

July 31, 2017

Using a systemic lens to address gender inequality in the agricultural sector



Sarah Wall

All blogs

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Development activities are tasked with addressing women's empowerment and gender equality as a cross-cutting component of their results, but significant improvements in income and opportunities for women has been limited. **Recent research** conducted by MarketShare Associates for the BEAM Exchange indicates that one limitation is that projects have failed to understand the role that social norms and gender biases play. "Most programming tends to primarily focus on increasing women's access to opportunities, whether it be to markets, education information, land rights etc. – with less consideration of how the socio-cultural context in which they operate influences their decisions and ability to engage with, and benefit from, those opportunities." Development projects must find a way to work within the existing gendered social context to catalyse gender inclusion, as countries cannot compete in the emerging knowledge economy while still reinforcing norms that restrict the role women can play in society and the economy.

USAID's **Agricultural Value Chain's Activity in Bangladesh (AVC)**, implemented by DAI, takes a systemic approach to development, including gender empowerment. AVC looks at gender through a systemic lens to (1) focus on identifying gender equality as a pragmatic and economic issue, rather than a social/moral issue and (2) align gender interventions with economic and livelihood incentives. This blog will

discuss contextual findings from the Bangladesh AVC project around how AVC prioritises indirect strategies for gender inclusion, which work within existing social norms to address market constraints for women, and partner these with targeted direct strategies, designed to intentionally explore or shift the social norms around gender. Rather than focusing on gender empowerment exclusively, AVC aligns initiatives to generate improved incomes and opportunities in the sectors in which women are already working. AVC finds that social norms begin to shift when behaviour change aligns with a financial benefit.

The economic case for gender inclusion

Engaging women as market actors

Many development initiatives will attempt to capitalize on gender as a binding factor, looking for opportunities to build women to women linkages. However, AVC has found that while gender is a binding factor, it is relatively weak when compared to others socio-cultural factors, such as ethnicity, religion, and community. As a result, in order to be effective AVC recognized the need to look for opportunities where there is alignment between women to women connections and economic incentives. AVC does this by working in sectors where women already have a strong presence, to improve the overall productivity, inclusivity, and profitability of that sector, which will have a disproportionate impact on the incomes of women.

AVC works across eight value chains, however the focus of AVC's work in gender is largely in the flower sector. Flower production is important, as women are already involved multiple functions within the supply chain, versus other agricultural sectors where women may be involved in cultivation, but their roles are informal and confined to production or small-scale, home-based trading. Additionally, because flowers are a newer crop in Bangladesh, there are less rooted social norms around gender in this sector versus more established crops such as jute. In Bangladesh's flower sector, two of the most prominent retail companies are women-owned, Influential female traders have emerged, along with other female entrepreneurs that are pursuing small-scale businesses outside of production. These female leaders and businesswomen have emerged naturally as they were not pushing against established/rigid social norms. AVC is working to capitalize on these trends by developing a network of support that will ensure the success of these initial innovators and draw more women in from their example to move into higher paid and higher responsibility roles.

AVC launched its flower strategy by first working to identify female leaders and innovators in the flower sector, and raise awareness and visibility of these women. As visibility of women in a variety of functions increases, society becomes more comfortable seeing women in businesses/markets, chipping away at social norms that silo women into specific roles. AVC supported a number of flower consumer

shows, both local and national, that served as leverage points to raise consumer interest in flowers and allow producers, retailers, and other market actors to interact directly with their consumers. These consumer fairs built the capacity of the participating female entrepreneurs, but also raised their visibility, not only to other women, but also among men in the agricultural sector. Importantly, the consumer shows highlighted the business success of the women, not simply their prominence as female leaders, messaging their financial success, innovative business strategies, and improved livelihood. By focusing on the impact that the women's involvement in the sector had on their income and ability to provide for their family, these consumer fairs aligned women's incentives to support other women, with stronger incentives around financial security and family livelihood.

Building on events to raise visibility of women in the sector, AVC has developed a unique network of support, launching a peer to peer business model to build social capital among SMEs and support services within the market. AVC is launching a specific network that will link SMEs within the flower sector, with a targeted focus on including emerging businesswomen and female entrepreneurs. This network will serve two key purposes. First, the platform will serve as a SME accelerator to make women-owned ventures and businesses "market ready." Women's historical underrepresentation in business can present capacity challenges in launching new ventures. The accelerator will identify women who have moved into trading or retailing functions with high capacity for growth to support their business management skills, access to finance, legal registration, and growth strategy/business canvas modelling. Second, the accelerator will form a network of SMEs and entrepreneurs that are serving a variety of functions in the flower sector and run formal learning sessions, informal discussions, and work planning/strategy sessions around joint challenges or common business opportunities. This will allow SMEs to connect with other SMEs and entrepreneurs – women as well as men – who are working in the same function and other levels of the supply chain. The support provided by the peer to peer network will help ensure that more women-owned businesses will thrive, reinforcing the importance of inclusivity in a growing sector/economy.

Engaging women as consumers

In donor-saturated markets like Bangladesh's Southern Delta, a high number of social enterprises or other hybrid business/NGOs emerge, and firms are pursuing the double bottom line of social impact and business performance. Still, projects can confuse this focus on social impact with an opportunity to lobby the businesses by identifying gender equality as a social/moral issue. This approach is met with pushback from communities and leaders, even prominent female leaders, as efforts to address gender as a moral issue are significantly constrained by existing social norms around the role of women and men in the home, market, and community. Messaging female inclusivity as a moral obligation leaves firms and individuals

operating under a donor-focused strategy, limiting the sustainability of gender programming. To catalyze gender inclusion, projects should consider how to combine economic motivations with other shifting social incentives to catalyze pressure for change.

AVC has been able to effectively communicate to key partners the importance of targeting women by aligning the business's goals of improving sales, targeting new customers, and expanding market reach with the strategy of marketing to women as a new consumer base. Women are not only involved in the production/supply of flowers, they are also a large percentage of the buyers or recipients of flowers, and therefore represent an important market opportunity if retailers can sponsor female-targeted consumer events and products. AVC worked with local producers to organize the consumer flower fairs and events around Valentines' Day and Mothers' Day, and participants in the national Flower Fest developed new products targeting women including bouquet designs, flower crowns, wedding décor, etc.

AVC is beginning to expand its strategy to target women as consumers by focusing on women's importance as horticultural/produce buyers. AVC partnered lead firms with marketing companies who helped transform large, inefficient marketing campaigns into targeted branding and marketing strategies, aimed specifically at generating loyalty among existing customers, or accessing new market segments. The marketing firms messaged the importance of including women as a market segment, and stressed the important financial benefits of tapping into women as an under-saturated market. Women are largely responsible for household daily shopping and also are frequently involved in homestead farming, making them a key market segment both for produce and input products/seeds. As firms target women in pursuit of improving their bottom line, the female customers have improved access to quality inputs and produce, and their bargaining power as important consumers is increased. By focusing on targeting women, not as a moral issue, but as a pragmatic and economic issue, AVC's interventions generate more sustainable behaviour change by building powerful financial incentives around gender inclusion.

Next steps

The next steps for AVC will be to capitalise on success to date in the flower sector to scale up efforts and establish more structured/formal vertical linkages between women in the flower supply chain. AVC's goal is to build on increased capacity and social connections resulting from the SME accelerator, and begin catalysing vertical partnerships to create a structured supply chain that is led by women entrepreneurs. Additionally, as women in the flower sector gain greater prominence, AVC will continue to track how these efforts reverberate into other markets and sectors. Initial activities from the peer to peer network have revealed potential for increased value and business opportunities around homestead

vegetable farming, as firms are seeing this as a potential opportunity to brand safe, home-grown vegetables. Homestead farming could be an important area to support women moving into additional functions around consolidation, trading, and retailing vegetable products. AVC will support the peer to peer network in motivating early adapters that wish to capitalise on this opportunity and support capacity building around safe production practices to meet this demand.

Printed from <https://beamexchange.org/community/blogs/2017/7/31/systemic-lens-gender-inequality-agriculture/> on 04/19/2024 at 20:29