experience sexual harassment or discrimination during these placements. This highlighted the importance of stronger partnerships between universities and employers, together with structured mentoring and safeguarding arrangements that support women during their transition into industry. Internships are often difficult to secure, despite employers simultaneously reporting difficulties filling internship positions. This apparent disconnect highlighted the need for closer coordination between universities, students and industry to ensure work placements become a more effective bridge into employment.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the principal challenge has shifted from increasing women's participation in higher education towards supporting successful transition into professional practice and long-term career progression. Many of the barriers affecting women's participation do not arise from a lack of interest or capability, but from weak connections between institutions. Universities, employers, professional bodies and developers frequently operate independently, resulting in fragmented pathways from education into professional practice. Strengthening these institutional relationships was therefore viewed as central to improving women's long-term participation in the housing sector.

Image credits: University Building (Technical University of Kenya)



3.4. Construction Training, Employment and Career Progression

Workshop discussions highlighted significant barriers affecting women's participation within technical and vocational training and the construction workforce. These barriers occur throughout the pathway into employment, from initial skills development and training through to recruitment, workplace culture, retention and career progression.

In Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions, women remain substantially underrepresented in the student population, particularly within electrical trades and plumbing. For women in the informal trades sector, immediate economic pressures frequently override the longer-term goal of completing skilled training. Odd jobs such as laundry and domestic work offer faster cash returns than TVET programmes that require sustained attendance over months or years. Participants also highlighted the importance of designing training programmes around the practical realities faced by many women. Childcare provision, lactation spaces and flexible arrangements were viewed not as additional benefits but as essential measures for enabling many women to complete technical training successfully.

A structural gap also exists in how young men and young women enter the trades sector informally. Young men in Kenya often begin building practical skills early by accompanying older artisans to workshops and construction sites before they reach formal training age. Young women, by contrast, are far more likely to be engaged in caregiving or domestic labour at the same stage of life, with the result that they arrive at formal training programmes with less exposure and contextual familiarity. This early deficit compounds over time and contributes to the perception that women are less suited to technical trades.

Participants also identified the limited number of female trainers within TVET institutions as a barrier. Increasing the visibility of women in training roles was seen as important both for strengthening mentorship and demonstrating that technical careers are achievable for women. More broadly, low enrolment in construction-related TVET programmes emerged as a general concern, particularly given the wider skills shortages facing the sector. Increasing participation among both young men and women, particularly in rural areas, was seen as an opportunity to strengthen local labour markets while supporting community economic development.

Buildher (see case study in Appendix 3) provides an example of how combining technical construction training with mentoring, site-readiness training, confidence building, enterprise development and employer engagement can help women move into skilled trades and establish long-term careers within the construction sector. Preparing women for the realities of working in male-dominated environments was viewed as an important complement to technical skills development. By addressing technical skills alongside mentoring, confidence-building and access to employment opportunities, the programme illustrates the value of integrated approaches to supporting women's entry into construction. Similarly, Ghana's Youth Inclusive Entrepreneurial Development Initiative for Employment (YIEDIE) (see case study in Appendix 3) demonstrates how structured vocational training, employer partnerships and clearly defined progression pathways can expand employment opportunities for women while strengthening the supply of skilled workers for the wider construction sector. Together, these initiatives illustrate how coordinated support extending beyond technical training alone can strengthen women's transition into construction employment.

Physical demands and labour intensity are commonly cited barriers to women working as construction artisans, although participants suggested that these barriers are frequently overstated. Recruiters often explicitly request male candidates, reinforcing assumptions about who is suited to construction work. Participants also highlighted procurement as an important mechanism for driving change. Developers and public programmes can embed gender inclusion requirements within tender documentation, contractor method statements and supply chain expectations, creating incentives for more inclusive recruitment and workplace practices throughout the construction value chain. Participants noted that parastatals provide a useful illustration of this approach in practice, as gender mainstreaming requirements have resulted in substantially more balanced recruitment.

Resistance from male workers was identified as a significant barrier to women's participation and retention within the construction workforce. Women entering construction sites are frequently required to prove their competence in ways that male colleagues are not, reflecting persistent assumptions that construction remains a predominantly male occupation. This can create friction within site teams, particularly where women are entering skilled roles that challenge established norms around gender and work.

Acceptance often improves over time as women demonstrate their capabilities. However, participants observed that employing one or two women within a predominantly male workforce often leaves them carrying the burden of representing all women on site. By contrast, achieving a critical mass of women within teams was seen as important in creating a more supportive working environment, reducing isolation and helping women's presence become viewed as normal rather than exceptional. Until this point is reached, the need to continually establish legitimacy creates an additional burden rarely experienced by men. These dynamics can discourage women from entering or remaining within construction trades, particularly where they are heavily outnumbered by male colleagues. These challenges are further compounded by career breaks associated with pregnancy, childbirth, and caregiving responsibilities. Women in the informal sector who take time away from work often find they must rebuild their skills base and professional networks from the beginning.



Image credits: Construction Trainees (Buildher)

Skilled women artisans also face significant wage discrimination on site. Unskilled male labourers who arrive without training are often paid at the same rate as skilled female artisans, with supervisors defaulting to the assumption that the woman represents a higher cost because of additional facilities requirements, rather than recognizing her as a higher-value worker. This conflation of gender with overhead rather than with skill perpetuates inequitable pay structures and discourages female artisans from seeking site-based employment.

Discussion also highlighted the need to better understand the costs associated with increasing women's participation in construction. One developer estimated that recruiting and mobilising a workforce comprising around 50% women required approximately 1.2 times the mobilisation costs of an equivalent male workforce, largely because of the additional community engagement needed to recruit women through trusted local institutions such as churches. However, participants consistently viewed these additional costs as an investment rather than an overhead, arguing that stronger evidence on both the costs and wider benefits of gender-inclusive approaches would help strengthen the business case for wider adoption.

These findings suggest that the barriers affecting women's participation in construction extend well beyond recruitment alone. They emerge throughout the pathway into employment, from skills development and vocational training through to recruitment practices and workplace culture. Strengthening women's participation therefore requires coordinated action across the construction employment pipeline, alongside stronger evidence demonstrating the commercial and social value of more inclusive approaches.

3.5. Key Findings and Implications

The discussions highlighted that improving women's participation in Kenya's housing sector requires action across the entire participation pipeline. While important progress has been made in increasing women's participation in higher education and professional training, significant barriers remain from early career aspirations and technical training through to recruitment, workplace retention, career progression and leadership. These barriers are interconnected, reinforcing one another and contributing to the gradual loss of women from the housing and construction workforce over time.

The findings also suggest that many of these challenges do not arise from a lack of interest, ability or ambition among women themselves. Instead, they reflect structural barriers, persistent gender norms and weak connections between institutions. Schools, universities, TVET providers, employers, professional bodies, investors and government all have important roles to play, yet too often operate independently. Existing gender policies and commitments are often implemented inconsistently in practice, reinforcing the importance of sustained collaboration and accountability.

Across both the professional and construction sectors, a lack of consistent data on women's participation limits organisations' ability to understand where and why women leave the participation pipeline, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and advocate for evidence-informed policy and organisational change.

Collectively, the findings suggest that improving women's participation is less about creating new standalone programmes than strengthening the connections between the institutions that already shape participation. While women's underrepresentation reflects a wide range of structural, cultural and institutional barriers, the workshop consistently highlighted weak transitions and disconnected relationships across the participation pipeline as a critical area for collective action. This highlights the need for a coordinated, system-wide approach that strengthens collaboration from early exposure and education through to employment, retention, progression and leadership. Building on these findings, the recommendations presented in the following section identify practical opportunities for organisations across the housing ecosystem to strengthen these connections in practice.



Image credits: Nairobi Workshop (SHOUT Group)

Image credits: iStock

4. Recommendations

Building on the findings presented in the previous section, workshop participants developed a series of practical recommendations to guide the work of the proposed Community of Practice and its participating organisations. The recommendations recognise that no single organisation can address the challenges identified in isolation. Instead, they identify opportunities for coordinated action across academia, industry, government, professional bodies and civil society to strengthen women's participation throughout the participation pipeline.

The recommendations are organised around three thematic areas that broadly reflect the participation pipeline identified through the workshop discussions: (i) Campaigns, Visibility and Representation; (ii) Education to Practice, Progression and Leadership; and (iii) Construction Training, Employment and Retention.

Within each theme, recommendations have been grouped according to indicative short, medium and longer-term priorities. These timeframes should not be interpreted as fixed implementation periods, but rather as reflecting the relative maturity and complexity of different actions.

- **Short-term recommendations** focus on activities that can be initiated relatively quickly using existing partnerships and resources.
- **Medium-term recommendations** typically require greater coordination, organisational change or the development of new tools and partnerships.
- **Longer-term recommendations** reflect more systemic ambitions that are likely to depend on sustained collaboration, evidence generation, policy engagement or wider institutional change.



Image credits: Female Construction Worker at Zima Homes (SHOUT Group)

Image credits: Female Construction Workers at Zima Homes (SHOUT Group)





Image credits: Female Construction Worker at Zima Homes (SHOUT Group)

4.1. Campaigns, Visibility and Representation

Objective	Desired outcome	Activities		
		Short term	**Medium term**	**Longer term**
1. Strengthen collaboration and existing initiatives through the Community of Practice	A connected housing ecosystem in which organisations collaborate, share learning and coordinate action to strengthen women's participation.	• Establish an informal Community of Practice connecting organisations across academia, training, housing delivery, investment and civil society. • Map existing initiatives, networks and programmes supporting women's participation across the housing sector. • Convene regular meetings to build relationships, share learning and identify opportunities for collaboration.	• Facilitate collaboration between members by showcasing existing initiatives, sharing effective practice, and identifying opportunities for adaptation and replication. • Strengthen partnerships between national and international organisations to facilitate knowledge exchange and replication of successful approaches.	• Support sustained partnerships that enable successful initiatives to be adapted and replicated across different organisations and contexts.
2. Increase visibility of women and women-led projects across the housing sector	Women's expertise, leadership and achievements are widely recognised, making role models, organisations and approaches more visible across the sector.	• Create a searchable directory of women working across the housing sector, including professionals, artisans, academics and others. • Catalogue women-led housing projects, businesses, programmes and initiatives.	• Use the directories to support recruitment, procurement, mentoring and networking. • Develop a simple set of indicators that organisations can use to track women's participation across the housing delivery chain.	• Establish the directories as recognised sector resources for collaboration, recruitment and accountability. • Showcase successful approaches and facilitate peer learning through case studies and exchanges.
3. Raise the profile of women's participation within strategic policy and investment forums	Women's participation is recognised as a strategic housing priority and routinely considered within policy, investment and industry decision-making.	• Map key national, regional and international forums where women's participation in housing can be promoted. • Coordinate participation by Community of Practice members in strategic events, conferences and policy discussions.	• Develop shared messages, evidence and case studies to strengthen advocacy across participating organisations. • Build relationships with policymakers, investors and industry bodies to increase recognition and prioritisation of women's participation in housing.	• Establish women's participation in housing as a recognised and recurring theme within major housing, urban development and investment forums, helping to shape future policy, practice and funding priorities.
4. Strengthen early exposure to built environment careers	Girls increasingly view housing and the built environment as accessible and attractive career pathways.	• Organise school visits to construction sites and built environment workplaces.	• Develop age-appropriate resources, storytelling and outreach activities that showcase women working across the housing sector.	• Develop school curriculum resources that embed female role models and examples from the built environment to normalise women's participation in the sector and inspire future generations.

4.2. Education to Practice, Progression and Leadership

Objective	Desired outcome	Activities		
		Short term	**Medium term**	**Longer term**
1. Expand mentoring and professional networks	Women are supported by strong professional networks, mentoring and industry connections that enable long-term career progression and leadership.	• Leverage the Community of Practice to connect and strengthen existing mentoring initiatives, creating additional opportunities across the housing sector.	• Facilitate practitioner talks, guest lectures, networking events and other opportunities for students and early-career women to engage with experienced professionals across the housing sector.	• Strengthen professional networks that support women's long-term participation, progression and leadership within the housing sector.
2. Improve evidence and accountability	Organisations use robust evidence to understand participation pathways, monitor progress and inform policy and practice.	• Improve data collection on professional registration, business ownership and leadership to identify where women leave the participation pipeline.	• Undertake longitudinal research tracking women from education into employment to better understand career pathways, retention and progression.	• Use the evidence generated to inform policy, practice and future interventions that strengthen women's participation across the housing sector.
3. Strengthen education-to-employment pathways	Women successfully transition from education into professional practice through stronger partnerships between education providers and employers.	• Develop internship and work placement opportunities with trusted industry partners that provide safe, supportive and inclusive learning environments for women.	• Develop formal partnerships and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between universities and employers to strengthen pathways into employment.	• Introduce structured graduate trainee programmes that begin before graduation to support smoother transitions into professional practice.
4. Strengthen organisational commitment to women's participation	Organisations embed inclusive employment practices that support women's recruitment, retention, progression and leadership.	• Review recruitment, safeguarding and organisational policies to strengthen inclusive employment practices and communicate the benefits of gender inclusion.	• Develop model policies and guidance that organisations can adapt to strengthen inclusive employment practices.	• Embed inclusive employment practices across participating organisations and the wider housing sector.

4.3. Construction Training, Employment and Retention

Objective	Desired outcome	Activities		
		Short term	**Medium term**	**Longer term**
1. Establish the evidence base	The housing sector has a robust evidence base demonstrating the costs, benefits and impact of increasing women's participation in construction.	• Quantify the direct costs associated with increasing women's participation within select construction projects to strengthen the business case for action. • Use evidence from existing projects to demonstrate the social and commercial value of greater women's participation.	• Collect consistent gender-disaggregated data on recruitment, retention, progression and pay to establish a baseline against which future progress can be measured	• Use the evidence generated to inform housing policy, funding priorities and industry practice relating to women's participation.
2. Strengthen recruitment and hiring practices	Construction employers consistently adopt inclusive recruitment practices that enable more women to enter technical occupations.	• Strengthen employer engagement with training providers to expand apprenticeships, shadowing and work placement opportunities within construction.	• Develop a template for inclusive recruitment and hiring practices that organisations can adapt to reduce gender and age bias throughout the recruitment process.	• Embed inclusive recruitment and hiring practices across the housing and construction sector to improve women's participation at all stages of the recruitment process.
3. Create inclusive workplaces that support retention, progression and entrepreneurship	Women are able to enter, remain and progress within construction careers, supported by inclusive workplaces, clear progression pathways and opportunities for entrepreneurship and business ownership.	• Share examples of effective practice in creating inclusive construction sites between developers to accelerate wider adoption. • Develop, refine and promote practical standards and site-readiness checklists that developers and contractors can use to support more inclusive working environments.	• Expand existing CPD and upskilling programmes to support career progression. • Increase the representation of women in supervisory roles, including forewomen and site leadership positions. • Identify opportunities to increase women's participation across different stages of the construction value chain.	• Develop business support and financing mechanisms that enable women to establish and grow construction businesses. • Develop a voluntary recognition framework for gender-inclusive construction sites and training providers, building on existing checklists and good practice to encourage continuous improvement and showcase leadership across the sector.

Appendix 1:
Workshop Participants

	Name	Organisation
1	Allan Mutuma	Brown Cap Developers
2	Jacky Wairimu	Buildher
3	Caroline Njeru	Gulf Cap Real Estate
4	May Waihenya	Gulf Cap Real Estate
5	Grace Ananda	Habitat for Humanity - Terwilliger Center
6	Kevin Sanya	Independent Consultant
7	Joy Wachira	Independent Consultant
8	Kavita Doshi	Innova Properties
9	Freda Rutere	International Housing Solutions Kenya
10	Priscilla Oluga	International Housing Solutions Kenya
11	Jane Katunge	Kiambu County Government Planning Office
12	Teresia Nduta	Kounkey Design Initiative
13	Emma Kimani	K-Rep Fedha Services (KFS)
14	Faith Wambugu	K-Rep Fedha Services (KFS)
15	Ivy Sialai	SHOUT Group
16	Sue Ellen Mumbi	SHOUT Group
17	Kezia Georgina	SHOUT Group
18	Etta Madete	SHOUT Group
19	Joan Nyagwalla	Technical University of Kenya
20	Asya Abdulatif Essajee	University of Nairobi
21	Margaret Macharia	University of Nairobi
22	Linda Nkatha	University of Nairobi
23	Ben Atkinson	University of Warwick
24	Juanita Elias	University of Warwick
25	Ciru Wanyoike	Veritas Edge Solutions
26	Mumbi Maina	Women in Real Estate
27	Lorna Kariuki	Women Shaping Cities
28	Mercy Osumo	Women Shaping Cities
29	Robyn T. Emerson	YellowRoseKenya

Appendix 2:
Interviewees

	Name	Organisation
1	Sana Malik	Birmingham City University
2	Ariana Karamallis	Build Change
3	Tatu Gatere	Buildher
4	Caroline Njeru	Gulf Cap Real Estate
5	May Waihenya	Gulf Cap Real Estate
6	Kavita Doshi	Innova Properties
7	Freda Rutere	International Housing Solutions Kenya
8	Beatrice Karanja	International Housing Solutions Kenya
9	Emma Kimani	K-Rep Fedha Services (KFS)
10	Graeme Reid	Tilisi Developments
11	Asya Abdulatif Essajee	University of Nairobi
12	Linda Nkatha	University of Nairobi
13	Ciru Wanyoike	Veritas Edge Solutions

Appendix 3:
Case Study Compendium

The following pages consist of case studies collated during the project, exploring different initiatives from across the world that focus on increasing women's participation in affordable housing design and delivery.

The case studies were selected because they address different points within the participation pipeline. While operating in different national contexts, together they illustrate practical approaches that informed the findings and recommendations presented in this report.

These case studies are summarised below:

Theme	Case study	Country	Description
Campaigns, Visibility and Representation	Women's Work: London (Part W)	UK	Campaign highlighting women's contributions to the built environment through research, exhibitions and public engagement.
	Women in Real Estate (WIRE)	Kenya	Professional network supporting women's career development, leadership and visibility across Kenya's real estate sector.
Education to Practice, Progression and Leadership	Women Academics in Construction (WAiC)	Nigeria	Network supporting women academics through mentoring, research collaboration and professional development.
	RIBA West Midlands Housing Competition, Birmingham City University	UK	Student design competition connecting architecture education with real-world housing challenges and industry partners.
Construction Training, Employment and Retention	Buildher	Kenya	Social enterprise providing women with construction skills training, employment pathways and entrepreneurship support.
	Youth Inclusive Entrepreneurial Development Initiative for Employment (YIEDIE)	Ghana	Programme delivering vocational construction training and employment opportunities for young people, including women.
	Zima Homes	Kenya	Affordable housing developer integrating women's participation across design, construction and community engagement.

Image credits: Female Construction Worker at Zima Homes (SHOUT Group)





Image credits: Networking and Career Development Session (Women in Real Estate)

Women's Work: London, Part W, UK

Increasing Visibility of Women's Contributions to the Built Environment

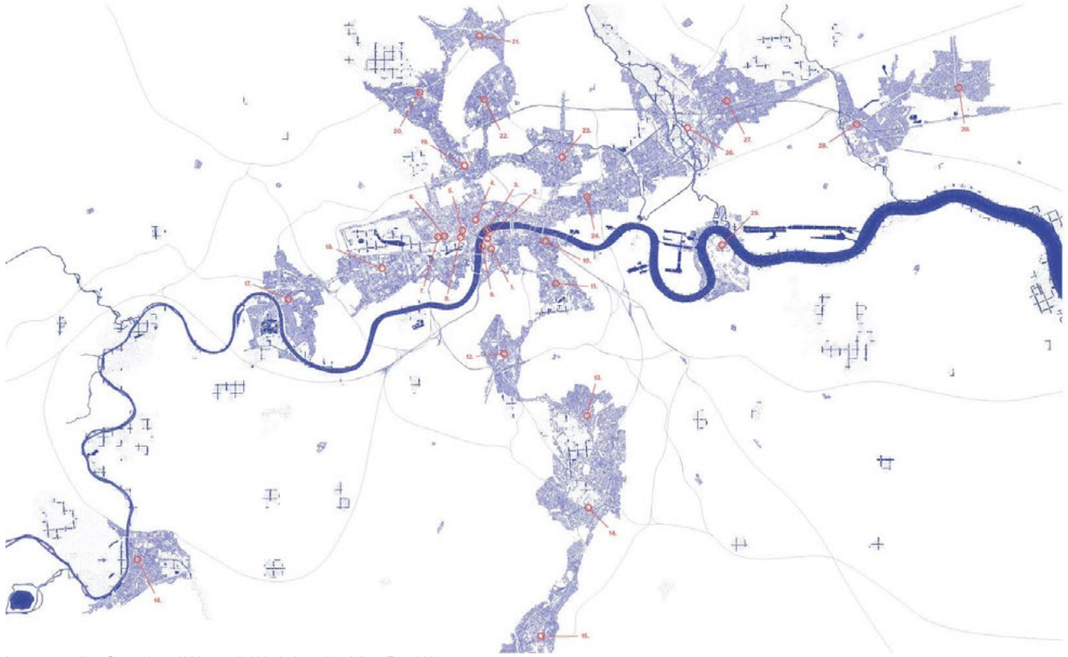


Image credits: Completed Women's Work: London Map, Part W

Context

Women's contributions to architecture and the built environment have often been underrepresented within public and professional narratives, archives, and educational materials. While women have played important roles in shaping cities and built environments, their work is frequently less visible within mainstream accounts of architecture and urban development. This lack of visibility affects not only historical recognition, but also contemporary perceptions of who participates within the built environment sector and who is represented within professional discourse.

Women's Work: London is a participatory mapping initiative focused on documenting projects by women across London. The initiative sought to create a publicly accessible resource documenting women's contributions to the built environment and highlighting work often overlooked within mainstream narratives about the city. It was developed by Part W, a UK-based collective and platform that works to increase the visibility, participation, and recognition of women within the built environment.

Through research, campaigns, public engagement, and collaborative initiatives, Part W seeks to challenge structural barriers that shape who participates in the sector and whose experiences are reflected in built environment decision-making.

Part W's wider work includes:

- Built Barriers: A campaign building a national visual archive of everyday design decisions that exclude, limit, and undermine.
- The Alternative List: A campaign recognising the achievements of women in architecture through existing award structures.
- Wiki-edit: Participatory wiki workshops that tackle the under-representation online of women designers, architects and place makers.

Challenge

Women's Work: London responds to several connected participation challenges within the built environment sector, including:

- Under-recognition of women's contributions to architecture and urban development.
- Limited visibility of women within built environment histories and public narratives.
- Exclusion of women's work from mainstream archives and educational materials.
- Broader questions around representation within professional discourse.

The initiative also reflects wider issues around visibility and participation within the built environment sector. Participation is influenced not only by access to education or employment, but also by whose work is recognised, whose stories are documented, and who sees themselves represented within the sector.

Where women's contributions remain invisible within public and professional narratives, this can reinforce exclusion and narrow perceptions of who shapes cities and built environments.

Approach

Women's Work: London used participatory and crowdsourced approaches to identify, document, and map projects associated with women across London. Members of the public were invited to nominate buildings, projects, and spaces connected to women practitioners, designers, and built environment professionals. This resulted in over 150 submissions from across Greater London, from which a panel of expert judges then selected 30 projects.

The initiative combined crowdsourced submissions, mapping, archival documentation, storytelling and public engagement activities, producing an online interactive map documenting projects associated with women across London. The project also incorporated wider public engagement activities linked to discussions around gender and the built environment. These included talks and events connected to visibility, participation, and representation within architecture and urban development. Walking and cycling tours are planned for the future, with the campaign seeking to promote the value of visiting, seeing and exploring projects in real life.

By using accessible and public-facing formats rather than relying solely on academic or professional outputs, the project operated simultaneously as a documentation exercise, a public engagement initiative, and a visibility campaign focused on women's participation within the built environment sector.

The initiative has also informed wider engagement activities beyond the original mapping exercise. For example, architecture practice Gort Scott developed a Women's History Month mapping project inspired by Women's Work: London, with staff nominating additional female-centred projects to build on the existing map and using it as a basis for internal discussions and research. The map has also informed walking tours and public exploration activities linked to women's contributions to the built environment, including initiatives connected to the London Festival of Architecture.

Part W now seeks to replicate the project across other UK cities and beyond.

Key reflections

Women's Work: London demonstrates how visibility and representation initiatives can contribute to broader participation discussions within the built environment sector. The initiative suggests that participation is shaped not only by workforce access, but also by public recognition, representation within professional narratives, and visibility of role models and contributions.

The project also demonstrates the value of participatory and crowdsourced approaches for documenting contributions that may otherwise remain absent from mainstream built environment histories and discourse.

The use of mapping, storytelling, and publicly accessible formats also demonstrates how discussions around gender and participation can engage audiences beyond traditional professional and academic circles. Women's Work: London highlights the importance of recognition, representation, and visibility within broader efforts to strengthen participation in the built environment sector.

Sources

Women's Work: London Crowdsourced List Part W

Women in Real Estate, Kenya

Strengthening Women's Leadership and Professional Participation in Kenya's Built Environment



Image credits: Women in Real Estate

Context

Women remain underrepresented across many aspects of Kenya's built environment sector, particularly in leadership, governance, business ownership and decision-making roles. Although increasing numbers of women are entering professional education, barriers to progression remain, while limited visibility of female leaders and a lack of sector-wide evidence make these challenges difficult to identify and address.

Women in Real Estate (WIRE) is a Kenyan professional network and membership organisation that works to strengthen women's participation across the real estate and wider built environment through research, evidence generation, advocacy, professional development, leadership development, mentoring, business development and networking. By combining evidence generation with practical support for women professionals, WIRE seeks to strengthen individual career opportunities while contributing to wider institutional change across the sector.

Established in 2016, WIRE has grown into one of Kenya's leading professional organisations for women in the built environment, bringing together professionals from architecture, engineering, quantity surveying, construction, project management, valuation and real estate. Its work reflects growing recognition that improving gender representation requires sustained support throughout women's careers, alongside wider changes within the institutions and professional systems that shape participation.

Challenge

WIRE responds to several interconnected barriers affecting women's participation within Kenya's built environment sector, including:

- Underrepresentation of women in leadership, governance, ownership and decision-making roles.
- Limited sector-wide data on women's participation, making barriers difficult to identify and monitor.
- Low visibility of women professionals, reducing the availability of role models and weakening pathways into professional practice and leadership.
- Limited access to professional networks, mentoring, business opportunities and leadership development that support career progression across the sector.

Approach

WIRE combines research, professional networking and advocacy to strengthen women's participation across Kenya's real estate and wider built environment sector. A central part of its work has been generating evidence on women's participation within the built environment through annual surveys and other research, helping to address long-standing gaps in sector-wide data.

Alongside this, WIRE has created opportunities for women to build professional networks, access leadership development opportunities and increase their visibility across the sector, while working with employers, professional bodies and other partners to promote greater gender inclusion.

WIRE's work is organised around five strategic pillars: business development, leadership, industry research, career outreach and mentorship. Through these, the organisation delivers networking events, leadership training, mentoring programmes, professional workshops, research and policy engagement, while supporting women at different stages of their careers, from students and graduates through to senior professionals and business leaders.

Research plays a central role across WIRE's work. Through its annual Women in the Built Environment surveys and other studies, the organisation identifies structural barriers, monitors change over time and generates evidence that informs policy, industry practice and institutional reform. This evidence underpins WIRE's advocacy and helps shape many of its programmes and partnerships.

Alongside its research and professional development activities, WIRE plays an important convening role, bringing together academia, professional bodies, employers, government and development partners to facilitate dialogue, strengthen collaboration and promote collective action around women's participation in the built environment.

These activities have strengthened the evidence base on women's participation within Kenya's built environment, while also creating opportunities for professional networking, leadership development and wider discussion around gender inclusion. Together, they demonstrate the value of combining evidence generation with practical support for women professionals.

Key reflections

Although WIRE operates across the wider built environment, many of the barriers and solutions identified are directly relevant to housing. Improving women's participation within the professions responsible for planning, financing, designing, constructing and managing housing can help ensure that housing systems better reflect the diverse needs and experiences of the communities they serve.

WIRE demonstrates that women's participation should be understood as a career pipeline rather than a single intervention point. Barriers emerge before women enter professional education and continue through recruitment, workplace culture, career progression, leadership and decision-making. Addressing these challenges therefore requires coordinated interventions across multiple stages of women's careers rather than isolated initiatives.

The initiative also demonstrates the importance of evidence and visibility. Collecting consistent data on women's participation provides a stronger basis for understanding barriers, measuring progress and encouraging organisational accountability, while increasing the visibility of women professionals helps challenge stereotypes, inspire future generations and broaden perceptions of who belongs within the built environment sector.

WIRE illustrates the important role that professional membership and intermediary organisations can play in wider sector change. Its work demonstrates how research, networking, mentoring, leadership development and advocacy can each make valuable contributions towards strengthening women's participation, while also highlighting the importance of complementary action across the wider built environment ecosystem.

WIRE illustrates the value of professional membership organisations as important contributors to wider sector change. Its evidence, professional networks and leadership programmes provide important foundations that can be amplified through collaboration with universities, employers, developers, government and other sector partners.

Sources

Women in Real Estate (WIRE), Kenya

Women in the Built Environment Survey (2021), as presented in Nyole (2025)

Nairobi Workshop

Women Academics in Construction, Nigeria

Building a Global Academic Community to Transform Gender Diversity in Construction



Image credits: iStock

Context

The construction industry is one of the most persistently male-dominated economic sectors in the world. In sub-Saharan Africa, women's underrepresentation in construction is compounded by structural gender inequalities in higher education access, professional credentialing and acceptance in workplace culture.

Nigeria's construction sector, like those of many Global South countries, faces particular challenges. While universities are producing growing numbers of women graduates in built environment disciplines (e.g. quantity surveying, building technology, civil engineering and architecture) these women encounter systematic barriers when they seek to establish academic careers, win professional recognition or advance to leadership positions.

WAiC is a network founded by Dr Patience Tunji-Olayeni, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Building Technology at Covenant University, Nigeria. WAiC's mission is to create a global community of women academics and postgraduate students in the built environment who are supported, connected and equipped to drive positive change in the construction industry - both within academia and through their research impact on the wider sector.

Challenge

WAiC responds to several intersecting challenges facing women in construction academia and the built environment more broadly:

- Women academics and postgraduate students in construction-related disciplines often have limited access to mentoring, publication support, professional networks and career development opportunities, particularly in Global South contexts.
- Research on gender issues in construction is underfunded and undervalued in comparison to technical research, limiting the evidence base available to support gender mainstreaming in construction policy and practice.
- The construction industry itself remains strongly gendered in its culture, norms and hiring practices, meaning that university-produced graduates encounter a sector that does not yet have adequate social infrastructure to retain and advance women.
- Existing women-in-engineering and women-in-construction organisations have historically been concentrated in the Global North, leaving women academics in Africa, South Asia and Latin America without comparable institutional support.
- African women academics remain underrepresented in international construction research debates, meaning that their perspectives, contexts and priorities are often overlooked within global knowledge production.

Approach

WAiC operates as an international academic network built around five core values: Diligence, Excellence, Support, Inclusivity, and Impact. Its activities span research, mentoring, professional development, and advocacy:

- Network-building: WAiC connects women academics and postgraduate students in construction and built environment disciplines globally, creating a community of support and shared professional development across institutional and national boundaries.
- Research promotion: The network actively supports its members in producing and disseminating research on gender issues in construction, construction education, construction management and sustainable construction. Members publish in international journals and contribute to globally edited volumes, including the 2025 book Women in Construction: Towards a More Equal, Diverse, and Inclusive Built Environment Sector.
- Mentoring: Senior members of the network mentor early-career academics and postgraduate students, including cross-institutional and cross-national mentoring relationships.
- Capacity building in professional bodies: WAiC's work strengthens gender diversity not only in universities but in the professional engineering bodies that shape industry standards and credentialing. They build upon lessons from WomEng's Africa Catalyst work with engineering institutions in sub-Saharan Africa and West Africa.

WAiC's approach is notable for its explicit integration of gender, sustainability and industry transformation as interconnected goals for women. The network does not treat women's inclusion as a standalone diversity objective but as integral to producing more equitable, more innovative and more sustainable construction sectors both in Africa and globally.

Key reflections

WAiC offers a distinctive model for university-to-industry connection. Rather than working primarily through employer engagement or industry pipeline programmes, it works through the production and circulation of research and through strengthening the capacity of professional bodies to advance gender diversity through its wider net of influence. This is a slower yet durable pathway to systemic change - one that shapes the standards, norms and evidence base of the construction sector.

WAiC highlights the value of ensuring that women academics from Africa and other underrepresented regions are visible within international debates on construction and the built environment.

By creating a global network rooted in a Nigerian institution, it helps bring a wider range of experiences, perspectives and research priorities into conversations about gender and construction.

The network's focus on postgraduate students and established academics is important. By investing in the next generation of women construction researchers in Nigeria, Botswana, Namibia and other Global South contexts, WAiC works to ensure that gender mainstreaming in construction continues to grow and that it reflects the full diversity of global built environment contexts.

Sources

WAiC – Women Academics in Construction

RIBA West Midlands Housing Competition, Birmingham City University, UK

Exploring Community-Centred Housing Design Through Student and Practitioner Collaboration



Image credits: RIBA West Midlands Housing Competition, Birmingham City University

Context

As part of the 2026 Birmingham City University (BCU) Innovation Fest, RIBA West Midlands, BCU, and the Church Development Agency (CDA) collaborated to develop a housing competition bringing together architecture students, practitioners, and housing stakeholders to explore low-cost housing and community design in Birmingham. CDA, which is wholly owned by the Church of England, exists to support the repurposing of legacy property to provide homes, strengthen communities, and model environmentally and socially sustainable practices.

Church Commissioners have stated that their strategic development land portfolio is expected to deliver 32,000 homes over the next 20 years, including at least 9,000 affordable homes. CDA is exploring redevelopment of a Grade II listed church and surrounding grounds in Saltley, Birmingham, and this site, centred around St Saviour's Church, formed the basis of the competition brief. The initiative reflected growing interest within the built environment sector in creating stronger links between architectural education, professional practice, and socially driven urban regeneration. It also highlighted how faith-owned land and community institutions may contribute to wider discussions around housing delivery, neighbourhood regeneration, and community infrastructure.



Image credits: RIBA West Midlands Housing Competition, Birmingham City University

Challenge

The initiative responded to several connected challenges within housing and built environment practice, including:

- Limited opportunities for students to engage with live housing and regeneration sites.
- The need for stronger links between architectural education and professional practice.
- Questions around how housing design can respond to existing community contexts and heritage constraints.
- The reuse and redevelopment of church-owned and community-associated urban sites.
- Wider interest in exposing future built environment professionals to real-world housing and development challenges.

The competition also reflected broader discussions around the role of faith-based organisations and community institutions within housing and neighbourhood development. Across many urban areas, churches and other community organisations hold land assets that may offer opportunities for affordable housing, social infrastructure, and community-led regeneration.

Although the initiative was not specifically focused on gender, it also demonstrates how design competitions and collaborative learning initiatives could potentially be adapted to engage more directly with questions around participation, representation, and inclusion within housing and built environment practice.

Approach

The competition invited participants to develop housing and community design proposals for the Saltley church site while retaining the existing Grade II listed church building. The brief drew on CDA's 5S Design Guide for Affordable Church Housing, encouraging participants to consider social, spatial, and community dimensions of housing design alongside physical development.

The competition was open to both architectural practices and architecture students from Birmingham City University and Coventry University. Participants developed proposals responding to the same live site and brief, with submissions judged by a panel organised through the partnership between BCU, RIBA West Midlands, and CDA. Winners and runners-up were announced across both student and practitioner categories.

A notable aspect of the initiative was the opportunity it created for students and practitioners to engage with the same design challenge simultaneously. This allowed students to compare how professional practices approached the same constraints, opportunities, and design considerations, while also providing opportunities for direct discussion and exchange between those in education and those already working within practice.

By positioning the competition within a live urban context and linking academic work to practitioner and community perspectives, the initiative created opportunities for participants to engage with questions extending beyond technical design alone. These included housing affordability, neighbourhood integration, heritage constraints, community identity and social infrastructure.

Key reflections

The initiative highlights several themes relevant to participation and professional development within the built environment sector. First, the competition demonstrates the value of linking architectural education with live community and housing challenges. Exposure to real sites, local contexts, and practitioner perspectives may help strengthen understanding of how housing design interacts with wider social, institutional, and community systems.

Second, the initiative highlights the potential role of collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches within housing education and practice. Bringing together academic institutions, professional bodies, practitioners, and community organisations created opportunities for dialogue across different forms of expertise and experience.

Finally, while the initiative was not specifically designed around gender participation, the model itself could potentially be adapted relatively easily to incorporate gender-sensitive themes and objectives. For example, future competitions could integrate questions around inclusive design, women's participation in housing delivery, representation within professional practice, or community safety and accessibility within housing environments.

The initiative therefore provides an example of how student and practitioner collaborations around live housing challenges may support broader discussions around participation, inclusion, and socially responsive housing practice within the built environment sector.

Sources

RIBA West Midlands LinkedIn Post

Church Development Agency

Coming Home, Church of England

Diocese of Leeds, Church of England

Buildher, Kenya

Strengthening Women's Participation in Construction through Workforce Systems



Image credits: Construction Trainees (Buildher)

Context

Construction remains one of the most male-dominated sectors within Kenya's economy, with women accounting for fewer than 3% of construction artisans. At the same time, employers report difficulties recruiting reliable, site-ready workers, while many women remain excluded from stable employment due to limited access to technical training, practical work experience and industry networks. Buildher was established to address these challenges by creating structured pathways that enable women to enter, remain and progress within construction careers.

Founded in 2018, Buildher works with low-income and under-employed women, providing accredited technical training, workplace readiness, real work experience and direct links to employment. Its approach recognises that increasing women's participation requires more than skills training alone. Instead, it seeks to strengthen the wider workforce system that connects recruitment, training, employment and long-term career progression.

Challenge

Buildher responds to several interconnected barriers affecting women's participation within Kenya's construction sector, including:

- Employer difficulties recruiting reliable, site-ready workers alongside limited participation of women within the construction workforce.
- Weak alignment between technical training and the practical skills required by employers.
- Limited access to structured work placements and employment pathways following training.
- Gender bias, social norms and workplace practices that restrict women's recruitment, retention and progression.

Approach

Buildher has developed an end-to-end workforce development model centred on its 5R Workforce System, which supports women from initial recruitment through to long-term employment and entrepreneurship.

The model comprises:

- Recruit: Identify and recruit high-potential women through targeted outreach and holistic support.
- Ready: Deliver accredited technical training, workplace readiness and industry-standard skills.
- Real Work: Provide structured site placements, internships and practical experience on live construction projects.
- Returns: Support transitions into employment, subcontracting and enterprise, enabling sustainable income generation.
- Refine: Continuously improve the model through labour market analysis, employer feedback and industry consultation to ensure training remains aligned with workforce demand.

Alongside technical competence, the programme places strong emphasis on workplace professionalism, safety, reliability and industry standards, helping to improve employer confidence in graduates.

Together, these components create a structured pathway from recruitment into sustained employment, while reducing recruitment risks for employers and strengthening links between workforce supply and industry demand.

Buildher provides women with practical work experience on live construction projects, opportunities for subcontracting and entrepreneurship, and ongoing support following graduation. By integrating workforce development with employer engagement and labour market feedback, the organisation seeks to reduce recruitment risks for employers while improving women's long-term participation within the construction sector.

To date, Buildher has trained more than 1,000 women across five construction finishing trades, with 89% progressing into employment or income-generating opportunities and high national certification pass rates. Over time, Buildher has expanded its approach beyond technical training to include green construction skills, enterprise development and wider workforce systems change, demonstrating how workforce development can contribute to broader transformation within Kenya's construction sector.

Key reflections

Buildher demonstrates that improving women's participation in construction requires strengthening the entire workforce system rather than focusing solely on technical training. Recruitment, accredited skills development, workplace readiness, structured work experience, employer engagement and long-term career support all contribute to successful transitions into employment.

The initiative also highlights the importance of strong connections between training providers and employers. By integrating live project experience, contractor partnerships and continuous labour market feedback into programme design, Buildher helps ensure that training responds to industry demand while reducing recruitment risks for employers.

Finally, Buildher illustrates that increasing women's participation in construction requires addressing both supply and demand. Supporting women to develop technical skills is only part of the solution; equal attention must be given to creating inclusive recruitment pathways, improving workplace practices and expanding opportunities for progression into supervisory roles, subcontracting, entrepreneurship and business ownership across different stages of the construction value chain. Its experience demonstrates how workforce development can contribute not only to greater gender inclusion, but also to addressing wider skills shortages and improving construction sector performance.

More broadly, Buildher demonstrates the value of viewing women's participation as part of a wider workforce system. Strengthening the links between recruitment, training, employment, enterprise and industry engagement creates more sustainable pathways into construction careers than focusing on any single stage in isolation.

Sources

Buildher Nairobi Workshop

YIEDIE, Ghana

Strengthening Youth Participation Through Skills Development and Employment Pathways



Image credits: iStock

Context

YIEDIE was a five-year programme (2015–2020) implemented by Global Communities with support from the Mastercard Foundation. Operating across five major cities in Ghana, the initiative sought to address high levels of youth unemployment while responding to skills shortages within the construction sector.

Construction was identified as a sector with significant potential to generate employment, yet participation remained constrained by weak links between training providers and employers, limited access to finance, and barriers preventing young people from transitioning into sustainable livelihoods.

Women faced additional challenges, including gender norms surrounding construction work, limited visibility of female role models, and lower participation in technical and trade-based occupations. While YIEDIE was not exclusively focused on women, increasing participation among women and other disadvantaged groups formed an important part of the programme's wider objectives.

YOUTH INCLUSIVE ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE FOR EMPLOYMENT

Challenge

Youth unemployment and underemployment remain high despite growing demand for skilled labour within Ghana's construction sector. Many young people struggle to transition from training into sustainable employment because of weak links between training providers and employers, limited access to finance, and a lack of structured pathways into apprenticeships, employment and enterprise development.

These challenges are particularly acute for women and other disadvantaged groups. Women face additional barriers arising from gender norms surrounding construction work, limited visibility of female role models, and lower participation in technical and trade-based occupations. Even where women acquire relevant skills, progression into employment, entrepreneurship and longer-term careers is often more difficult than for men.

The programme recognised that expanding technical training alone is insufficient. Strengthening employment pathways requires action across the wider construction labour market and the institutions that shape transitions from training into work.

Approach

YIEDIE adopted a market-systems approach designed to strengthen the wider ecosystem supporting employment within the construction sector. The programme combined technical skills development and apprenticeships with mentoring, entrepreneurship support, access to financial services, job placement activities, and employer engagement. Rather than focusing solely on individual participants, YIEDIE also worked with training institutions, employers, financial service providers, industry associations, and government stakeholders.

A key feature of the programme was its emphasis on connecting different stages of the employment pathway. Training was linked to labour market opportunities through employer partnerships, while entrepreneurship support and financial inclusion initiatives sought to help participants establish and grow businesses within the sector.

The programme also engaged in policy dialogue and advocacy, recognising that institutional and regulatory barriers influence employment opportunities alongside individual skills and capabilities.

Women were actively targeted through recruitment and participation strategies, reflecting recognition that women often face additional barriers to entering and remaining within construction careers.

Key reflections

YIEDIE demonstrates the value of understanding participation as a systems challenge rather than solely a skills challenge. While technical training formed an important component of the programme, its approach recognised that skills alone are often insufficient to support sustained participation within construction and housing delivery systems.

The initiative highlights the importance of linking training to wider support mechanisms, including mentoring, employer engagement, access to finance, and entrepreneurship opportunities. These complementary interventions can help address barriers that arise after training has been completed and may be particularly important for women entering male-dominated sectors.

The programme also illustrates the importance of creating pathways rather than isolated interventions. By working across multiple stages of the employment journey and engaging a broad range of stakeholders, YIEDIE sought to strengthen transitions from training into employment and enterprise development.

Finally, the initiative suggests that efforts to increase women's participation may benefit from addressing both individual and systemic barriers simultaneously. Building skills remains important, but sustainable change may also require action from employers, training providers, financial institutions, professional bodies, and policymakers.

Sources

Global Communities, Barriers and Solutions to Youth Employment in the Ghanaian Construction Sector

Global Communities, Can Policy Engagement Create Youth Employment Opportunities? Lessons Learned from the YIEDIE Project

ODI: Ghana's Construction Sector and Youth Employment

Zima Homes, Kenya

Embedding Women's Participation Across the Housing Delivery Process



Image credits: Zima Homes

Context

As interest in gender-responsive housing has grown, much of the discussion has focused on improving women's access to housing and finance. Comparatively less attention has been given to how women participate within the organisations and processes responsible for planning, designing, financing and constructing housing. Yet the composition of housing delivery teams influences not only employment outcomes, but also the quality, inclusiveness and long-term sustainability of housing itself.

Zima Homes is a Kenyan affordable housing developer that has sought to integrate women's participation throughout the housing delivery process. Working alongside partners including Buildher, the company has combined affordable housing delivery with workforce development, low-carbon construction and community engagement, demonstrating how gender considerations can be integrated throughout project planning, design, construction and delivery rather than treated as a standalone objective.

Challenge

Zima Homes responds to several interconnected challenges affecting women's participation within housing delivery, including:

- Low representation of women across leadership, technical and construction roles.
- Construction site environments that often fail to meet the practical needs of women workers.
- Weak links between workforce development programmes and affordable housing delivery.
- Limited integration of gender considerations within housing design, planning and community engagement.
- The additional investment required to create more inclusive construction sites and recruitment practices.

Approach

Zima Homes has sought to integrate women's participation throughout the housing delivery process, from leadership and design through to construction and community engagement. Workforce participation is monitored across different job groups, with representation tracked within leadership and management, design and technical roles, skilled construction and general labour. The company has also introduced transparent recruitment, promotion and salary structures, supported by harassment protection, anonymous feedback mechanisms, staff training and non-discriminatory employment practices.

Women's participation is also embedded within the design process. Women are represented within design teams, while stakeholder interviews and community engagement workshops are used to understand priorities relating to neighbourhood planning, safety, access to schools, transport, markets and adaptable housing layouts.
On site, Zima Homes has introduced practical measures to support women's participation, including appropriate sanitation facilities, personal protective equipment, safe site access and working arrangements designed to improve safety, security and comfort.

Recognising that increasing women's participation also requires stronger workforce pathways, Zima Homes has prioritised the recruitment and training of women entering construction, including through work with Buildher.

These approaches have contributed to high levels of women's participation across the workforce, with women representing approximately 58% of the overall workforce, including around 90% of leadership and management positions, 65% of design and technical roles, and 30% of skilled construction roles and 45% of general/unskilled labour. Women accounted for approximately 74% of home purchasers and 66% of first-time homeowners.



Image credits: Zima Homes

Key reflections

Zima Homes demonstrates that women's participation is most effective when it is considered from the earliest stages of project development rather than added during construction. Integrating gender considerations throughout planning, design, procurement, workforce development and community engagement helped shape both women's participation and housing outcomes.

The project illustrates the important role that housing developers can play as catalysts for wider sector change. Many of the measures introduced, including inclusive recruitment practices, workplace adaptations and partnerships with organisations such as Buildher, required deliberate organisational commitment rather than relying solely on external policy requirements. Setting explicit participation targets and monitoring representation across leadership, design, construction and ownership also helped identify where progress had been made, where gaps remained and where further action was needed.

The project also demonstrates that increasing women's participation at scale is unlikely to depend on a single recruitment pathway. While partnerships with specialist organisations such as Buildher provide an important pipeline of trained, work-ready women, implementation highlighted the need to complement these with locally embedded recruitment approaches. In this case, contractors worked through churches and community organisations to identify additional women workers, illustrating the importance of combining formal workforce development programmes with community-based recruitment to expand women's participation at scale.

Importantly, the case study highlights that inclusive delivery requires investment. Appropriate site facilities, well-fitting personal protective equipment, community engagement and workforce partnerships all carry additional costs. However, these should be viewed as investments in workforce quality and long-term sector capacity. The experience also suggests that these costs can be reduced over time as inclusive practices become standardised and supply chains, recruitment pathways and workforce capacity mature.

The case study also demonstrates that progress is unlikely to be uniform across the participation pipeline. While women's representation was particularly strong within leadership, design and ownership, participation within skilled construction remained lower, highlighting the need for sustained investment in training and progression pathways. Nevertheless, the project demonstrates that gender inclusion can be successfully integrated alongside commercial performance and environmental sustainability, illustrating how affordable housing developments can generate wider social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Sources

Zima Homes Nairobi Workshop

