

PRACTICE NOTE

The Strategic Use of Data for Institutional Change

Lessons from the Women in Leadership Community of Practice

LEARNING CIRCLE

MAY 2026



About This Note

The session brought together partners working to advance gender equity in law and economics across India, Kenya, Nigeria, LatAm and South Africa.

The conversation was organised around five (5) strategic questions that reflect how partners are using data to drive institutional change: shifting mindsets, creating accountability, navigating the politics of data, building constituencies for action, and sustaining an evidence base over time.

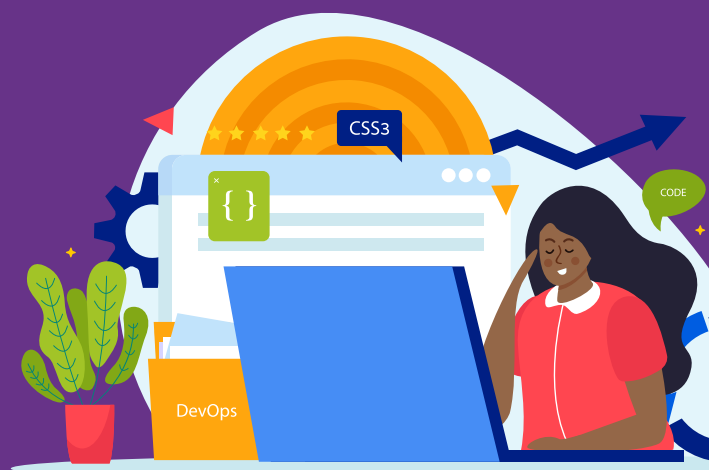
This note distils the key lessons from that dialogue. It is written as a working document.

Context: Why Data Matters for Institutional Change

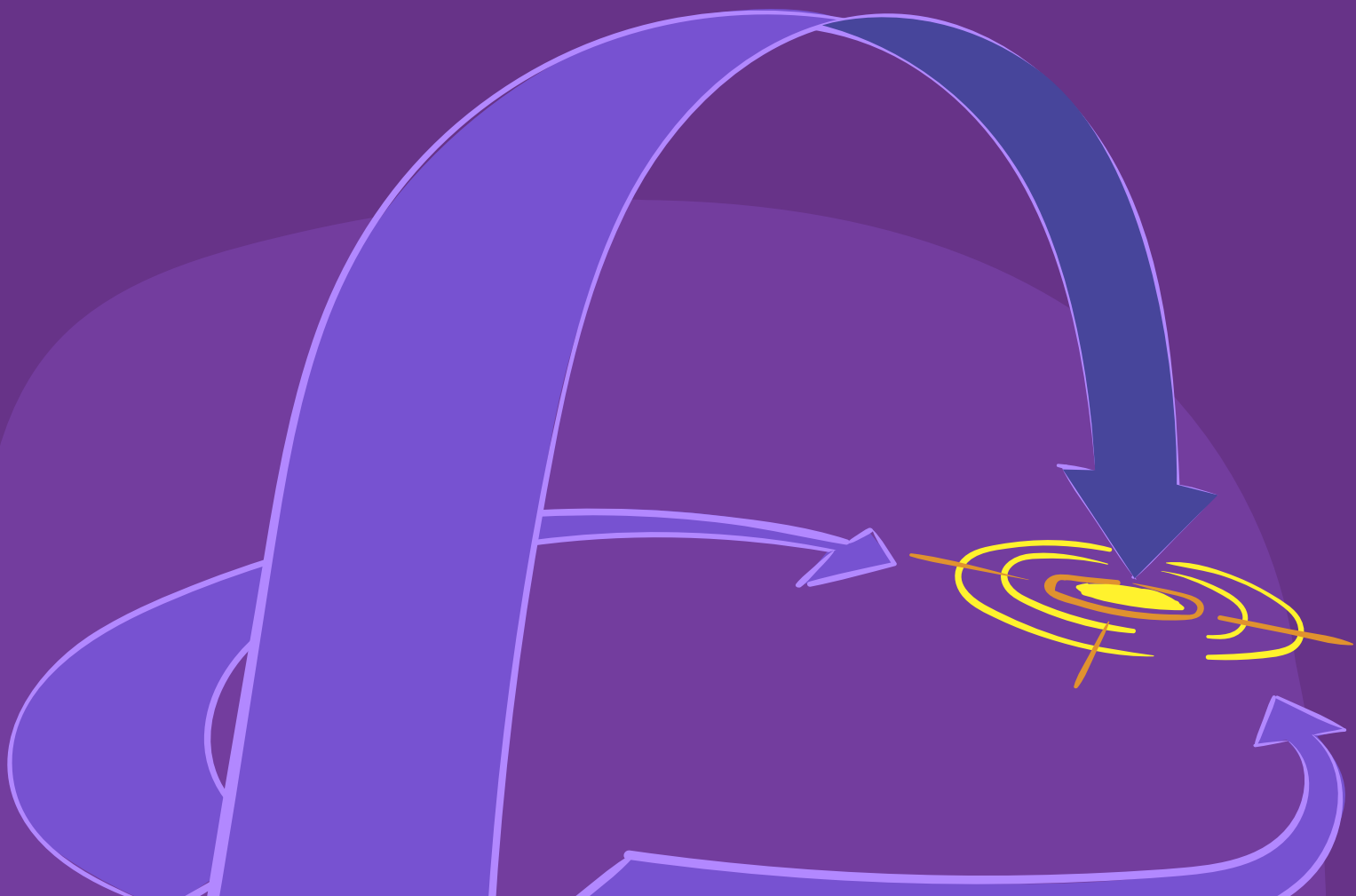
Partners in this CoP are working in some of the most traditional and male-dominated institutions in their contexts such as Universities, Courts, Law Firms, Regulatory Bodies, and Banks. Changing these institutions requires more than goodwill: it requires evidence that names the problem clearly, builds a shared understanding of its costs, and creates the conditions for sustained action.

Yet data alone is rarely sufficient. For example, telling an institution that only 2% of its senior leadership are women may be acknowledged and still result in no action. The question for discussion centered on what makes the difference between data that is heard and data that is acted upon.

Across five interconnected themes, this note shares what Partners are learning in this respect.



Using Data to Shift from Awareness to Action



The first challenge Partners face is getting decision-makers to move from awareness to action. Data on women's underrepresentation, however compelling, does not automatically shift how power-holders think or behave. Partners have identified several conditions that help data land differently.

Data needs a trusted conduit

Partners from the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) have found that having an insider, someone already embedded in and respected by the institution, deliver the data makes a significant difference. Women judges who are peers and colleagues of decision-makers have been able to get into rooms that the organisation itself could never access. Ask allies within the institution: “who would be open to hearing this and from who?” This has helped identify the right messengers, rather than assuming that the external partner is always best-placed to present the evidence.

Make the data operationalisable

The Migration and Asylum Project (MAP) in India found that institutions respond more readily when data is paired with feasible, practical recommendations.

The question decision-makers ask is not just “is this a problem?” but “what would it cost us in time, resources, and effort to act?” Helping them answer this question by presenting data alongside concrete, pilotable interventions makes it easier to act rather than simply acknowledge. This matters because institutional inertia is often less about unwillingness and more about perceived cost and complexity. Partners can present data alongside small-scale, low-risk pilots. When decision-makers hear: “here is a problem, and here is one manageable step we could take,” their calculus changes. The evidence is no longer just a diagnosis; it becomes a roadmap. This approach also reduces the risk of decision-makers using the absence of a clear plan as a reason to delay action.

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Align data with institutional priorities

Presenting women's leadership as a standalone goal can easily be deprioritised when it competes with what institutions see as their core mandate.

Partners have found it more effective to show how increasing women's representation directly serves institutional goals. In one legal aid context, the argument was reframed: if women are the primary beneficiaries of legal aid services, then placing more women in the system is the route to achieving the institution's own targets on service penetration. The data does not change; but how it is packaged matters enormously. The logic here is straightforward: institutions are far more likely to act when they can see a direct connection between the evidence being presented and their own stated goals or performance indicators. Reframing is not spin. It is a way of ensuring that gender equity arguments are heard in the terms that institutions already use to evaluate themselves.

Co-produce data with decision-makers

The African Women Studies Centre (AWSC) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya have enabled the shift from awareness to action by involving policy-makers, including university management, directly in data collection. From their experience, when senior leaders serve as key informants and participate in focus group discussions, they begin to own the evidence. In this University of Nairobi example, those who were involved have identified gaps themselves and proposed solutions that align with the programme's objectives. In the end, the data is no longer something being done to them; it is something they helped build.

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Use eye-catching numbers, & spread them widely

A single, striking statistic like only “21% of women are in the workforce” can create the conditions for concrete policy action when it’s widely circulated and repeated. Partners have found that official data which is narrated consistently across forums, by multiple voices, builds the shared knowledge base from which demands for change can be made.



The key is not just having the data, but ensuring it enters the public and institutional conversation at scale. When the same figure is cited by government officials, civil society organisations, researchers, and practitioners alike, it becomes difficult to ignore or contest. Repetition, across platforms and messengers, is itself a strategic act.

Use rankings to create competitive incentives

One Partner has made use of existing state-level ranking systems that assess institutions’ capacity to deliver services. By showing institutions where they rank, and offering to help them perform better, they reframed the data as something serving the institution’s own interest in improvement. This approach creates buy-in alongside credibility.



The power of this approach lies in the fact that the ranking system is an external, authoritative measure that the institution already recognises and cares about. Gender equity is no longer being introduced as an outside concern but as a variable that affects how the institution is seen and assessed by others.

In competitive environments where institutions compare themselves to peers and where rankings carry reputational or resource implications, this can be a particularly effective lever for motivating action that goodwill alone would not produce.

Show what the institution is losing

The Partner from Strathmore University in Kenya found that disaggregated data is most compelling when paired with an argument about institutional cost. The question shifted from “what is the problem?” to “what is this institution losing by not addressing this?” This framing asks institutions to calculate the cost of inaction: the talent being overlooked, the perspectives absent from decision-making, and the reputational

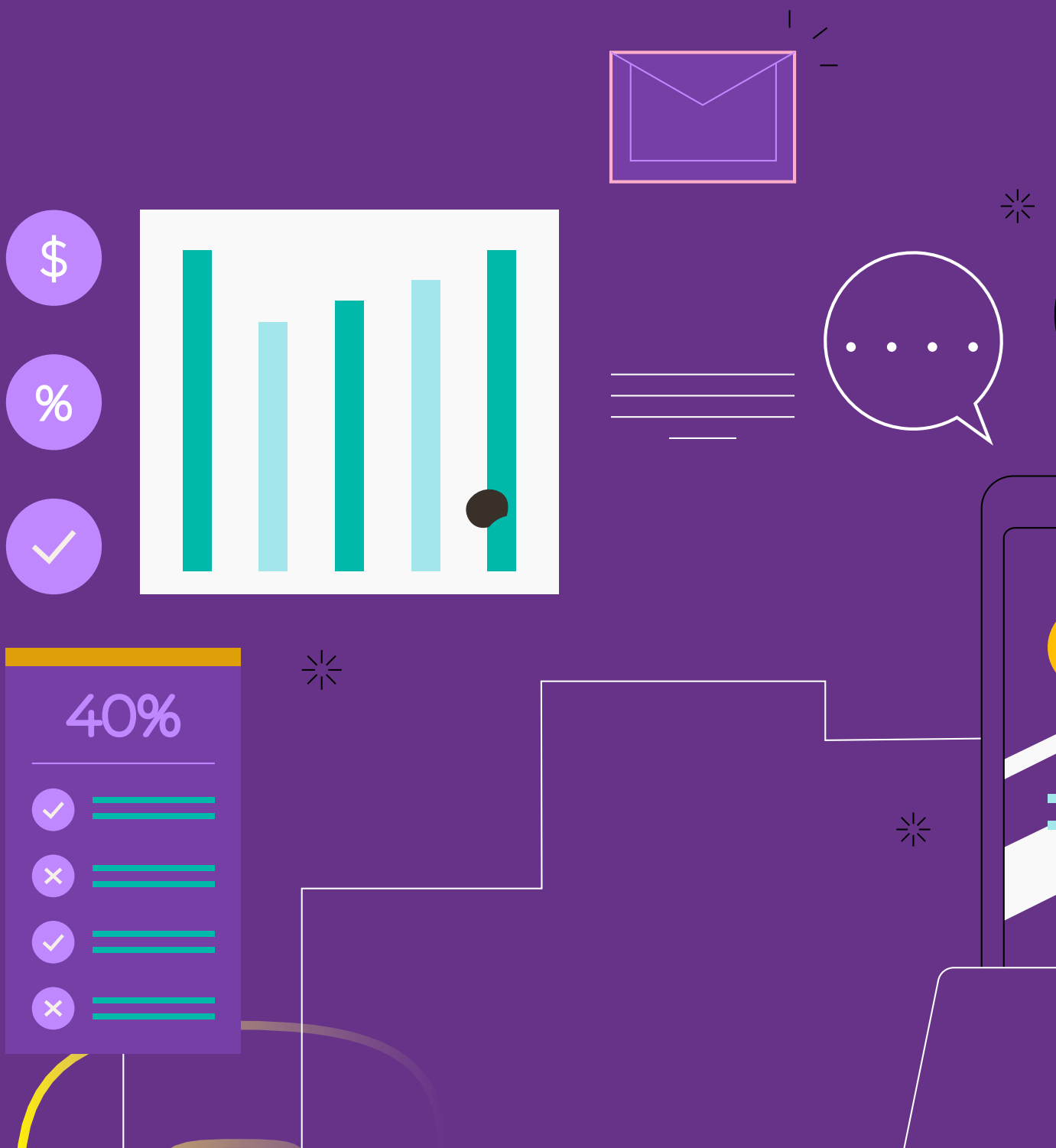
what is this institution losing by not addressing this?

and performance gaps that result. Rather than positioning gender equity as an external demand, it positions inaction as an institutional liability.



So what does this mean in practice?

- Know your messenger as carefully as you know your data. A peer with credibility inside the institution will often land data better than an external advocate.
- Package evidence as a tool for institutional improvement, not just a critique. Connect it to what the institution cares about.
- Involve decision-makers in generating the evidence. Their ownership of the data is part of what makes it actionable.



Data as an Accountability Mechanism

Many institutions that partners work with have made formal commitments to gender equity through policies, strategies, or public declarations. The challenge is that commitments on paper do not automatically translate into change in practice. Partners are exploring how data can be used to hold institutions accountable to what they have already promised.

Track implementation, not just policy existence

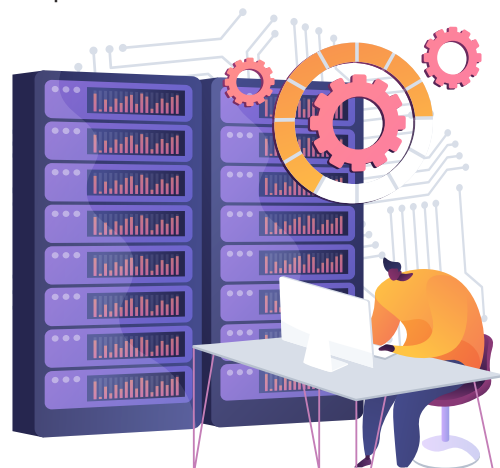
The Policy Innovation Center (PIC) in working with Nigerian universities found that gender-equity policies often exist in name but are not being implemented.

The gap between policy and practice is itself important data. Identifying that gap, and naming it clearly to institutional stakeholders, creates a different accountability conversation than arguing for new policies from scratch. This is a significant strategic distinction: **it shifts the conversation from advocating for change to holding institutions to account for commitments they have already made.** Many institutions find it harder to resist accountability for their own stated policies than to deflect new demands entirely.

The gap between policy and practice is itself important data.

Work with ICT and data systems to embed accountability

AWSC has partnered with the university's ICT department to ensure that the data they need is systematically captured going forward. They have identified gaps in the university's existing data flows, for instance, tracking students from enrolment through to graduation and beyond, and are working with ICT to build those capabilities into the institution's standard systems. This means that accountability data will be available regardless of whether any particular champion of the work remains.



The significance of this approach is that **it moves accountability from being person-dependent to being system-dependent.** When data collection is embedded in institutional infrastructure rather than held by an external project team, the evidence base survives staff turnover, funding cycles, and shifts in political will.

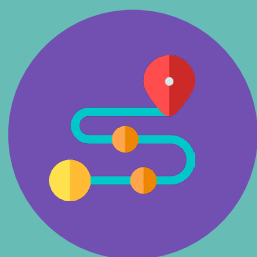
Identify who has the standing to hold institutions accountable

Just like moving from awareness to action, the messenger is equally important. Partners have found that the question of who presents data for accountability purposes matters as much as what data is presented.

In some contexts, women already within the institution carry more credibility than external advocates. In others, specific professional bodies, bar associations, or judicial councils carry the authority to use data as leverage.



Understanding who can hold the institution accountable, and supporting them to do so, is a strategic choice, not just a logistical one.



Track
Implementation



Work with ICT
and data systems



Identify who has
the standing to
hold institutions
accountable

So what does this mean in practice?

- The existence of a policy is not the same as its implementation.
- Make the gap between the two visible and make it data.
- Invest in building the institution's own data systems rather than only collecting data yourself.
- Accountability mechanisms embedded in institutional infrastructure are more durable than those that depend on any single advocate or project team.



The Politics of Data



Data is never neutral. It is produced by someone, for a purpose, and it reflects particular choices about what to count, how to count it, and whose experiences are made visible. Partners are learning to navigate this terrain carefully and to anticipate how data can be used both to challenge and to reinforce existing power structures.

Ask: who is the invisible woman in this data?

Partners have raised the importance of intersectional disaggregation. Disaggregating data only by gender (male/female) can hide as much as it reveals. Race, caste, religion, gender identity, and class shape women's experiences in institutions very differently. The question partners are asking is: which women are being counted, and which are being rendered invisible by the categories we use? In contexts where speaking about intersectionality is increasingly difficult, this question requires both intellectual rigour and political courage.

Beware of data that explains away the problem

Numbers can mislead as easily as they illuminate. PIC described a university where women appeared well represented in senior leadership but only because men had left for better-paid positions elsewhere. No deliberate shift in culture or policy had taken place. Yet the headline data could easily be used to claim the problem was solved.

This is the risk of surface-level analysis: it allows institutions to point to favourable statistics while leaving the conditions that produce inequality entirely untouched. Root cause analysis, asking why numbers look the way they do, is what separates data that reveals from data that obscures.

Partners are therefore learning to push beneath the headline figures. The questions that matter are not only "what do the numbers show?" but "what produced these numbers?" and "what would genuinely need to change for them to reflect real equity?" Without this discipline, data becomes a tool that institutions can use to close down conversations about change rather than open them up.



Data can be used against you



AWSC at the University of Nairobi shared experiences of institutional data being weaponised. In some cases, the argument was made that since women were already in leadership positions and had not delivered transformative change, there was no reason to push for more women in leadership. This points to a deeper issue: the difference between having women in leadership roles and having women who are able to act in the interests of other women. Partners noted the importance of anticipating this use of data and preparing responses including shifting the conversation from numbers alone to the conditions that enable women to lead effectively.

Ensure data can withstand challenge

In academic institutions particularly, partners have found that data, especially qualitative data, will be questioned. Scepticism about research methodology is a common response, and qualitative evidence is sometimes dismissed as “just stories.” Partners emphasise the importance of ensuring that data collection is methodologically rigorous and that qualitative evidence is treated as equally legitimate. Producing evidence that is “beyond reproach” and being prepared to defend it is part of the work.



Challenge colonial framings of what counts as data & leadership

PIC raised the point that even where policies promoting women’s leadership exist, they are often framed within colonial constructs that privilege particular forms of knowledge and particular kinds of leaders. In economics departments, for instance, macroeconomics is treated as serious and policy-relevant, while microeconomics, where women are more represented, is seen as soft. These framings shape which women are seen as credible for leadership roles, and they require a challenge that goes beyond data to the decolonisation of leadership itself.



- Disaggregate your data intersectionally and be willing to name who is absent from the picture.
- Know that data will be challenged, especially qualitative data. Rigour in collection and documentation is a political act.
- Anticipate how your data could be used against the argument you are making — and prepare your response in advance.

So what does this mean in practice?





From Data to
Demand: **Building
a Constituency for
Change**

Data on its own changes nothing. Change happens when there is an organised constituency with both the interest and the power to act on evidence. Partners talked about how they are developing increasingly sophisticated approaches to identifying and building that constituency.

Map power and interest, participatively

PIC developed a participatory political economy and power-mapping process with university partners. Rather than arriving with a pre-determined theory of change, they worked with staff and students at different levels to identify who within and outside the institution had the power and interest to drive change. They found that some actors had high power but low interest, while others had high interest but low power and that the strategic task was to figure out how these actors could leverage one another. Crucially, the people closest to the institution were often best-placed to identify this landscape.



MAP

POWER & INTEREST,
PARTICIPATIVELY



ENGAGE

ACROSS LEVELS,
NOT JUST AT
THE TOP



IDENTIFY

ALLIES
INSIDE THE
INSTITUTION



PURSUE

REGULATORY
LEVERAGE WHERE
POSSIBLE

Engage across levels, not just at the top

Relying on a single senior champion is a fragile strategy. When that person moves on, as they frequently do, the momentum they carried can disappear with them. JPAL in India has found that engaging across institutional levels with early-career academics, students, administrative staff, and department heads distributes ownership of the change agenda and makes it far more resilient.

This is not simply about having more people involved. It is about building a constituency that is embedded at different points in the institution's structure, so that no single departure can unravel the work. Each level brings something different: senior leaders can open doors and authorise action, while those earlier in their careers often have both the motivation and the time horizon to sustain change over the long term.

The people who are junior staff today will be heads of department and institutional leaders in the years ahead

This is why partners working with universities are deliberately cultivating early-career academics as future champions. The people who are junior staff today will be heads of department and institutional leaders in the years ahead. Investing in their understanding of and commitment to gender equity now is an investment in the institution's culture in the future, one that compounds over time in a way that top-down engagement alone cannot achieve.

Identify allies inside the institution

This approach has enabled partners to build coalitions of allies who were not visible from the outside.

IAWJ partners described the value of asking women judges themselves who among their peers might be open to the data and to change. This approach, drawing on insider knowledge of the institution's informal politics, has enabled partners to build coalitions of allies who were not visible from the outside. This proved more effective at making the case for change than any external advocacy could have been.



Pursue regulatory leverage where possible

Voluntary commitments are only as durable as the individuals who make them. When reporting requirements are mandatory, embedded in regulatory frameworks rather than left to institutional goodwill, the accountability landscape changes fundamentally. Compliance is no longer contingent on a sympathetic leader or a well-timed conversation; it becomes a condition of operating.

AWSC in Kenya therefore is actively pursuing national-level policy change that would require all universities to report gender-disaggregated data to the Commission for University Education. If achieved, this would shift gender data from something institutions do when they choose to something they are required to do. This creates a consistent, comparable evidence base across the sector that no single institution can opt out of.

When reporting requirements are mandatory, Compliance becomes a condition of operating.

Partners working in the banking sector have observed a similar dynamic. Where central banks have introduced requirements around gender reporting or diversity standards, institutions have moved far more quickly than they did in response to advocacy alone. Regulation, in this sense, does the work that persuasion cannot always sustain.



So what does this mean in practice?

- Do a power and interest analysis before deciding how to use your data. Who has the power to act, and who has the motivation?
- Build your constituency across levels, not just at the top. The most durable change is driven by many people, not one champion.
- Where possible, pursue regulatory and policy levers that create accountability beyond individual goodwill.



Data and the Long Game: **Sustaining an Evidence Base**

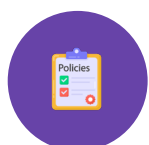


One of the recurring challenges in this work is that institutional change moves slowly, while political cycles, personnel changes, and funding timelines create discontinuities. Partners are thinking carefully about how to build evidence bases that outlast any one grant period, any one champion, or any one political moment.



Embed data systems within the institution

The most sustainable approach partners have identified is to help institutions build their own capacity to collect and use gender-disaggregated data rather than being the external producers of that data themselves. AWSC has engaged the ICT department directly, contributing to the design of data interfaces that will capture the information needed long after the project ends. Another partner is developing a gender-integrated data system that will be managed by a new inclusivity office within the institution. In both cases, the goal is institutional capability, not dependency on the project team.



Build policy tools that persist beyond the programme

Partners are working to translate evidence into policy toolkits, documented frameworks, directives, and guidelines that guide institutional behaviour regardless of who holds any particular post. When these are embedded in administrative systems, they create a form of institutional memory that does not depend on individual champions.



Pursue written commitments and policy documents

MAP described their effort to obtain written policy directives from institutional leaders as a deliberate strategy for sustainability. A written commitment even if not yet fully implemented creates a reference point that future advocates can use and that makes it harder for institutions to simply let commitments fade.

So what does this mean in practice?

- Build for sustainability from the start, not as an end-of-project task. Institutional data systems, policy toolkits, and written commitments are all forms of sustained investment in the evidence base.
- Engage at multiple career levels within the institution. The people who will own the institution in ten years are there now.
- Where possible, pursue regulatory anchoring, mandatory reporting and policy requirements that outlast individual champions and political cycles.





Synthesis:

What Cuts Across All Five Themes

Across all five conversations, several threads appear again and again:

- **Data is a relationship, not just a resource.**

The most effective uses of data described in this session involved other people, co-producing it, presenting it, owning it, acting on it. The question is always: whose hands does this data need to be in?

- **Context is everything.**

The same data can land very differently depending on who presents it, to whom, in what framing, and at what moment in an institution's political cycle. Strategic intelligence about the institution is inseparable from strategic use of data.

- **Intersectionality cannot be an afterthought.**

If data is collected without attention to caste, race, gender identity, and other intersecting dimensions, it will systematically undercount the most marginalised women. Building intersectional rigour into data collection from the start is both an ethical and a strategic imperative.

- **Qualitative and quantitative data are both essential.**

Numbers create urgency and shareability. Lived experience creates empathy and moral force. Partners are most effective when they combine both not treating one as more legitimate than the other.

- **The long game requires institutional infrastructure.**

Individual champions matter, but they move on. Embedding gender equity into data systems, policies, and regulatory frameworks is what allows the evidence base to outlast any particular person or project.





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