



Strengthening Gender Equality & Social Inclusion in Africa's Research and Innovation Ecosystems

A synthesis of evidence, insights,
and lessons from the RISA Fund
programme in Africa, 2021–2026,
GESI Deep Dive Study Report

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Executive Summary | 3 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| About the RISA Fund Programme | 4 |
| GESI Barriers in the Research and Innovation Space in Africa | 5 |
| About this RISA GESI Deep Dive Study | 6 |
| Methodology | 7 |
| RISA GESI Deep Dive Study Questions | 7 |
| Data Collection Methods | 8 |
| Data Analysis | 8 |
| Reporting | 8 |
| Limitations | 9 |
| Results | 10 |
| RISA's Impact on the Research & Innovation Ecosystem | 10 |
| Reflections on Awardee Focus and Thematics | 10 |
| Reflections on GESI Dimensions and Themes | 11 |
| RISA's impact on the research and innovation ecosystem | 12 |
| RISA's impact on GESI in the R&I ecosystem | 12 |
| RISA's Impact on Inclusion in the R&I Ecosystem | 13 |
| RISA's Approach to GESI in Impact and Results Measurement | 14 |
| Effective GESI Strategies and Approaches | 15 |
| GESI Lessons and Insights | 16 |
| Importance and nuance of GESI | 17 |
| Strengthening the ecosystem in support of GESI | 17 |
| Collaboration and Partnerships | 18 |
| Long timeframes to achieve impact | 18 |
| Likelihood that GESI will be Sustained by Awardees | 18 |
| Reflections on GESI in the RISA Fund | 20 |
| Successes, Challenges and Recommendations | 21 |
| Key Successes | 21 |
| Key Challenges | 22 |
| Recommendations | 23 |
| Future Programme Design | 23 |
| Awardee Capacity & Support | 23 |
| Inclusive Design and Intersectionality | 23 |
| Ecosystem-Level Change | 23 |
| Conclusion | 25 |

The RISA Fund is funded with UK International Development from the UK government. This content is produced in partnership with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and RISA.

Executive Summary

This GESI study examines how the Research and Innovation Systems for Africa (RISA) Fund has supported gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) across research and innovation ecosystems in six African countries from 2021–2026. The study was conducted to understand the extent of RISA's influence, identify successful strategies used by awardees, and generate lessons and recommendations to strengthen future GESI integration.

The review draws on a desk study of RISA documents, monitoring data, and ten key informant interviews with awardees and country teams. The analysis explored ecosystem level outcomes, institutional practices, and inclusive participation across the programme.

The findings show that RISA helped increase awareness and action on GESI across universities, accelerators, innovation hubs, and policy actors. Awardees contributed to policy reforms, such as Ghana's disability inclusion blueprint, and helped embed GESI practices within institutions through guidelines, budget allocations, and more inclusive leadership structures. Direct support to women, youth, and persons with disabilities—through mentorship, funding, training, and visibility platforms—also strengthened participation in research and innovation spaces.

Early shifts in norms were observed, especially around disability inclusion and women's leadership.

However, progress was uneven. Short funding cycles made it difficult to achieve or measure longterm change, and many stakeholders still equated GESI mainly with gender, limiting deeper intersectional work. Limited data, sociocultural norms, and inconsistencies in reporting frameworks also reduced the visibility of GESI outcomes.

The study concludes that RISA has laid strong foundations for more inclusive research and innovation ecosystems. To sustain momentum, longer funding cycles, clearer GESI guidance, stronger measurement frameworks, and deeper ecosystem level interventions are needed. Future programming should support inclusive institutional reforms, expand intersectional approaches, strengthen national level partnerships, and invest in capacity building for both innovators and the institutions that serve them.

Introduction

About the RISA Fund Programme

The Research and Innovation Systems for Africa (RISA) Fund is a multi-country initiative, established in 2021 and funded by UK Government through the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). The fund aims to strengthen research and innovation (R&I) systems across six countries in Africa: **Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa.**

RISA focuses on three core areas:

- 1. Strengthening research organisations** to enhance their capacity to produce relevant, high-quality research and to create an enabling environment for researchers and research institutions.
- 2. Supporting the scaling of new and emerging technologies** with high potential for poverty reduction and inclusive growth.
- 3. Enhancing synergies between research and innovation systems**, improving coordination and integration across ecosystem actors.

To advance these objectives, the RISA Fund embedded 11¹ ecosystem strengthening goals (ESGs) developed by the International Development Innovation Alliance (IDIA). The ESGs outline the most effective pathways for building strong, resilient research and innovation ecosystems.

A central principle within this framework is **Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI)**, reflected in ESG7. RISA recognises that research and innovation spaces often replicate broader societal inequalities and patterns of exclusion. By integrating GESI considerations from the outset, RISA Fund aimed **to increase the participation, visibility, and influence of women and marginalised groups** within Africa's research and innovation ecosystems.

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, often shortened to GESI or GEDSI (whereby the D refers to Disability) is a term commonly used in the International Development sector to refer to an approach towards addressing unequal power relations and social injustices.

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion initiatives are intended to address the political, economic and social exclusion of individuals based on gender or sexual identity, class, race, ethnicity, physical disability, age, poverty level or geographical location. Gender equality and social inclusion are not only a fundamental aspect of achieving human rights and social justice, but also a precondition to ensure development processes are inclusive and do not privilege one group over another.

¹ RISA Fund ESG Analytic Framework comprised ESG elements derived from IDIA namely; Building Informed Human Capital, Ensuring accessibility of finance, Establishing supportive research and innovation infrastructure, Creating enabling national research policy and regulation, Nurturing a culture supportive of research, innovation, and entrepreneurship, Supporting Coordinated Networking Assets, Embedding gender equality and social inclusion (GESI), Creating smoother pathways to scale, Mobilising a collective ecosystem approach to address a development challenge, Supporting the development of effective research incentives, and Building a framework for assurance and enhancement of research

² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6295f2360cd56b026c257790/t/62a1cd5ed04abc2aac8c4880/1654771043557/Strengthening%2BInnovation%2BEcosystems+English.pdf>

GESI Barriers in the Research and Innovation Space in Africa

Gender inequality and social exclusion is a systemic challenge in the research and innovation space around the world, including in Africa. Across sub-Saharan Africa, only 24% of academic staff are women.³, reflecting persisting gender gaps in high education leadership and research participation. At the student level, only 25% of learners pursue STEM fields, compared to 50% in other world regions. Women represent just 30% of STEM professionals⁴, and in some West and Central African countries, they account for less than 15% of engineering and technology researchers.⁵

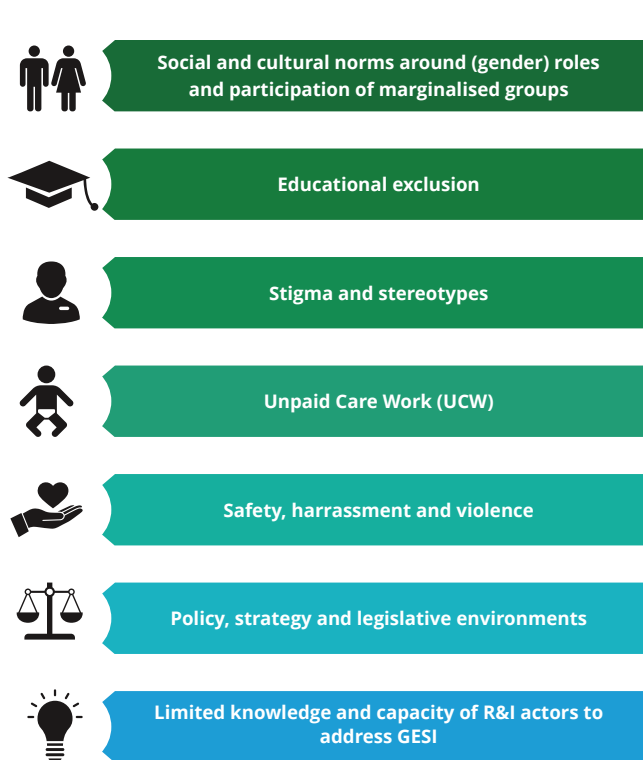


Diagram 1: Cross-cutting insights from Country-level GESI Assessments - Full descriptions can be found in:
RISA GESI Strategy and Action Plan –30 June 2022

Digital skill gaps also persist; only 9% of youth aged 15-24 across 15 African countries possess basic computer skills, while just 10% of the male workforce and 7% of the female workforce demonstrate these competencies⁶. The innovation financing landscape mirrors these inequalities. Between 2013 to 2021, Africa's tech startups raised \$12.6 billion, yet less than 5% went to all-female founding teams, compared to 82% channelled to all-male teams.⁷

Data from other marginalised groups – such as persons with disabilities, rural/poor communities – remain sparse. Still, available evidence and program experience indicate that these groups face similar or more severe exclusion from tertiary education, research and innovation ecosystems. Nonetheless this echoes the fact that representation and inclusion of marginalised groups in research and innovation is an under-prioritised issue.

Recognising these challenges, RISA understood that **failure to intentionally mainstream GESI would risk perpetuating systemic exclusion, undermining the transformative potential of R&I ecosystems.**

At the programme's inception, RISA project team conducted country-level GESI assessments in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa to identify some of the critical GESI gaps to inform targeted action. These assessments placed specific emphasis on women, youth, people with disabilities (PWD), poor/rural communities (those that are most marginalised or left behind), and the LGBTQ+ community.

Although each context presented unique cultural, political and institutional barriers, insights into the broader, overarching challenges and parallels between the contexts clearly emerged.

These Country Assessments informed the development of **a high-level GESI strategy and action plan** for the RISA programme, providing a framework to guide and shape efforts to meaningfully mainstream GESI across all programme components.

While GESI was a critical and intentional component of the RISA Fund's work, the overarching objective remained the strengthening R&I ecosystems within each country – consistent with the full suite of **Ecosystem Strengthening Goals (ESGs).**

³ <https://essa-africa.org/node/1421>, accessed on 08-09-2025.

⁴ <https://shesteminafrica.com/#:-:text=%E2%80%A2,women%20in%20STEM%20across%20Africa%20>

⁵ <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/what-you-need-know-about-challenges-stem-africa>, accessed on 08-09-2025.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ <https://we-fi.org/move-over-tech-bros-women-entrepreneurs-join-africas-fintech-boom/>, accessed on 08-09-2025.

This report seeks to reflect on **RISA's achievements in advancing GESI** throughout the programme, and how these efforts contributed to building more inclusive, equitable and resilient R&I ecosystems across Africa.

About this RISA GESI Deep Dive Study

Since its inception in 2021, the RISA Fund has supported grantees to address GESI barriers and foster a more inclusive R&I ecosystems across target countries in Africa. Over its implementation period, the Fund has supported three cohorts of grantees, generating substantial experience, evidence, and insights on what it takes to meaningfully integrate GESI in R&I programming.

In 2024, RISA undertook an initial analysis and synthesis of evidence of GESI integration within Fund activities. While the exercise provided valuable learnings, several questions remained – particularly regarding the extent to which GESI processes, institutional changes, and project-level interventions have created the foundations or enabled longer-term ecosystem level shifts.

This GESI Deep Dive was therefore commissioned to meet the following core objectives:

1. Understand the impact of RISA on the research and innovation ecosystems.
2. Surface key strategies and approaches that have contributed to the impact RISA has had, as well as the unmet needs of awardees.
3. Identify lessons learned and recommendations for the future: both for programming and strengthened GESI integration in R&I ecosystem.

RISA GESI Deep Dive Study Questions

To address the objectives of the GESI deep dive study within the RISA Programme, the following key learning questions were identified:

| Primary Research Question | |
|--|---|
| To what extent did RISA influence the research and innovation ecosystem in programme contexts to be more aware of and responsive to the needs, challenges and priorities of women and marginalised groups? | |
| Sub-questions | |
| RISA Impact | Has RISA impacted the research and innovation ecosystem to be more equitable and inclusive, and if so, how? |
| | What lessons and insights on GESI did awardees take from RISA and to what extent will these continue beyond the project lifetime? |
| | What dimensions/themes of GESI have been addressed by RISA awardees? What were the facilitating / hindering factors for this focus and prioritisation? |
| Effective Strategies and Approaches | What strategies and approaches used in RISA proved to be the most effective to increase equity and inclusion? |
| | Are there context-specific differences? |
| Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the Future | What key insights can be drawn about what worked well, what didn't, and the underlying reasons for success or challenges? |
| | What actionable recommendations can be made to sustain the outcomes, support GESI in diverse contexts, and inform the design and implementation of future programmes? |

The methodology for this GESI Deep Dive was developed by the consultant in close collaboration with the RISA team. The approach followed a **five-stage process**, designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of RISA's GESI integration and its influence on ecosystem-level outcomes:



Diagram 2: RISA GESI deep dive methodology

Data Collection Methods

4. Desk review and secondary data analysis:

A comprehensive desk review was conducted to build an understanding of RISA Fund's operations, GESI related strategies, support provided to grantees, and documented successes and challenges. This review examined a range of internal documents, including the GESI Assessment Report, quarterly awardee reports, quarterly Fund reports, findings from the technical support survey with awardees, and routine monitoring data.

5. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):

KIIs were carried out with four Country Technical Leads and 10 awardees to gather deeper insights into how GESI was integrated within the RISA Fund. The interviews explored; awardees' experiences implementing GESI within projects, the support, guidance, and tools provided by RISA, challenges encountered during implementation, unmet needs and gaps in GESI integration and recommendations for strengthening future programming. Awardees interviewed represented all ongoing RISA projects at the time of the research, covered the following country distribution:

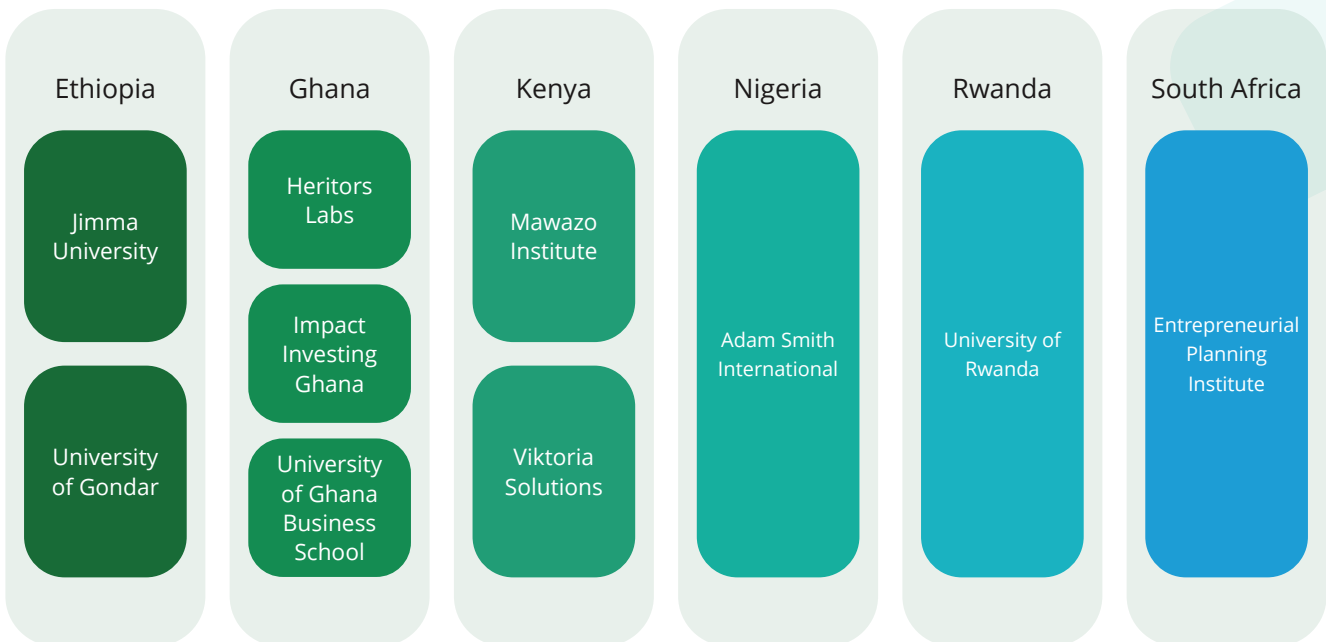


Diagram 3: RISA awardees interviewed by geographic location

Data Analysis

Data gathered through the desk review was coded, mapped and analysed using content and thematic analysis aligned to the evaluation questions. This was complemented by qualitative evidence generated through the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). An analytical framework was developed using the learning questions together the output, outcome and impact indicators drawn from routine monitoring data. The framework guided the systematic review of desk-based evidence. Interview data was then thematically coded and triangulated with the desk review findings to validate emerging patterns, strengthen interpretation, and ensure a holistic understanding of RISA's GESI integration across the programme.

Reporting

The findings, insights, and recommendations emerged from the data analysis have been synthesized and presented in this report. To ensure openness and honesty during the interviews, participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. For this reason, all findings are reported in aggregate form, and direct quotes or insights are attributed to specific awardees or individuals.

Limitations

While every effort was made to ensure the quality and robustness of this research, several limitations affected both the data collections process and the overall analysis:

Partial evidence base: Although ten awardees were interviewed and project documentation was reviewed across three funding cycles, these sources do not capture the full breadth of RISA's portfolio or the perspectives of actors who were not directly engaged in the programme. At the time of data collection, few awardees were still under contract with RISA. The awardees interviewed represented all ongoing grants – except for South Africa partner, which was a former awardee. The sample therefore reflects a narrow segment of portfolio and risks skewing insights toward the 'best-performing' awardees, many of whom had received follow-on funding.

Self-reported outcomes: Both the interviews and desk review evidence rely heavily on self-reported information from awardees. This may lead to overemphasis on successes and underreporting of challenges. Critical perspectives – such as those of research participants, community members, or policy counterparts – were not captured. In addition, the absence of standardised metrics across projects limits the comparability of results.

Diverse portfolio: RISA funded a wide range of projects across different countries, sectors, scales, organisational types and implementation scales. While this diversity demonstrates the breadth of the programme, it also poses challenges for cross-project comparison. The varied approaches and contexts make it difficult to aggregate findings or draw uniform conclusions about outcomes and impact across the portfolio.

Short project cycles: Most RISA-Funded projects operated on short implementation cycles – typically one year or less. Consequently, available evidence reflects output or immediate outcomes rather than long-term or sustained impact. It is therefore not possible to verify whether inclusive practices, strengthened institutions innovative solutions, or policy engagements will endure beyond the project period. Similarly, attributing broader ecosystem-level shifts solely to RISA is challenging, as such changes often result from multiple policy, institutional and contextual influences. Overall, these limitations mean the review provides a credible but necessary partial picture of GESI integration across the RISA programme. It highlights promising approaches, emerging contributions, and early lessons, but cannot yet assess the sustained or system-wide impact of RISA's investments.

RISA's Impact on the Research & Innovation Ecosystem

Reflections on Awardee Focus and Thematics

Before exploring the impact of the RISA Fund on GESI, it is important to highlight the wide range of sectors represented across the portfolio. RISA awardees work in the higher education, entrepreneurship and SME incubation, digital innovation, agricultural innovation, research commercialisation, and policy engagement. GESI considerations were integrated across these sectors to varying degrees, depending on organisational focus, capacity and context. Many awardees also operated across multiple thematic areas. The image below is not intended to be comprehensive in capturing this diversity, but rather to illustrate the breadth of interventions supported through RISA.

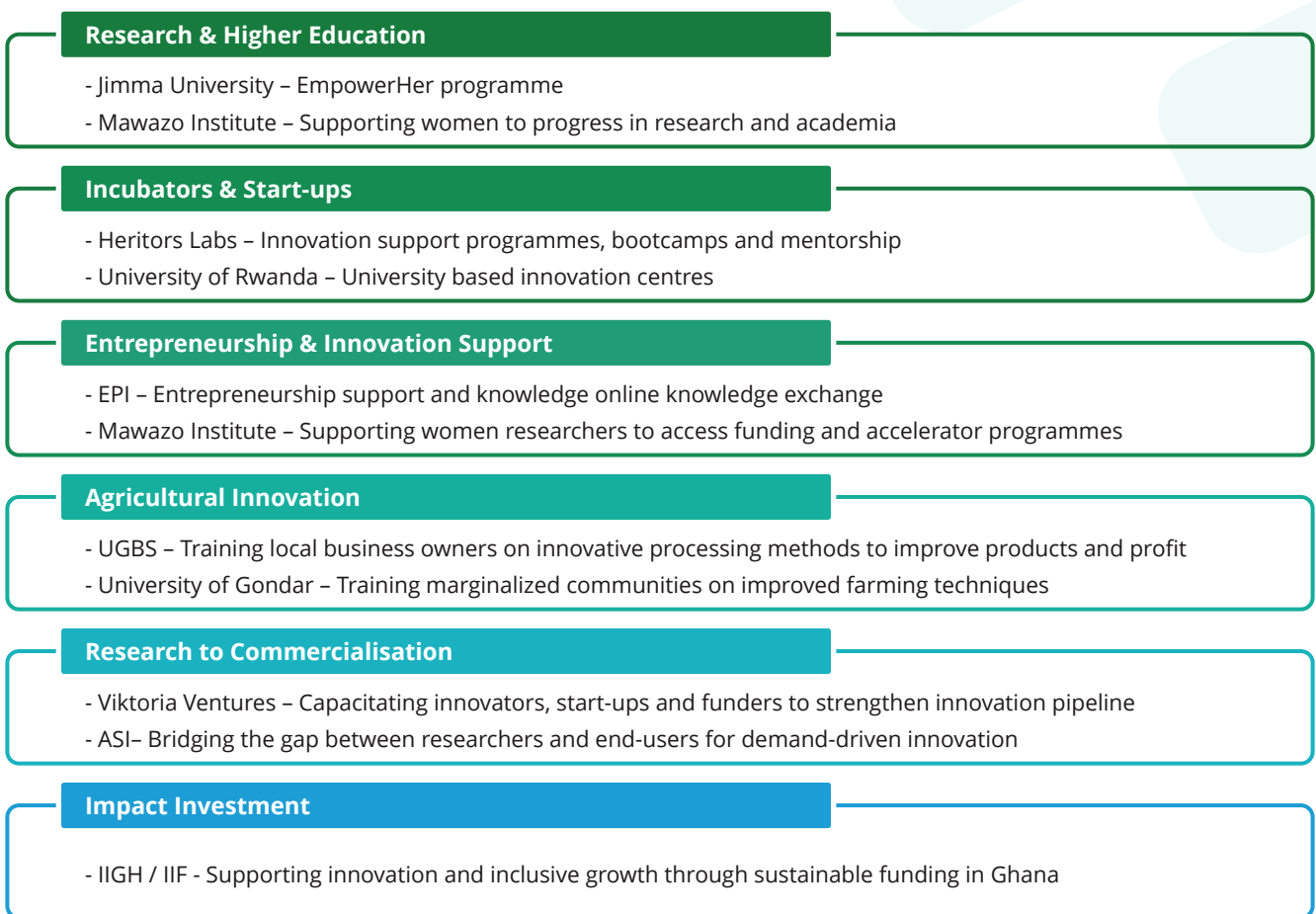


Diagram 4: Sectoral focus on RISA investments

Overall, the portfolio spans academic institutions, incubator and accelerators, digital innovators, impact funds, and policy actors - ranging from research and capacity-building to startup support and national-level influence. While this diversity strengthens RISA's reach and ecosystem, it also introduces challenges when comparing approaches, results, and outcomes across sectors.

Reflections on GESI Dimensions and Themes

Evaluation Question: What dimensions and themes of GESI were addressed by RISA awardees? What were the facilitating or hindering factors shaping this focus and prioritisation?

Across all data sources, women were the most consistently prioritised GESI group. Youth inclusion was also evident - particularly in entrepreneurship, digital skills and training programmes - while persons with disabilities (PWDs) featured in some initiatives but remained inconsistently addressed overall. Several projects also targeted rural, low-incomes or otherwise disadvantaged communities often excluded from innovation ecosystems.

Although the Country GESI Assessments emphasised the LGBTQ+ community as a group at risk of exclusion, this focus did not translate into funded project activities. Most projects centred on women, some incorporated youth, and a smaller subset addressed disability inclusion or broader marginalised groups.

Interviews provided the opportunity to explore the drivers of these choices:

- 1. Contextual Barriers:** Awardees often shaped their GESI priorities in response to specific contextual barriers. For example, in Ghana, the perception that women are not "socially or systematically oriented" to participate in the R&I ecosystem was seen as a major constraint. In Nigeria, patriarchal norms – such as land ownership, mobility restrictions, and male-dominated professional environments – shaped GESI strategies. In Ethiopia, cultural and social barriers hindered women's participation in higher education and STEM fields, while in Kenya, social stigma and cultural norms influenced women's ability to pursue careers in research, academia and STEM.
- 2. Equating GESI with gender:** Several awardees expressed aspirations to move beyond gender and further explore the broader social inclusion component of GESI. However, stakeholders – including institutional partners and community actors they engaged - often focused on gender-only framing rather than other dimensions and groups, perhaps because; gender is perceived as a 'low hanging fruit' or more familiar concept, structural barriers facing women participation remained significant and demanded priority attention, or discussions on broader inclusion being met with discomfort or resistance. One awardee noted a common reaction in academic settings: *GESI conversations are sometimes met with dismissiveness, expressed as 'it's the ladies again'.*
- 3. Visibility and Data:** The lack of reliable data on certain groups – such as PWDs, displaced populations, or sexual and gender minorities – and the resulting need to increase visibility influenced awardees' focus on identifying and showcasing their contributions. Awardees noted the low visibility of PWDs and certain marginalised communities within the R&I spaces. At the same time, the (perceived) low participation limited pipeline of women and PWDs in STEM subjects was seen as barriers to engaging them in programme activities. Some teams also felt unprepared to target these groups without adequate baseline information or institutional guidance – constraining the practical scope of GESI integrations across the portfolio.

RISA's impact on the research and innovation ecosystem

Evaluation Question: Has RISA contributed to making the ecosystem more equitable and inclusive - and if so, how?

The RISA fund employed short-funding cycles averaging one year, to support a range of initiatives aimed at strengthening the research and innovation ecosystem in Africa. Although, several awardees received multiple rounds of support, the short-funding cycle inherently made achieving impact level change challenging. When examining impact in relation to GESI, the challenge is heightened by the deeply entrenched and systemic nature of gender inequality and social exclusions, as well as the fact that most awardees were addressing GESI as one component among many within their broader project activities. This criterion creates a risk of positioning GESI as an 'add-on' rather than as a driver of ecosystem transformation.

Meaningful and transformative change in gender equality and social inclusion requires focused, intentional, and strategic approaches that address multiple barriers and structural gaps simultaneously. This work must not only enable the participation of diverse groups but also contribute to shifting the broader ecosystem – including norms, institutions, and power dynamics – to create environments where inclusion can thrive.

With these dynamics in mind this section approaches the question of impact by first presenting examples of meaningful change within two dimensions; **1) changes within the research and innovation ecosystem and 2) shifts in inclusion in the ecosystem**, before concluding with reflections on RISA's approach to impact measurement and how it shapes visibility of GESI-related results.

RISA's impact on GESI in the R&I ecosystem

Through the work of its awardees, the RISA Fund's influence has contributed to shaping policies, driving institutional reforms, and fostering shifts in norms within the research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem. These changes collectively support a more equitable and inclusive environment for gender equality and social inclusion (GESI).

- **Policy and ecosystem influence:** Policy-level influence is central to establishing an equitable and inclusive ecosystem for gender equality and social inclusion. Several awardees contributed to national policy frameworks and ecosystem-wide standards. Notable examples include Heritors Lab's developed Ghana's first national blueprint for disability inclusion in research and innovation, outlining policy reforms, inclusive design standards, targeted funding windows and employment pathways. The blueprint is already being referenced by two government ministries and three universities signalling early institutional uptake. Jimma University contributed to national strategies related to incubation centre standardisation in Ethiopia, while both Jimma University and the University of Rwanda influenced national technology transfer strategies, embedding GESI considerations into broader policy frameworks. These contributions reflect RISA's influence in shaping future ecosystem norms and standards.
- **Institutionalisation of GESI considerations and practices:** Several awardees made significant strides in embedding GESI practices within institutional systems, thereby ensuring sustainable inclusion and priority for GESI moving forward. Examples include: the integration of GESI considerations into strategies, curricula, and evaluation criteria - Jimma University, securing the approval of GESI guideline by the university senate - University of Gondar, resulting in targeted research calls for female researchers and dedicated budget allocations for continued GESI activities. Viktoria Ventures supported Kenyan research institutions to move beyond gender policies 'on paper' to implementing them in practice. These changes represent important steps toward long-term institutional transformation.

- Advancing Women's leadership:** Strengthening women's leadership is essential for ensuring that women's voices shape decision-making in R&I systems. Strong examples from the assessment include Adam Smith International (ASI) CONESAM, which has achieved over 50% women in leadership positions across 14 states, significantly increasing women's participation in agricultural mechanisation and policy advocacy in a historically male-dominated sector.
- Shifts in norms and mindsets:** Norms change slowly, and evidence of shifts is often difficult to capture. Nonetheless, RISA-supported awardees demonstrated early signs of influencing mindsets and attitudes: Heritors Lab engaged financial institutions on the systematic exclusion of PWD and women innovators from accessing loan products, prompting initial recognition of the need for new, more tailored financial products. Similarly, Impact Investing Ghana (IIGH) trained close to 25 Enterprise Support Organisations (ESOs) on GESI, influencing them to redesign their programmes with stronger inclusion components. These examples indicate early but promising shifts in norms within key ecosystem actors.

RISA's Impact on Inclusion in the R&I Ecosystem

Alongside systemic influence, the RISA Fund and its awardees directly contributed to the inclusion of marginalised groups through targeted programmes, training, and the creation of supportive spaces.

- 1. Direct support to researchers, innovators and entrepreneurs** – Awardees supported marginalised groups through tailored funding, training and mentorship. For example, Mawazo Institute's flagship fellowship programme supported 60 African women PhD students with professional development, training, and flexible funds for research activities and well-being. Their Mawazo Connects Network offered tailored support for alumni, including financial assistance for product testing and policy engagement. Heritors Lab awarded USD1,000 seed funding to a women-led business to help secure export license and upgrade equipment.
- 2. Targeted programmes and inclusive innovation spaces** – Several awardees created spaces that specifically support under-represented groups refine their ideas, business models and establish start-ups or businesses. For example, EPI launched a programme for young entrepreneurs from townships, targeting lower-income marginal communities. Jimma University's "EmpowerHer" programme supported women researchers and innovators in Ethiopia. Heritors Lab delivered a "GESI Levelling Up" workshop, training 38 women, youth, and PWDs on entrepreneurship and digital marketing. These programmes helped emerging innovators refine ideas, develop business models, and prepare to launch enterprises.
- 3. Role models, visibility, and networking** – Increasing visibility and fostering networks for women and other underrepresented innovators is essential for strengthening their presence in R&I ecosystems, RISA-supported initiatives, build critical connections, and showcase their expertise. RISA supported initiatives include; Heritors Lab Women in Innovation and Research Conclave, which showcased female innovators in Ghana's research and innovation ecosystem. IIGH's all-women roundtable in the impact investing space. EPI's deliberate focus on inclusive representation, profiled nearly two-thirds women experts at events to create role modelling within the entrepreneurial space. Viktoria Ventures successfully advocated for a dedicated GESI session at the 2025 Commercialisation and Entrepreneurial Institution Leaders (CIEL) summit – marking the first time GESI will feature in this influential forum.



Taken together, the RISA Fund's impact is visible in two reinforcing domains: its support for 1. **systemic changes** – including policy influence, institutional reform, leadership representation, and early normative skills, and 2. **direct inclusive efforts** – through training, funding, visibility, and targeted support for women, youth, PWDs, and marginalised communities. These contributions highlight how short-cycle funding, when strategically deployed, can catalyse promising early-stage changes that strengthen the foundations for more equitable R&I ecosystems across Africa.

RISA's Approach to GESI in Impact and Results Measurement

Before exploring RISA's approach to GESI within impact and results measurement, it is worth noting that the program's explicit mandate and requirements for GESI integration had on its own, a meaningful influence on how partners and stakeholders engaged with GESI considerations. The requirement to integrate GESI prompted awardees to formally name, define and integrate GESI considerations into project design and implementation. While awardees joined RISA with varying levels of GESI awareness, many said that RISA's emphasis helped them shift from informal to

intentional practice, and later to more consistent integration. GESI became more routinely and effectively integrated in awardee's projects as the funding cycles progressed suggesting that awardees were learning how to better address GESI, while RISA was simultaneously learning how to support them to feature GESI in their work.

'GESI became more routinely and effectively integrated in awardee's projects as the funding cycles progressed suggesting that awardees were learning how to better address GESI, while RISA was simultaneously learning how to support them to feature GESI in their work.'

Nonetheless, the desk review of RISA's monitoring data highlighted challenges in how GESI-related outputs, outcomes, and impacts are understood and documented. In several cases, outputs were misclassified as outcomes or even impacts; similar activities were assessed differently across awardees; and changes were at times recorded at multiple results levels. These inconsistency points to lack of clarity in shared definitions, guidance, and expectations. In addition, 'impact' was often interpreted as sustainability of the intervention rather than ecosystem-level change towards equity and inclusion. This led to many reported achievements emphasizing participation within specific activities rather than efforts addressing GESI in the broader research and innovation ecosystem, where more transformative change could be realised.

This challenge likely stems from RISA Fund's tiered measurement framework, which focuses on four levels of awardee integration of GESI - planning/design, developing/implementing, demonstrating results in addressing identified GESI barriers, and achieving sustainability. While useful for tracking progress in practice, this framing is not equivalent to a results chain of - outputs -outcomes - impacts. It is likely to be reinforced by the under-mainstreaming of GESI in the RISA's Theory of Change. Without clearly defined, integrated GESI outputs and outcomes, the visibility of GESI contributions was limited, and opportunities to evidence policy influence, institutional change, or longer-term sustainability were missed. Few projects demonstrated transformative elements, and (potential) sustainability beyond the funding period was not consistently articulated.

Effective GESI Strategies and Approaches

Evaluation Question: What strategies and approaches used in RISA proved most effective to increase equity and inclusion?

Drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of individual strategies and approaches is challenging without undertaking a full evaluation. This section therefore reflects on what is required to foster transformative change within an ecosystem and the approaches awardees have used towards that goal.

Achieving the objective of strengthening ecosystems to be more equitable and inclusive requires going beyond simply supporting diverse groups to participate. It also demands deliberate considerations of how the system itself must change. This involves changes to policies, norms and institutional practices to create an ecosystem that meaningfully includes women, young people, PWDs and other marginalised groups.

Overall, the most effective approaches and projects are those that combined elements; supporting GESI in R&I spaces, while also influencing how those spaces operate. This finding is reflected in the desk review, where projects that paired training or mentoring with policy dialogue, institutional influencing or spaces for multistakeholder engagement were the most likely to show outcome- or impact-level changes (despite the limitations articulated above).

The strategies discussed below are therefore considered in relation to two categories: transforming the ecosystem and inclusion within the ecosystem.

| Transforming the R&I Ecosystem | Inclusion within the R&I Ecosystem |
|--|--|
| <p>Influencing national policies to support GESI in research and innovation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of Ghana’s national disability blueprint and AI practitioners’ ensured participation of women and PWD (Heritors Lab). - University input into national innovation strategies and policies (for example incubation centre standardisation by Jimma University, and technology transfer by the University of Rwanda,). - Creation of a centralised national database of research and innovation to inform government decision making. | <p>Mentorship and tailored programmes to support women, youth and PWD innovators, often paired with resources such as makers spaces, small grants, or conference fees (Heritors Lab, Mawazo Institute).</p> |
| <p>Mainstreaming GESI into institutions norms, policies and practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engagement with University Vice Chancellors to raise awareness of GESI and instigate norm and policy change (Viktoria Ventures). - Embedding GESI interventions into university budgets and guidelines e.g., University of Gondar- senate approved GESI guidelines leading to women-focused research calls and institutional budget allocations. - Changing how the funders and investors engage with women and under-represented groups in the start-up world (IIGH/IIF and Viktoria Ventures). | <p>Training and support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tailored support to women researchers to advance their careers in research and innovation (Mawazo Institute) - Incubation programmes for women and PWD (University of Gondar, Heritors Lab). - GESI mainstreaming training for grantees and staff (University of Gondar, ASI). |

| Transforming the R&I Ecosystem | Inclusion within the R&I Ecosystem |
|--|---|
| <p>Shifting norms and mindsets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Storytelling and visibility efforts reframing women and PWDs as innovators and leaders (Heritors Lab, ASI) - Dialogues with banks and investors to shift perceptions and consider women and PWDs innovations as viable investments (IIGH/IIF and Viktoria Ventures). - Training men in communities to change norms and mindsets about women (UGBS) | <p>Brokerage and bridging the gap between research and innovation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linking women innovators to investors and accelerator programmes (Mawazo Institute, Viktoria Ventures, IIGH/IIF, Heritors Lab) - Connecting rural business owners to improved research and innovative practices (ASI, UGBS, University of Gondar) |
| <p>Inclusive platforms and sector leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishing a national platform of practitioners to drive demand-led innovation, ensuring inclusive leadership and participation of women and young people (ASI) | <p>Networking and exposure via regional summits and community of practice platforms to increase visibility and peer learning opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digital platforms to build community and share practice (Mawazo Institute, EPI) - Academy-Industry Collaboration Workshops to raise awareness and foster partnerships for research commercialisation (University of Rwanda). |

Finally, it should be noted that within start-ups and innovation, there is a difference between mainstreaming GESI considerations and inclusive-centred designs, such as innovations by women, innovations for women, which drive innovation for problems that disproportionately affect women and girls. While this did not surface strongly within this study, it is an important consideration for future programming.

GESI Lessons and Insights

Evaluation Question: What lessons and insights on GESI did awardees take from RISA, and to what extent will this continue?

Awardees displayed varied institutional approaches to GESI. For some, GESI became a priority as a direct result of RISA Fund; for others, it had been an emerging consideration in their work, while a few had long positioned it as central motivation. For example, among those awardees interviewed, Mawazo Institute and EPI had gender equality and social inclusion embedded in their mission and organisational identity. Others, however, developed new thinking and practices around GESI throughout the course of RISA support. As a result, the lessons and insights gained varied considerably across the awardees. The key lessons and insights below are drawn from the interviews conducted.

Importance and nuance of GESI

Awardees consistently noted that their engagement with RISA helped shift and deepen their understanding of GESI. For some, this meant integrating GESI as a deliberate dimension for the first time. For others, it marked a move from implicit or ad hoc approaches to more explicit structured GESI practices. Several interviewees emphasized that RISA strengthened their ability to embed GESI more systematically in proposals, implementation strategies and institutional processes.

Over the grant period, many awardees also came to appreciate the nuance and complexity of GESI. They described moving beyond framing GESI simply as “gender” towards recognising the diversity of women’s experience and how factors like age, disability, marital status and caregiving responsibilities shape their opportunities.

Strengthening the ecosystem in support of GESI

A recurring theme across interviews was the importance of strengthening the wider ecosystem, which still has significant gaps in gender equality and social inclusion. Awardees reflected that practitioners, accelerators, funders and institutions all require dedicated support to enhance their own inclusivity practices. Without this, even when women and other under-represented groups pursue careers in research, engage with innovation programmes, or build start-ups, their needs are not fully met within these systems.

For example, many accelerator programmes remained poorly tailored to the realities of women’s needs, including care giving responsibilities. Additionally, while considerable attention is placed on supporting entrepreneurs and start-ups, those who enable them (practitioners) - coaches, mentors and business advisors - are often overlooked. Awardees emphasised that strengthening the inclusivity capacity of incubation programmes and the practitioners who lead them is a key factor in changing the ecosystem.

Awardees similarly highlighted how social and cultural norms are highly nuanced, impacting women differently both within and between countries, and thus require strategic navigation and tailored approaches.

A number of respondents reflected on how gender barriers intensify when they intersect with factors such as disability, economic status or rural location. This contributed to a stronger understanding of intersectionality as an essential consideration in programme design and the need to move beyond “one size fits all” approaches.

Awardees also underscored that shifting institutional and societal mindsets - particularly around disability inclusion and the participation of women in traditionally male-dominated fields - is just as important as providing financial or technical resources.

This insight also extended to mentorship, which while seen as valuable, mentorship alone is deemed insufficient. For it to translate into tangible outcomes, it must be paired with resources, supportive institutional policies, and commitment from leadership.

Another key reflection concerned the divide between research and innovation. Awardees noted that the two sectors often operate on different timelines and pace of working. Innovation actors value strong and compelling evidence but tend to move at a pace that is out of sync with the slower and more rigorous nature of academic research. Furthermore, differences in the language and communication styles used between the two worlds create additional barriers. As a result, more inclusive communication, realistic timelines, and demand-driven approaches were seen as crucial to making the research-to-commercialisation pathway more equitable.

Collaboration and Partnerships

Awardees consistently highlighted the critical role of multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnerships for effective project implementation and sustained progress in advancing gender equality and social inclusion. Building connections across universities, accelerators, practitioners, and policymakers was seen as vital for embedding change beyond individual projects.

Collaboration not only created visibility and networking opportunities but also helped to institutionalise inclusive practices. Several awardees have taken steps to create multi-sectoral platforms to strengthen relationships across the ecosystem and elevate GESI priorities at multiple levels. Across RISA's diverse contexts, strong partnerships emerged as a key lever for translating inclusive ideas to translate into lasting ecosystem change.

Long timeframes to achieve impact

The most consistently emphasised insight across the interviews was that achieving meaningful inclusion and transformative change required longer timeframes. Awardees noted that both measuring real impact and achieving it demanded extended periods – far long than typical programmed funding cycles allow.

Many partners felt that RISA's relatively short funding timelines were incompatible with the goal of transforming a complex and exclusionary ecosystem. Without extended timelines and realistic expectations, they cautioned that inclusion efforts risk being superficial rather than substantive.

Likelihood that GESI will be Sustained by Awardees

The desk review shows that, over time, GESI strategies became more targeted and formalised, with projects increasingly integrating GESI into their project indicators. While this may partly reflect RISA's growing emphasis on GESI compliance, it also suggests that as awardees built long-term relationships with RISA, they become more intentional about embedding GESI into their work. This aligns with the interview findings summarized below.

During the interviews, it was clear that awardees entered the RISA Fund with varying levels of understanding and commitment to GESI. As such, RISA's influence on the future intentions to continue working on GESI needs to be understood within this context.

Many awardees already had some degree of awareness or commitment to GESI. For organisations such as Mawazo Institute and EPI, gender equality and social inclusion were at the core of their organisational missions. For others, RISA support catalysed more deliberate engagement with GESI. A small number of awardees noted that they initially engaged with GESI because it was a requirement of RISA.

Nonetheless, all awardees expressed strong likelihood of continuing working on GESI beyond the RISA Fund. For those who initially viewed GESI as a donor requirement, this shift represents a clear and positive result of RISA's work.

“[Before] it was something that was foreign to us. But now that we have that deep understanding of it, we appreciate the thought process that it helps to have around ensuring that people are not missing out.”

“We learnt how we can include the GESI activities in our programme... The other thing is sure, we are contributing something to solve some of the GESI issues but still, we learn that we should continue to solve some of the GESI issues... From our research, from our activities, we learn that those issues are active areas [here].”

“Working with RISA has made it a little bit clearer that including women, PWD, displaced persons, it shouldn't be an afterthought. It should be something that's inherently big in all of your projects, whether it's grant work or not. It shouldn't just be something that like a box you want to tick because you're working with a grant, a grant agency or a funding agency.”

However, while several awardees demonstrated strong commitment to GESI, their understanding of GESI sometimes remained relatively tokenistic - focused on training women to operate within the existing ecosystem or on counting participant numbers. Only one or two interviewees perceived it as a compliance issue without showing deeper conviction about its importance.

Several factors emerged that will likely contribute to the ongoing prioritisation and sustainability of GESI practices.

1. Cultural and mindset shifts: Many awardees described GESI evolving from an add-on to a core element of programme design and delivery, suggesting stronger basis for continuity.

2. Signs of institutionalisation: Some organisations embedded GESI into HR and other institutional policies, ensuring diverse representation in boards and in managerial roles, and allocating institutional budget to sustain initiatives started under RISA.

3. Strengthened internal capacity: Awardees reported enhanced skills in designing and implementing GESI-sensitive interventions, which they intend to continue applying.

On the other hand, despite the strong intent, several risks to long-term sustainability were identified.

1. Financial constraints: Short duration of funding cycles limits the ability to sustain activities, particularly mentorship programmes, incubation hubs, inclusive convenings, and community engagement.

2. Deeply embedded socio-cultural norms: Persistent attitudes around gender roles and disability inclusion may cause organisations to revert to more comfortable or less intensive approaches once external pressure is removed.

3. Narrow interpretation of GESI: Many stakeholders continue to equate GESI primarily with gender, leading to insufficient attention to disability rurality, socio-economic status, and other dimensions.

4. Lack of shared frameworks: Without clearer definitions and consistent guidance, implementation quality is likely to remain uneven across contexts.

‘Long-term success will depend on; access to/securing diversified funding streams, continued strategic support from funders and ecosystem actors; and sustained efforts to challenge deep-rooted norms and embed GESI systematically across the research and innovation ecosystem’

In conclusion, there is a strong momentum and internal commitment among awardees to sustain GESI efforts. However, long-term success will depend on; access to/securing diversified funding streams, continued strategic support from funders and ecosystem actors; and sustained efforts to challenge deep-rooted norms and embed GESI systematically across the research and innovation ecosystem.

Reflections on GESI in the RISA Fund

The interviews provided an opportunity to explore awardees' perceptions of, and experiences with, the support provided by the RISA Fund team. While the awardees were broadly positive of RISA's contribution, particularly commending the team's supportive and flexible approach - they raised some consistent concerns.

Across the portfolio, awardees described RISA as an **enabling and dependable partner**. The financial support provided was consistently highlighted as essential for their work, including launching new platforms, establishing training programmes and incubation hubs, and engaging key institutional and sector-level stakeholders. Awardees also noted that RISA's support strengthened not only the delivery of interventions but also their internal governance structures.

Several awardees emphasised the value of RISA's **technical and capacity-building support**. They appreciated regular check-ins, monitoring and evaluation guidance, and responsive feedback. Some awardees credited RISA with encouraging them to take a deeper and more intentional approach to GESI – an approach they might not have pursued without RISA's prompting. Another commonly cited benefit was the **exposure and networking** facilitated by RISA; awardees observed that RISA's visibility expanded the reach of their work and created learning and collaboration opportunities both within the implementing cohort and beyond.

This visibility was described as reinforcing their work and extending their influence nationally and internationally.

At the same time, several challenges were identified. All awardees interviewed felt that the **one-year project timelines were too short** to deliver sustainable impact, particularly in complex areas such as research and innovation ecosystems.

Others cited **shifting financial processes** as difficulty, sometimes creating cash flow pressures. Some interviewees raised **concerns about reporting processes**, noting that requests occasionally felt ad hoc and that clearer guidance and onboarding would have helped them better anticipate RISA's expectations.

Most significantly for the purposes of this study, a number of awardees felt that RISA did not provide sufficient clarity regarding expectations for GESI achievements.

While the emphasis on GESI was widely broadly welcomed, awardees suggested that clearer articulation of what GESI meant for the RISA Fund – supported by shared definitions, co-creation spaces and cross-learning opportunities – would have strengthened their work in what remains an emerging field. This finding aligns with the desk review, which noted lack of a clear articulation in programme documents on why GESI mattered and how it should be operationalised.

These mixed reflections align with findings from RISA technical support (2024-2025). Of the 17 respondents, 11 (64%) reported that the support was useful or extremely useful, while four (4) felt it was somewhat useful and two (2) felt it was not useful. In qualitative comments, the two respondents who rated the support as not useful indicated that they received no substantive guidance.

Taken together with the interview findings, a more nuanced picture emerges. For many awardees, being encouraged to prioritise GESI was in itself valuable. For others, more tailored and context-specific support would have been beneficial. Overall, awardee's reflections highlight the strengths of RISA as a supportive, flexible, and empowering funder, while pointing to clear opportunities to strengthen guidance and coherence - particularly in relation to GESI.

Evaluation Question: What key insights can be drawn about what worked well, what didn't, and the underlying reasons for success or challenges?

Key Successes

Overall, RISA made notable contributions to increasing participation of women in research and innovation spaces across Africa. The Fund supported strengthened capacities of women, young people, persons with disabilities (PWD), and – though to a lesser extent - other marginalised groups through mentoring, training, and enhanced policy and ecosystem-level engagement. Key successes are shown in the figure below:

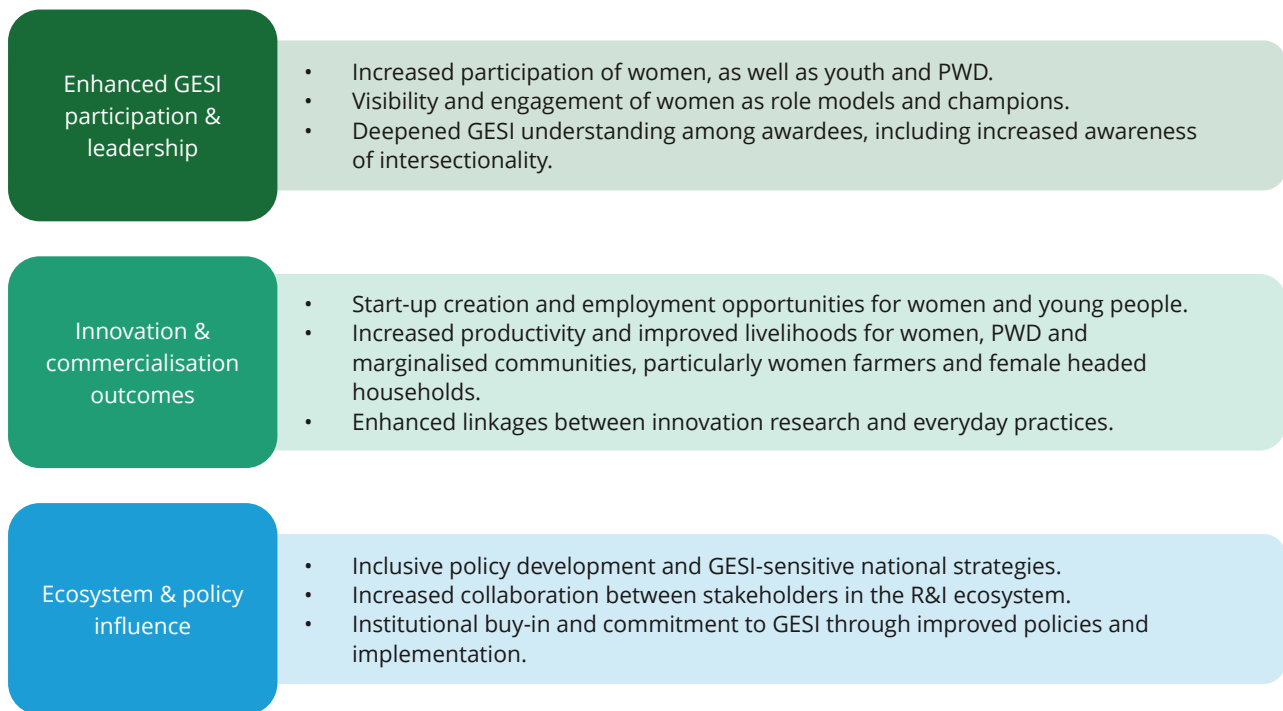


Diagram 5: Key Successes of the RISA fund

These successes can be attributed to several factors:

Explicit GESI Requirements: RISA's clear expectation that awardees integrate GESI served as a strong catalyst for awardees to prioritise GESI more intentionally.

Flexibility and Adaptability: Awardees consistently praised RISA's flexibility, together with their routine and on-demand technical support, which enabled them to adjust activities in response to context and emerging opportunities.

Technical Support: Routine and on-demand guidance – especially related to monitoring, evaluation and GESI – helped strengthen programme quality and encouraged deeper thinking.

Collaboration and Ecosystem Engagement: The value placed on multi-stakeholder collaboration by numerous awardees resulted in strong partnerships that facilitated knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and collective problem-solving.

Targeted and Tailored Approaches: Interventions designed to meet the needs of specific groups such as women in STEM, youth innovators, early-career researchers, contributed significantly to positive outcomes.

Key Challenges

The most frequently cited challenges were the short project timelines and constraints within the funding mechanism itself, both of which limited the sustainability of interventions. Several grantees also highlighted the sociocultural and systemic barriers which persisted, as along with the significant gap between research and academia on

one hand, and innovation and the private sector on the other – an ongoing divide that hampers participation, collaboration and uptake of research. Finally, intersectional inclusion remained inconsistent, with PWD and other marginalised groups still insufficiently mainstreamed.

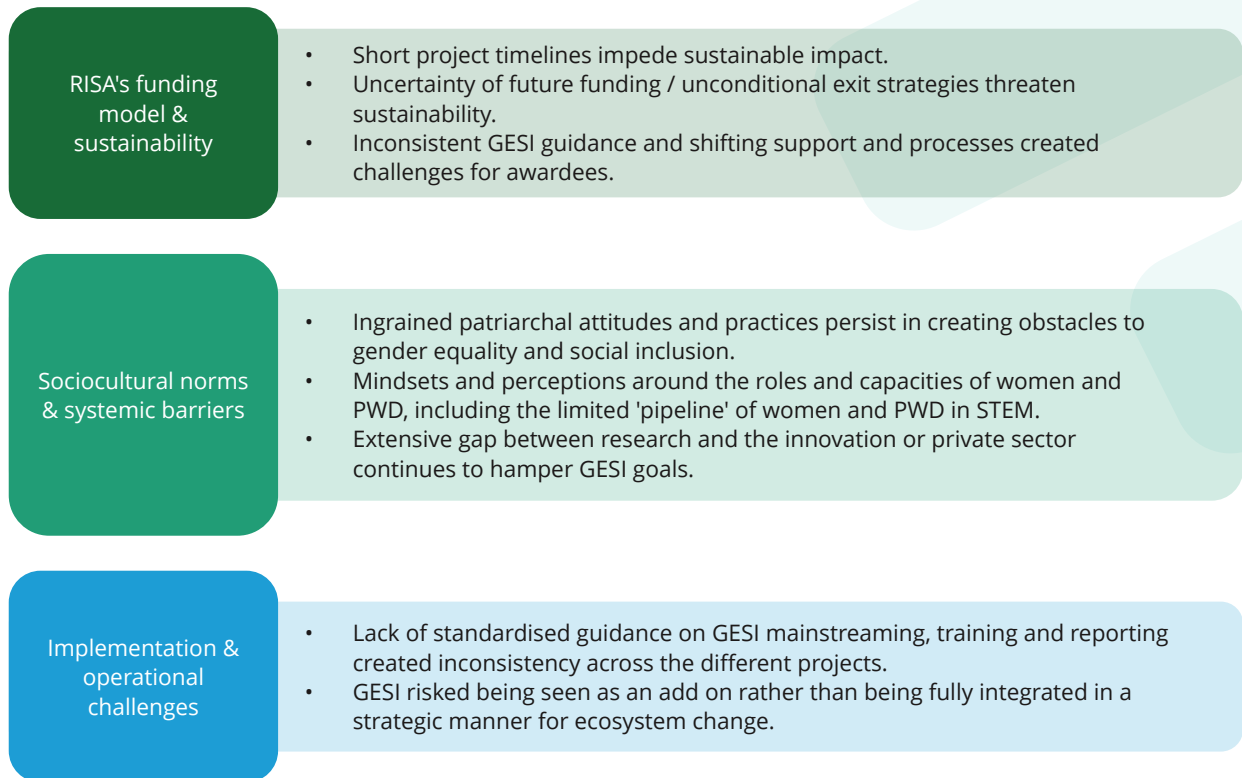


Diagram 6: Key Challenges of the RISA fund

Recommendations

Evaluation Question: What actionable recommendations can sustain outcomes and inform future programming?

Several recommendations emerged from this research which are relevant for RISA, other donors, and the broader ecosystem to enhance GESI and innovation efforts. Many awardees emphasised the importance of sustaining this work and continuing support through the RISA Fund. Key recommendations are summarised below.

Future Programme Design

- Providing dedicated funding for transformative GESI initiatives would ensure GESI remains at the centre in transforming the research and innovation ecosystem.
- Extend funding to multi-year cycles with clearer exit strategies to enable continuity, scale-up and create long-term transformative change.
- Offer strong, standardised guidance on GESI to build clarity on expectations, reporting requirements and definitions. Establishing GESI reporting dashboards and indicator definitions across projects could support this.
- Define clear ecosystem-level outcomes or outcome areas for ecosystem change, such as policy reforms, women-led investment mechanisms, or institutional adoption of inclusive frameworks. Stronger reporting frameworks clearly distinguishing outputs, outcomes, and impacts, will be critical to capturing meaningful change.
- Explore bridging initiatives to support innovators moving from early-stage research ideas into acceleration programmes. Additionally, greater support for the trainers, coaches and mentors was recommended to ensure they are well placed to support GESI-innovators.
- Maintain a strong focus on African-driven solutions, rather than replicating models from the Global North that may not align with local contexts.

Awardee Capacity & Support

- Provide standardised GESI training and guidance for all awardees to provide more clarity, consistency and a shared understanding of best practices across projects.
- Consistently embed GESI technical leads within country implementation teams to offer ongoing support and technical insights to awardees.
- Conduct quarterly GESI reporting to track progress and prevent GESI from becoming an afterthought.

- Invest in further research and documentation on GESI in the R&I space to better inform programming and advocate for its importance within the ecosystem.
- Facilitate community-building opportunities between awardees to encourage peer learning, collective thinking and replication of effective GESI practices across the ecosystem.

Inclusive Design and Intersectionality

- Move beyond “women only” approaches by actively addressing the needs of PWDs, rural innovators, youth, and other underserved groups.
- Ensure meaningful participation / voice of affected groups in intervention design and implementation to strengthen inclusion and relevance.

Ecosystem-Level Change

- Engage financial institutions more proactively to design products and opportunities that are accessible to women, PWDs and other under-represented innovators.
- Engage ministries, sector actors and GESI-affected individuals from project inception, so that interventions align with national priorities and stakeholder needs, increasing uptake and sustainability.
- Promote demand-driven innovation and system-level change, shifting responsibility for addressing adoption barriers from individuals to institutions change.
- Support universities and institutions to integrate GESI within policies, budgets, and operational practices to promote institutional change.
- Embed normative change components in all projects in order to shift mindsets and strengthen gender equality and broader social inclusion.

This GESI Deep Dive demonstrates that meaningful progress has been made in advancing gender equality and social inclusion within the research and innovation ecosystem in Africa, even though this progress remains uneven and, in some cases, fragile. Across the RISA portfolio, awardees demonstrated commitment to GESI principles, with evidence of increased participation of women and

PWDs, evolving institutional practices, and early signs of policy influence. Examples such as Ghana's disability blueprint, university allocation of budgets for inclusive practices, and greater recognition by financial institutions of gaps in their products faced by women and PWD innovators, highlight how RISA has catalysed systemic awareness and incremental systemic change.

The most impactful strategies combined ecosystem-level interventions - such as policy engagement, institutionalisation, and normative shifts - with inclusive access mechanisms, including mentorship, training, and networking.

The findings show that the most impactful strategies combined ecosystem-level interventions - such as policy engagement, institutionalisation, and normative shifts - with inclusive access mechanisms, including mentorship, training, and networking. This approach helped ensure that immediate opportunities for under-represented groups were coupled with structural shifts that may sustain impact over time. However, important challenges remain. GESI was not always consistently or clearly integrated into projects, which limited the visibility of contributions and constrained the ability to track changes beyond participation metrics. The broad scope of RISA programme, spanning diverse sectors and approaches, also made it difficult to compare results, draw overarching conclusions or identify a coherent story of impact.

Short funding timelines further limited the ability to demonstrate transformative changes, particularly where shifts in norms, policies, and institutional practices required long-term engagement. In many ways, RISA attempted to achieve too much within too short a period.

Overall, the review shows that RISA had laid valuable foundations for embedding GESI within research and innovation systems. While promising approaches and useful lessons have emerged, the extent to which awardees could sustain system-wide impact remained uncertain. Future progress will depend on deepening institutional ownership, strengthening clarity and consistency in measurement frameworks, and ensuring future investments balance inclusive access with broader ecosystem transformation. By doing so, RISA and its partners can help move the sector beyond short-term efforts to truly systemic and lasting change.

About the RISA Fund

The RISA Fund (2021-2026) is a multi-country initiative funded by UK International Development from the UK government designed to strengthen research and innovation systems across Africa. It brings together two complementary programmes under the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) Research and Evidence Division— Strengthening Research Institutions in Africa (SRIA) and African Technology and Innovation Partnerships (ATIP)—to harness synergies and drive systemic change. Managed by a consortium comprising Chemonics UK, Results for Development, and SOAS University of London, RISA collaborates with a wide range of implementing partners including universities, innovation hubs, government agencies, private sector actors, and international development firms. The programme operates in six countries: Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and South Africa, supporting locally driven solutions and fostering cross-sectoral learning and impact.

Contact: info@risa-fund.org

www.risa-fund.org/

