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Women's economic empowerment and a market systems paradigm shift



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All blogs

Many programmes are still falling short of achieving their women's empowerment goals. Why?

Most of us know that in order to integrate and empower women in market systems, we have to actively influence market systems change in this direction. And yet, many programmes are still falling short of achieving their women's empowerment goals.

In cases where programmes do not succeed in integrating women, they may be applying a 'gender neutral' approach and therefore ignoring considerations around gender and women's issues, or they might be adding on women's empowerment and gender activities after general market research, analysis and even intervention design have been completed. However, as guidance from the original M4P WEE Framework onward has stressed, women's roles and controls, access and agency, gender dynamics et cetera must be considered right from the start.

So why do gender neutral or add-on approaches continue to be implemented? In my opinion, it is because the paradigm shift has not taken place in the culture of organisations. Many individuals within programmes realise what needs to be done, but the organisational ethos and supporting materials do not embody the principles and tools that can make this happen.

[Six rational responses to four common arguments](#)

There are various arguments that market systems programmes make to justify a less than optimal approach to women's economic empowerment.

Argument 1: "Market systems programmes are economic programmes not social programmes; our programmes are concerned with competitiveness and growth, not with women's empowerment."

This is a false statement all round. Market systems programmes target 'the poor' aiming to achieve poverty alleviation. This objective is central to all making markets work for the poor (M4P), value-chain development (VCD) and market development (MD) initiatives, while growth and competitiveness come second to improving livelihoods of the poor. Therefore market systems programmes could be deemed social programmes. This should hold true regardless if the poor are women, men, youth, an ethnic or religious minority or any other group in society.

The second response to this argument is one we all know very well by now; women's economic empowerment contributes to the economic and social well-being of communities, businesses, sectors and nations. The facts and figures are out there – from the World Bank to UN Women to leading business consultants. In market systems programmes, we focus on women's empowerment precisely because of our competitiveness and growth objectives.

Argument 2: "We can't ask our private sector partners to work with women – they are running a business and they have to be free to decide who they engage with."

In market systems programmes, we regularly ask our private sector partners to do things that they have not chosen to do in their business, and we even incentivize them to change their behaviours. Without interventions, businesses do not usually serve the poor, work in remote areas or think about ways to include hard to reach populations. Yet this is the stuff of market systems programmes: setting up consolidator or input supply networks that reach excluded farmers; designing services such as loan packages, insurance, skills development that can be extended to new market segments; improving enabling environment rules or norms that will shift power balances and level playing fields. This is exactly how we should be working with women in market systems, in the design of interventions and in our negotiation with partners. Fortunately, our private sector partners are often way ahead of us anyway. There are numerous examples where programmes set low gender targets but savvy business partners have figured out that women are important drivers in the sub-sector or that they are a potentially profitable consumer group, and these partners have moved forward on their own. This is not always the case, but it happens across target countries and contexts.

Argument 3: "Women aren't involved in the sub-sector so the programme just has to be sure that it is doing no harm."

There is no longer endorsement for only picking sub-sectors that are male dominated. In balanced economic development, as noted above, we recognise the need for and value of women's full participation – whether this be through women-targeted or integrated programming.

Women are involved in the sub-sector but are not as visible as their male counterparts. This is especially true in sub-sectors where aspects of the work take place at home, on the family farm or in the informal sector. Men are often the ones in the marketplace buying inputs, selling products and taking more powerful positions in a sub-sector. If women's roles are not understood from the start, with information only coming from men, important activities that women carry out may be overlooked, and sub-sector development will be less successful.

Argument 4: "'Gender' is too difficult and the staff are just learning about market systems."

If a programme is teaching staff about market systems with a gender neutral lens, then that is like teaching people arithmetic but only with even numbers – it appears less complex in the beginning but leads to complications and frustrations over time. Field staff who are trained on women's empowerment after they have done their market analysis and designed their interventions are often quick to understand the implications. As a result, they can be disappointed that the training came so late, and they can also become the biggest advocates of gendered approaches to market systems development. (As a result, working from the bottom up in a programme can be an excellent way of promoting the paradigm shift in organisational culture.)

Join the discussion

It's not that difficult really. It is a matter of both thinking about men and women as two different market segments, with overlapping similarities and some disparities, and making sure that guidance and tools to support field staff are appropriate and accessible.

At an upcoming [BEAM webinar](#), an updated women's empowerment and market systems (WEAMS) framework will be presented. We look forward to hearing if your programme has made the paradigm shift, what interesting work you are doing, what challenges or questions you have, and what you think should be included in the new framework. Register for the webinar and [read a summary](#) of the WEAMS framework in advance, and have the opportunity to provide your input into the framework before it is finalized and distributed.

Dr Linda Jones is a globally recognised expert in the inclusive development of markets and financial systems with a particular focus on women's economic empowerment. As a consultant, Linda has advised on a wide range of bilateral, multilateral and NGO programmes, and has held senior positions at the Aga Khan Foundation, Coady International Institute and Mennonite Economic Development Associates.

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