EDGE Program Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy

I. Introduction

The Mastercard Foundation, in collaboration with Hybrid Designs and its consortium partners; R&D Group, iCog Consultants, Qua Qua Capitals with Deloitte as a fund manager has launched a transformative five-year initiative titled Entrepreneurship in the Digital and Gig Economy (EDGE). This program aims to unlock over 300,000 dignified and fulfilling employment opportunities for economically disadvantaged young people (aged 15-35) across Ethiopia by leveraging a digitally enabled and mediated domestic outsourcing market while nurturing a robust offshore outsourcing ecosystem.

Ethiopia's gig economy is nascent but growing, driven by technological advances, mobile technology, and increasing demand for flexible work. The sector offers opportunities for entrepreneurship, skill development, and financial inclusion, which are particularly relevant given Ethiopia's high youth unemployment rate (urban youth unemployment at 27.2%, with female youth unemployment twice that of males)[1].

Women's participation in the gig economy remains low, especially in male-dominated platforms such as ride-sharing, where women drivers constitute less than 3% of the workforce. Initiatives like the all-women Seregela ride-sharing company demonstrate potential for female inclusion but are exceptions rather than the norm[2]. Projects working on the digital gig economy that target women face several challenges, particularly when they lack a robust gender integration and safeguarding strategy.

Despite its promise, Ethiopia's gig economy has yet to meaningfully include persons with disabilities, who remain largely invisible in both data and program design. Limited research and disaggregated

[1] Country-Case-Study-Ethiopia.pdf

[2] The Rise of the Gig Economy in Ethiopia: A Pathway to Employment and Innovation - Shega

statistics make it difficult to assess their participation, and existing platforms rarely offer the accommodations or support needed to ensure accessibility.

This Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy is developed to ensure that the EDGE Program not only meets its targets on a numeric basis for young women's participation, but also achieves transformative, intersectional inclusion. The strategy plans to address the unique barriers faced by diverse groups of young women (80%) —including refugees and displaced persons (5%) (RDP), and women with disabilities (5%)—and men (20%) across Ethiopia. This approach acknowledges that merely increasing numbers of female participants is insufficient; true empowerment requires addressing systemic inequalities and fostering agency.

Similarly, meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities demands reasonable accommodations, accessible platforms, and an intentional effort to amplify their participation and visibility in the gig economy. For returnees, displaced persons (RDPs) in Ethiopia, this also entails highlighting and addressing specific barriers to digital participation, such as mobility restrictions, documentation gaps, and limited access to technology.

Guiding Principles:

Our approach to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion is firmly rooted in the following core principles, which inform every action and decision within the EDGE Program:

Intersectionality: Recognize that women's experiences are shaped by overlapping identities—such as disability, motherhood, displacement, socio-economic status, and urban/peri-urban context. This principle mandates that we look beyond "women" as a uniform group and understand the specific, compounded barriers faced by different sub-groups, tailoring interventions accordingly.

Adaptivity: Tailor interventions to local contexts, cultures, and infrastructure. This means continuously learning from the ground, adjusting strategies based on feedback and emerging realities, and recognizing that a "one-size-fits-all" approach will not succeed in Ethiopia's diverse landscape.

Agency: Prioritize women's leadership, voice, and decision-making. This principle emphasizes empowering young women to have control over their own lives, their choices, and their participation in the project. It means creating platforms for their voices to be heard and acted upon, fostering self-efficacy, and enabling their active role in shaping solutions.

Do No Harm: Ensure safety, privacy, and dignity for all participants. This is an utmost ethical principle that requires rigorous risk assessment to prevent any unintended negative consequences, especially in relation to protection from exploitation, abuse, and harassment. It means ensuring that program activities do not inadvertently increase harm or put participants at risk. The EDGE Safeguarding Framework ensures that safety, consent, confidentiality, and survivor-centered responses are embedded across the program. We recognize that women's participation in digital work may increase their visibility and risk; thus, safeguarding is both a gender equity and protection imperative.

Accessibility & Accommodation: Ensure that all program components—from digital platforms to physical spaces are designed with universal access in mind. This means proactively identifying and removing barriers that prevent youth with disabilities from full participation, and embedding adaptive tools, inclusive communication, and mobility considerations into implementation.

Representation & Belonging: Recognize the importance of visible and meaningful inclusion of young people with disabilities in leadership, consultation, and co-creation processes. This principle emphasizes the need to move beyond tokenism, fostering environments where youth with disabilities see themselves reflected, valued, and empowered as agents of change within the program.

Integrating Gender and Safeguarding: The EDGE Program recognizes that gender inclusion cannot be achieved without ensuring safety and protection from harm. We take a deliberate approach to **embed safeguarding into all gender-responsive activities**, so that young women, especially those facing compounding barriers, can participate fully and safely in digital and gig economy opportunities.

This includes:

- Risk-assessing training environments and outreach strategies.

- Ensuring secure digital communication and privacy protocols and accessible complaint mechanisms.
- Training staff and mentors on GESI safeguarding.
- Providing survivor-centered reporting and referral systems.

By integrating safeguarding into gender and social inclusion work, EDGE creates **safe, inclusive, and empowering spaces** for young women to thrive.

Collaboration: Partner with local women and youth led organizations, organizations of and for persons with disabilities, refuge led organizations (RLOs), youth associations from displacement-affected areas, youth advisory groups, relevant government and non-government stakeholders and community of practices to build on existing local expertise and networks, fostering learning and ensuring the voices of young people is part of the program implementation.

II. Strategic Pillars and Actions

Pillar 1: Deepening Understanding and Gender-Responsive Design

Objective: To identify the unique barriers, support systems, and communication preferences of diverse groups of young women, youth with disabilities and RDPs in each program location. This pillar ensures that our interventions are built on a solid foundation of context-specific knowledge, moving beyond assumptions to data-driven, nuanced understanding.

Action 1.1: Context-Specific Desk reviews & Assessments

This action involves actively seeking out and documenting the specific social, cultural, economic, and practical realities that influence young women's, youth with disabilities and RDPs' lives in program operational areas in the digital gig work sector.

Conduct Primary and secondary assessments to inform program implementation:

Primary data collection will be conducted both in qualitative and quantitative methods on lived experiences of young women, youth with disability and RDPs' to gather critical insights to inform program implementation.

The program will establish youth advisory groups to make sure the voices of program participants are considered. The collection of Success Stories and Case Studies will also further enrich the primary data insights.

Secondary data will be conducted through desk assessment reviewing existing studies and assessments conducted by other researchers and programs. Qualitative assessments will swiftly use lived experiences to inform inclusive program design and outreach. They will identify key obstacles for young women, youth with disabilities, and RDPs (including cultural norms, care burdens, accessibility, literacy, mobility, and documentation gaps), and pinpoint existing support networks for direct program responsiveness.

Action 1.2: Gender and Social Inclusion Sensitive Tools and Guidelines

This action focuses on embedding gender, disability and RDP lens into the project's operational tools, ensuring that data collection and program content are inclusive and responsive.

Integrate GESI variables (sex, disability status, marital status, parental status, refugee and displacement status etc.) In pre and post assessments, needs assessments, online registration forms, and MEL frameworks. This means designing forms that capture not just sex, but also disability status, marital status, parental status, RDP and specific barriers encountered. For MEL, it means defining clear indicators that allow for disaggregation beyond just sex, and ideally, for qualitative measurement of changes in confidence and decision making.

Disaggregate data not only by sex, but also by age, disability, displacement, marital status, parental and location. This goes beyond basic gender disaggregation to reveal how different intersecting identities are not only collected but also analyzed and used to understand how they influence access, participation, and outcomes. For example, knowing participation rates of "Peri-urban young mothers with disabilities" gives a more disaggregated finding than just "women." enabling data driven and targeted response.

Mandate GESI focused curriculum design (inclusive language (not just gender inclusive but disability and displacement), diverse imagery, flexible learning options, universal design principles and awareness of literacy level) in the EDGE "Standard Training Guideline" and training modules. This ensures that all training materials actively challenge

stereotypes, use gender-neutral or inclusive language where appropriate, feature diverse role models (including young women with disabilities, young rural women), and offer learning pathways that accommodate different needs, learning styles and literacy levels. One major principle that both program teams and trainers must reflect is that ***'' No participant, whether attending with a child, a personal assistant, or using an assistive device - is excluded from training sessions".***

Example: *Registration forms specifically ask about care duties, disability (including type), preferred language, and safe contact methods, and any reasonable accommodation needs. These include prompts regarding temporary childcare needs during training, assistive technology requirements, accessible and alternative formats (such as sign language, captioned videos, or accessible electronic copies, and support services like personal assistants.*

Pillar 2: Inclusive Outreach and Mobilization

Objective: To maximize awareness and participation among young women, youth with disabilities and RDPs using context-appropriate and accessible communication channels. This pillar emphasizes proactive and tailored approaches to reach those who are often excluded from conventional programs due to intersecting barriers such as disability, caregiving responsibilities, geographic location, displacement status or limited digital access

Action 2.1: Multi-Channel & Localized Outreach

Objective: This action focuses on diversifying communication methods to ensure information reaches all target groups effectively, respecting their access to information and cultural preferences and accessibility requirements.

Community Radio & Local Influencers: In peri-urban and remote areas (e.g., Asosa, Jigjiga e.t.c), utilize community radio stations known for their high listenership. This involves developing engaging spots, and short story telling in local languages. Additionally, engage local women's associations, youth led associations, RDP led associations (RLOs association of displaced persons) and religious establishments for information dissemination.

Digital Platforms/Social Media: In urban centers (Addis Ababa, Adama, Bahir Dar, Dire Dawa), actively use popular platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp to promote inclusive engagement. Content will be specifically tailored for young women and youth with disabilities, and RDPs featuring visuals and messages that resonate with their aspirations

and address their concerns - such as flexible work arrangements, income generation, peer support and child care support/facility, reasonable accommodation and digital accessibility needs.

Male and Non-Disabled Ally Engagement: To foster a truly inclusive and supportive environment for women, youth with disabilities and RDPs in digital work, the EDGE program ensures that orientation sessions—whether delivered in-person or online—engage male community members and individuals without disabilities. These sessions are designed to raise awareness of the transformative impact inclusive participation can have on families, communities, and local economies. By addressing misconceptions and social stigma surrounding both gender and disability, the initiative cultivates empathy, understanding, and proactive allyship. This engagement plays a vital role in reducing household and community-level barriers by promoting sh***ared responsibility and encouraging allies to support equitable access.*** *Men and non-disabled individuals are encouraged to actively advocate for gender integration, reasonable accommodations, and inclusive practices—whether through supporting care duties, creating accessible learning environments, or endorsing the participation of women and youth with disabilities. Through this approach, the program aims to build a culture of inclusion where diversity across gender, disability, and background is not only accepted but celebrated as essential to community resilience and economic progress.*

Address Misconception (about young women, Disability and RDPs): Use compelling storytelling and testimonials from successful female gig workers (and their supportive families) to challenge prevailing myths about digital work, women's roles, and safety concerns. Share empowering stories and testimonials from youth with disabilities who have successfully engaged in digital gig work. This should be done through various media (radio, social media, and community meetings) to shift negative perceptions and build trust. This is particularly critical for refugees who have only recently been able to access digital IDs and the right to work.

Examples: *In Somali region, work with respected Imams to endorse women's participation in digital training, framing it within local cultural values. In Oromiya, use local language radio spots that feature local success stories to build relevance and trust. In Addis Ababa, create short video features using captioning, spotlighting how youth with disabilities are leveraging assistive technologies—such as screen readers, voice typing tools, and assistive devices—to succeed in the gig economy.*

Action 2.2: Targeted Recruitment Strategies

This action ensures that efforts are made to explicitly include and prioritize young women, youth with disabilities and RDPs actively counteracting systemic biases that might otherwise exclude them.

Beware of the already set quotas for intersectional groups (e.g. 80% young women, 20% young men and 10% disadvantaged groups). These are minimum targets to ensure equitable representation and avoid programs being dominated by less disadvantaged groups. These quotas will be regularly monitored in registration and recruitment reports.

Partner with organizations serving these groups for direct referrals (e.g., disability associations,, RDP, refugees and returnees services, light for the world, UNHCR, IOM ,women's shelters, one stop centers , women and social affairs, associations for young mothers and MOH women development armies etc). These partnerships leverage existing trust and networks, ensuring that information reaches and is understood by the most disadvantaged, and that referrals are culturally sensitive.

Use tailored recruitment drives (e.g., information sessions at IDP camps, disability centers, health posts, women's cooperatives). This involves taking the recruitment process directly to where marginalized groups reside or gather, reducing their burden of accessing information or registration points. Materials and facilitators will be adapted for these specific settings (e.g., sign language interpretation for communities with hearing impairment, accessible digital copies, braille, audio formats for participants with visual impairments).

Example: *In the south region, partner with the local disability association to recruit young women with hearing impairments, potentially using sign language interpreters during information sessions. In Amhara, collaborate closely with IDP camp leaders to conduct targeted outreach and registration within the camps.*

Pillar 3:Gender Equality and Social Inclusive Program Delivery and Support

Objective: To remove logistical, technological, cultural and accessibility-related barriers to the participation of young women, youth with disabilities and RDPs in training, ensuring their sustained engagement and successful learning. This pillar is about making the learning environment and support systems explicitly inclusive of diverse needs, recognizing that gender, disability and displacement can share unique experiences and challenges.

Action 3.1: Flexible and Accessible Training Modalities

This action focuses on designing flexible and inclusive learning pathways that accommodate the diverse lives, access needs and responsibilities of young women, youth with disabilities and RDPs rather than expecting them to fit into rigid structures. The following training modalities are applicable, varying by the specific products or training types each consortium provides

Offer a mix of online, blended, and in-person formats. This provides choice and flexibility to meet the needs of participants including those with disabilities as *mobility might be a barrier and as access to digital ID and proof of residency for registration might be a barrier for RDPs. Online learning can be ideal for those with limited mobility, digital ID* while blended (mix of online and in-person) offers support, and in-person tailors to those with limited digital access or a preference for direct instruction.

Self-Paced Learning: Provide learning modules that can be completed at the participant's own speed and at any time. This is particularly crucial for mothers or young women with heavy domestic responsibilities, allowing them to learn when their schedule permits, often outside traditional working hours.

Flexible Scheduling: Schedule live sessions (online or in-person) at times that explicitly accommodate typical care duties and local routines. This might mean avoiding peak childcare hours, or offering evening/weekend sessions, based on local assessments.

Accessible and Localized Training Hubs: Ensure the working spaces the program already plans to set up across the country and other lateral hubs (kefita) are safe, accessible (beyond proximity to include accommodation for persons with disabilities) in local communities. These hubs must be equipped with internet connectivity, shared devices (laptops, tablets), quiet learning spaces, and potentially a dedicated childcare corner. Selection of the hub locations should consider proximity to the residential location of the majority of participants to reduce travel time, cost, and safety concerns. Where possible facilitating zero-rating internet fees for a certain number of EDGE program participants that are integrated in product platforms.

Device and Access Support: Ensure the planned internet connectivity within the program working spaces is stable, there is enough power supply and accessible for young women with disabilities. This directly tackles the digital access challenge. Provide participants with access to smartphones, tablets, or laptops based on their training needs, and ensure that all devices and platforms are accessible. Accessibility support and training in the use of assistive technologies should be offered as part of onboarding to ensure equitable digital participation.

Example: *In Wolaita Sodo, setting up a women-only digital lab with a visible childcare corner signals a commitment to supporting mothers. In the Somali region, using a mobile van equipped with tablets and solar chargers brings the training directly to nomadic or remote communities. In Addis Ababa devices provided for youth with disability features such as text-to-speech, screen magnifiers, and speech to text tools.*

Action 3.2: Comprehensive Wrap-around Support Services

This action acknowledges that training alone is often insufficient. It focuses on addressing the non-training barriers that commonly lead to women's dropout or hinder their full engagement.

Childcare Support: Provide options such as on-site childcare at training centers (where feasible and demand is high) or connect with local women's rights associations to assign volunteers to provide child care services, or ensure training venues consider availability of child care spots/facilities. Where possible offer stipends/vouchers for childcare arrangements made by the participants with trusted local caregivers. For no-cost solutions, this may involve facilitating peer-to-peer childcare networks or leveraging community volunteers, and identifying existing services in TVET institutions.

Digital Literacy & Confidence Building: Ensure trainers address and support young women, youth with disabilities and RDPs with limited prior tech exposure to technology or require assistive tools. This, if possible, goes beyond basic training to include **modules on confidence-building, and challenging internal biases or external stereotypes that might hinder young women from embracing technology.**

Mentorship and Peer Support: Systematically pair participants with youth female, youth with disability and RDPs mentors from the digital sector (or successful former trainees) who can provide practical advice, encouragement, and career guidance. Facilitate strong peer-to-peer support networks (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram groups, and regular meet-ups) where program participants can share experiences, troubleshoot problems, and motivate each other.

Safeguarding and Protection Referrals: Participants experiencing sexual exploitation, harassment, online grooming, or unsafe conditions will be supported through a survivor-centered safeguarding protocol. EDGE will maintain a confidential referral system in partnership with qualified service providers, local child and women's protection agencies, and community support structures. Participants will be informed of their rights and available reporting channels during onboarding.

Example: *In Addis, offering a structured peer support WhatsApp group specifically for young mothers helps them share experiences and solutions. In rural areas, partnering with existing health posts provides a trusted entry point for psychosocial support referrals.*

Action 3.3: Gender and Inclusion Sensitive Curriculum & Content

This action ensures that the learning content itself is empowering, relevant, and contributes to a transformative understanding of gender roles, disability inclusion, RDP inclusion and opportunities within the digital economy.

Use inclusive language, challenge stereotypes, and feature diverse imagery. Review curriculum materials or arrange an overview session with consortiums leading training to remove gender, disability and displacement biases from training curriculums. For example, show young men and women sharing household tasks, adding welcoming and motivational messages before training or show images of young women in non-traditional digital roles and showcasing female role models in the digital gig industry. Imagery should reflect the diversity of Ethiopian women (rural, urban, different ethnicities, with disabilities).

Include modules on:

- Showcase a wide range of opportunities beyond traditional "women's jobs," encouraging young women to explore high-growth or non-traditional digital roles.
- Equip young women with skills in budgeting, saving, understanding contracts, taxation for gig work, and basic entrepreneurship.
- Feature Ethiopian women freelancers and entrepreneurs as guest speakers. Invite successful local women who are thriving in digital or gig work to share their experiences, challenges, and successes. This provides relatable role models and practical insights.

Example: *A video features a successful Ethiopian woman with a disability who runs her own digital business from a rural area.*

Pillar 4: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) with an Intersectional Lens

Objective: To track progress, identify gaps, and inform adaptive management, ensuring continuous improvement and responsiveness to women's needs and the broader gender and inclusion goals. This pillar embeds accountability and continuous learning.

Action 5.1: Comprehensive Gender, disability and RDP -Disaggregated Data Collection

This action ensures that data collection goes beyond simple numbers to capture the lived realities of diverse participants' experiences and outcomes.

Collect data disaggregated by gender, age, disability, marital status, location, displacement, and other relevant intersectional markers (e.g., socio-economic status, displacement status, motherhood etc). This allows for precise tracking of who is participating, who is benefiting, and where disparities persist among different groups of women.

Track not only enrollment and completion, but also retention, income and confidence. Beyond basic participation, focus on qualitative and quantitative indicators that show genuine changes in women, youth with disability and RDPs' economic situation, their control over resources and their confidence.

Use qualitative tools (focus groups discussions and Success stories) to gather rich feedback from different groups. This provides the "why" and "how" behind quantitative data, capturing meaningful changes in gender relations, power dynamics, disability and RDP inclusion and lived experiences of participants.

Example: *Qualitative feedback sessions highlight stories of increased agency in household financial decision-making.*

Action 5.2: Regular GESI Analysis and Capturing and Sharing Learning

This action transforms collected data into actionable insights, ensuring that the program is continuously improving and responding to real-time needs.

Analyze data for GESI gaps and unique challenges. Go beyond presenting disaggregated numbers to deep analysis: *Why* are certain groups lagging? *What* specific barriers persist? *How* do interventions need to be adapted for different intersectional groups?

Participate in a community of practices for gender reflection and learnings: Participate in existing gender CoPs to share learnings and best practices to provide space for sharing lessons learned, and joint problem-solving. This fosters a culture of learning and adaptive management.

Document learnings/best practices and integrate in quarterly reports : Ensure lessons learnt and findings are documented in the form of success stories/case studies; learning briefs and quarterly reports that highlight specific achievements focusing on the journey, challenges participants overcome especially on young women and disadvantaged groups.

Pillar 5: Staff Capacity Building on Gender-Responsive Programming

Objective: To equip all EDGE program staff, consortium partners, and service providers with the knowledge, skills, and commitment required to effectively implement a program that has strong gender equality and social inclusion commitment and result. This pillar ensures that GESI considerations are systematically integrated into day-to-day operations and decision-making at all levels.

Action 5.1: Foundational GESI Programing: have a foundational understanding of gender equality and social inclusion and youth engagement principles.

- **Organize a training (refresher) on gender equality and social inclusion program approach:** with best practices and learnings. To create an understanding on key concepts, gender roles, stereotypes and importance of intersectional approach.
- **Conduct/attend regular "Gender Equality Social Inclusion Lens" review session:** Hold routine GESI learning meetings (Quarterly GESI Reflection Session) where partners review their activities and planned interventions through an inclusion lens, identifying potential biases, opportunities for inclusion, and unforeseen risks.

Example: *The Gender lead conducts monthly sessions with all partners and PMO teams to review progress against GESI integration strategies, ensuring programs actively seek out and support program participants.*

III. Gender Equality Social Inclusion Responsive Indicators

This section outlines the key areas for measuring output and progress, aligning with the objectives of the EDGE program and this Strategy. Specific indicators will be developed and tracked under each category.

This section discusses program participants, specifically focusing on young women and their intersectional identities, including young women, women with disabilities, and refugee and displaced young women.

1. Access and Participation: Measuring equitable reach and sustained engagement of diverse young women and men.

Indicators:

- Number of young people (15-35) that have accessed employment in the outsourcing sector.
- Percentage increased in the income levels of young people targeted in the program
- Percentage of female participants who report improved access to digital devices and internet, as a result of the program.

2. Economic Empowerment and Financial Agency: Measuring changes in income and savings for young women.

Indicators:

- Percentage of young women reporting increased in their income (the overall indicator in the MEAL module is Percentage increased in the income levels of young people targeted in the program – so the proportion will be calculated from this)
- Qualitative feedback of young women reporting increased control over income.

3. Quality of Life and Well-being: Measuring improvements in overall living conditions, reduction in care burdens, and access to essential support services.

Indicators:

- Percentage of young women participants who report improved access to wrap-around supports such as childcare
- Qualitative feedback from young women on program relevance
- Percentage of young women participants expressing willingness to apply for or accept on-shore gig jobs after program intervention.
- Percentage of young women participants expressing willingness to apply for or accept offshore digital gig jobs after program intervention.

4. Resilience and Agency (Voice and Decision-Making): Measuring increased confidence and influence in household and community decisions for young women.

Indicators:

- Percentage of young women participants reporting increased confidence to seek and perform digital gig work after EDGE training.
- Qualitative feedback from young Women reporting making household decisions

5. Community support: Measuring the support young women are getting for participating in digital gig works

- Percentage of women reporting increased family or community support for their participation in digital and offshore gig work.

VII. Budget Considerations

Adequate and dedicated financial resources are critical for effective gender integration and achieving transformative outcomes. In the coming Fiscal year, funds should be allocated for:

- **Gender equality social inclusion assessments:** Essential for informed, context-specific implementation and adoptive management.
- **Capacity building**: Essential for onboarding consortium members and other relevant stakeholders about the GESI integration strategy for the program.
- **GESI responsive MEL:** For robust data collection, analysis, and learning.

VIII. Conclusion

This Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy ensures that the EDGE Program is not only inclusive in numbers, but also transformative in outcomes. By embedding intersectional gender analysis, adaptive outreach, flexible delivery, robust support, robust safeguarding, and rigorous MEL, EDGE will consider integrating the mentioned intersectionality in the program implementation.

Disclaimer: This strategy is a living document and will be periodically reviewed and adapted based on learning, evaluation findings, and contextual understandings.

Annex I – Disability Inclusion SOP