



# How to Lift up Communities by Empowering Women

Empowering women and girls so they can realise their potential doesn't just benefit them, but also their wider societies. Greater gender equality enhances economic efficiency and improves most development outcomes. If women can make use of their skills and talents, they can increase overall productivity and raise average living standards.

**“When women participate fully in the labour force, it creates opportunities and generates growth. Closing the gender gap in employment could add \$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025. Increasing the proportion of women in public institutions makes them more representative, increases innovation, improves decision-making and benefits whole societies.”**

[UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres](#)



## Our research

At TRANSFORM, empowering women, specifically women entrepreneurs, is a fundamental aspect of our work. Many of the social enterprises with which we partner have a clear aim of raising up women. Their work aligns closely with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal number five, which is about attaining gender equality – but also links to goals one, eight and eleven: No Poverty; Decent Work and Economic Growth; and Sustainable Cities and Communities.

To evaluate the impact of work on women and girls, we commissioned a report looking at five of our partners. The aim was to explore the enablers that help women break free from gender norms, take on a new role or business, boost their incomes and improve their families' living standards – while also examining the barriers in their way, both in terms of getting started and subsequently, scaling up.

At TRANSFORM, we recognise the value of sharing insights and learnings gained through our work with impact enterprises, to accelerate wider positive change. You can find our latest Insight Papers and research findings [here](#).

[www.TRANSFORM.global](http://www.TRANSFORM.global)



The report, called **Lifting up Communities by Empowering Women**, was published in September 2023. Among other key findings, the report details how enterprises can support their female employees and actualise women's empowerment at work by:

- **Consciously linking women's positive outcomes with broader positive outcomes**
- **Adopting a targeted approach in recruitment and training**
- **Designing their working model and environment for women**
- **Leveraging partnerships at strategic points in delivery**
- **Offering flexible employment**
- **Providing access to credit and saving schemes**

# Our gender event in London

As ever, we are keen to share these findings with our wider sector, to help accelerate positive change. And so, in November 2023, we held an event for experts in the development community on the economic empowerment of women, based on the publication of our research. Lisa Hawkes, Unilever's Global Sustainability Senior Manager and a TRANSFORM Project Lead, chaired the discussion alongside expert speakers, including:

- Alison Ward, CEO of Cotton Connect
- Virginia Gardiner, CEO of Loowatt
- Deepti Sastry, CEO of Integrative Solutions and Evaluation Lead for TRANSFORM
- Alice Allan, Director of Collaboration, Business Fights Poverty

This paper provides key insights from the day.



## KEY DISCUSSION THEMES

### 1. Offer flexible opportunities

The entire global economy is propped up by care work. For society to function, someone has to look after babies, children and elderly or incapacitated family members. All around the world, women shoulder a disproportionate share of this work. They also do most of the household chores, like cooking and cleaning. In fact, 75% of all domestic work is done by women. And all of it is unpaid.

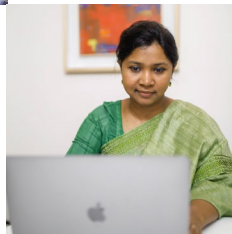
The unequal distribution of domestic work constitutes a root cause of women's economic and social disempowerment, which is why flexible working patterns are crucial in helping women raise themselves out of poverty. Women need to be able to earn an income around their caring and household obligations. Many can't be available for work in a place outside their home for the entire day, which is why traditional male working patterns often aren't a good fit.

While there is an important need to challenge traditional gender stereotypes, we should also ensure women are listened to. Not all women will want to take on additional responsibilities outside the home or delegate caring responsibilities. It's important to question the status quo but remain mindful of the realities of these women's lives.

If women are given flexible opportunities, particularly ones that they can do from home, their ability to earn an additional income not only raises their family's living standards – but also makes them feel like more valuable members of their community. It boosts their confidence, which enables them to go on to make further positive changes to their lives.

#### QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Are you tailoring roles to women and their domestic responsibilities, rather than expecting them to work in the same way as men?
- Can the employee/entrepreneur work flexible hours and/or from home?
- Have you asked the women you want to work with about the kind of opportunities that would work best for them?
- What can you do to help shift the gender stereotypes about caring and domestic work that are holding women back?



**We**  
**TRANSFORM**  
**Lives**



## 2. Celebrate role models

Role models are vital. If women can't see other women like them succeeding, they don't view it as a possibility for themselves. It's a basic question of representation. Women leaders and business owners must be celebrated. It's how to inspire other women's ambitions.

Storytelling is incredibly important here. Share examples of local women getting to the top. Explain how they got there, by letting them tell their story in their own words. Real-life examples are powerful.

It's also essential that women can network with each other. 'Sisterpreneurship' means women coming together as a business community to forge partnerships, share resources and help each other. After all, men have been doing this for millennia.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Do you have women in leadership positions?
- Are those female leaders given visible roles, such as speaking opportunities at events?
- Do you help women leaders mentor younger female staff or entrepreneurs?



## 3. Engage men as allies

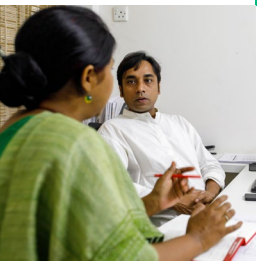
In many societies, the stereotype seems to persist that raising up women somehow means putting down men. In reality, gender equality benefits everyone.

For men, it will not only help free them from constraining stereotypes about how they should behave but also raise overall living standards, due to all the additional talent helping to grow the economy.

Educating men in the art of the possible is consequently a key component of empowering women. If male stakeholders can be encouraged to look at projects through a gender lens, hopefully, they will come to understand the benefits for all parties of questioning traditional patriarchal approaches. It's through such collaboration with men that we can improve outcomes for everybody.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Have you considered offering male team members or men related to a project gender sensitisation training, to create male champions of gender equality?
- Are you talking to men about the socio-economic benefits of changing systems, so they don't exclude women?
- Are you including men in discussions related to workplace gender issues?



## 4. Improve women's access to finance

In certain cultures, women still have difficulty accessing finance. Money is often held by the men in marriages and families. In some countries, women still can't open bank accounts. As a result, they often don't have any credit score and no ability to access traditional financial services. It's a major barrier to their economic empowerment.

To improve their access to finance, it's essential to understand the local cultural norms around women and money. Talk to the women about their challenges. Be sensitive. What will work in one context won't necessarily work in another.

Seek out the right financial institutions, the ones that are prepared to listen to the women in question and create inclusive products. For example, women need alternative forms of credit scoring. And digital banking often works better for them, as they can access it from a smartphone at home. This is one of the many important roles technology can play in empowering women.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Do you fully understand specific local cultural norms in terms of gender and access to finance?
- Have you ensured that any loan repayment interest rates are fair? Women are often given worse interest rates, even though they tend to have better repayment histories than men.
- Have you offered women financial literacy training, specific to your project, so they have the confidence to use the tools provided?



## 5. See women as agents of change, not victims

Women are often the biggest victims of poverty and climate change. However, they are increasingly recognised for their key role in economic growth and community development. Living on the front lines of poverty and climate change is the very reason women are also uniquely positioned to solve these issues.

Women's equality is more likely to be improved if the common narrative of women as victims who need saving by men and Western Countries is challenged. Only by empowering women through leadership positions, championing their perspectives and creating opportunities outside the home will we ensure women have the necessary space and resources to bring about the change they want and need in their communities.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Have you explicitly asked female employees what changes they would like to see in their personal and professional lives?
- Have you created safe places where women can share ideas and experiences – and discuss solutions to challenges?
- Do you actively encourage women to challenge people in power without fear of retribution?



TRANSFORM is an impact accelerator that unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support visionary enterprises across Africa, Asia and beyond. Together, we test and scale new solutions that tackle environmental challenges, improve health and wellbeing, and build inclusive economies.

Combining grant funding, business insight and research, TRANSFORM is advancing the development of innovative business models to help solve global challenges. It was established in 2015 and is led by Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY.