Socio-economic assessments are increasingly becoming an important aspect of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) in the UK. NPPF’s clarification in defining sustainable development as having not just an environmental role, but also an economic and social role has added an additional weight to their importance. Whilst historically, EIA has tended to focus on protection of the environment, a holistic and a well-balanced consideration of economic, social and environmental elements is increasingly being implemented in EIA today. In order for developments to foster strong, vibrant communities, EIA should give appropriate consideration to impact on humans, the resulting bio-physical environment and the interaction the two would have.

Pursuant to Part 1, Regulation 4 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017, EIAs increasingly incorporate socio-economic assessments that consider impacts on population and human health. Whilst not strictly legislated, typical socio-economic receptors considered within the scope of EIA are:

- Population
- Health status and deprivation
- Employment and labour market
- Earnings
- Unemployment
- Qualifications and skills
- Travel to work
- Housing
- Health and education facilities; and
- Social, recreation and retail facilities

A receptor that is rarely considered is gender. It is common knowledge that stereotypically, gender establishes socially constructed roles and power relations between men and women. Due to different roles, activities and knowledge, women and men’s concerns, opportunities and challenges are likely to differ. Consequently, the environment for men and women is likely to vary.

Gender equality does not obliterate these differences, it merely ensures equal opportunities and societal status. Whilst gender equality is not restricted to women, it is women, especially those from deprived backgrounds who, often have fewer opportunities and less access to resources such as land and income.

When it comes socio-economic impacts resulting from new developments, typical indices of deprivation are usually determined by the following indicators:

- Income
- Employment
- Education
- Health
- Crime
- Barrier to housing and services
- Living environment
These indicators outline impacts on human well-being and implications on societal operations, however, they fail to capture issues specific to men and women. Integrating gender and attempting to tackle gender inequality within socio-economic assessments is a strategy to address the concerns and experiences of both men and women in existing and future environments. Incorporating gender as a socio-economic receptor and gender inequality as a deprivation indicator would trigger the need to assess the implications of planning and development on men and women, thus creating opportunities to focus on gender gap issues. However, the extent to which gender specific indicator data is currently available could be a barrier to providing gender assessments underpinned by hard facts and evidence.

The various stages of EIA present opportunities for integrating gender-based considerations. The Scoping Opinion request provides an opportunity to identify the issue and to provide a framework to set out mitigation measures and gender-based strategies within the socio-economic chapter.

There are several articles, such as ‘The role of community consultation on major infrastructure projects’ [on IEMA] prepared by SKM Enviros and ‘Effective Scoping and the Benefits of Consultation’ [on IEMA] prepared by Spawforths, both of which confirm the significance of public consultation. This data collection technique provides a meaningful, equal opportunity arena for men and women to voice their concerns.

The socio-economic impact chapter within an environment statement provides an opportunity to conduct a thorough analysis of the negative and positive impacts of development on men and woman and to include measures to address gender-specific positive and/or negative effects. The inclusion of a gender action plan, or gender strategy, would be a progressive step towards diminishing impacts on men and women, and the inequality gap.

On a global scale, gender-based initiatives such as the ones undertaken by UNDP Regional Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa, are increasingly resulting in gender integration becoming a prerequisite for conducting EIA. It offers an important opportunity for gender inequality improvement. This is perhaps due to the presence of chronic gender inequality issues at a global level. However, it is noticeable that at an EU scale, the Gender Inequality Index 2017 indicates that UK is amongst the worst performing EU states on improvements to gender inequality.

At a macro-level, complete gender equality is perhaps difficult. However, integrating gender-based considerations provides a significant opportunity for a step towards gender inequality improvement at micro-level, creating vibrant and sustainable communities. Does it, therefore, also help unlock the door to achieving sustainable living environments?

The significance of this issue in creating sustainable development is certainly worthy of debate.