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Promoting inclusive business to empower women



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What effective strategies support companies to empower women within their core business and across value chains?

Under my research for the USAID-funded Leveraging Economic Opportunities (LEO) project, we found that agencies, who successfully promote businesses to adopt inclusive business practices to empower women, have a key focus on 'making the business case' to these companies and are able to speak the language of the private sector. We found that successful business cases were informed by a deep understanding of the incentives that drive a company's behaviour. We found that private sector incentives are often closely linked to enhancing business performance and increasing profits. Yet, with the birth of social enterprises and the private sector's increased understanding of shared value, the 'double bottom line' of social impact and business performance cannot be overlooked as a private sector incentive.

Given this complexity, I think it is essential that agencies seeking to effect change within the private sector understand the particular incentives of the private sector partners with which they seek to work, how gender plays into these incentives, and how these incentives can be leveraged to benefit women.

We found six primary types of incentives that can help 'make the business case' to the private sector to change their practices in a way that is more inclusive of and empowering for women:

- Accessing untapped employee talent
- Improving supply chain reliability

- Reaching female customers
- Opening new distribution channels
- Enhancing the brand and reputation of the business
- Furthering social impact

Are there other important incentives that we are leaving out? What else drives the private sector to be more inclusive?

Lastly, I want to mention that I have found in my work that even when a business case exists for firms to empower women, and the risks of doing so are manageable, businesses often do not act on this themselves. Various barriers – informational, motivational, social/gender norms and otherwise – stand in the way. Thus the work of agencies who promote an inclusive agenda are paramount! Whether from government, civil society, associations, community action, and even from business themselves, these change makers are often needed to actively present the business case to firms who are new to these opportunities and help businesses to buy down the various perceived risks. Sometimes this can simply be in the form of helping businesses to see the longer-term value of including women into their core business and then supporting them to find innovative strategies for long-term growth.

Have others also found this to be the case? How have people made the business case to companies? Have you found making a business case to be a helpful part of a strategy to helping companies to take the inclusive plunge?

For more on this topic read [Making the Business Case: Women's Economic Empowerment in Market Systems Development](#).

This blog was originally published on [EmpowerWomen.org](#), an open global platform that promotes collaboration, learning and innovation to advance women's economic empowerment.

Erin specialises in economic development and household economic strengthening programs with a focus on the empowerment of women and youth. Currently Erin is a Principal Consultant at MarketShare Associates (MSA). Erin has led a variety of consultancies including work with the USAID LEO initiative, the IFC, Plan, CARE and the Aga Khan Foundation. Prior to joining MSA, Erin was a Program Manager, Market Development and Access to Finance at the Aga Khan Foundation Canada. Past experience includes working for Women's World Banking, ProMujer, Aspen Institute and Earth Institute. Erin holds a Master of International Affairs from Columbia University.