

# Beyond livelihoods: how can we create working environments in the global south in which women thrive?

Women are key to economic development in the Global South. They are effective, knowledgeable and influential members of society who have unparalleled potential for creating positive and sustainable socio-economic impacts.

By raising women up, we can set in motion the changes that will allow them and their wider societies room for growth. Investing in women creates a unique ripple effect. It's an opportunity for real and lasting transformation.

Those working in development should empower women to overcome the obstacles in their way and support them in entering workplaces, including in sectors that have traditionally been male dominated.

To achieve this, it is essential to listen to women's ideas, giving them ownership and decision-making power, so they can help create working environments in which they feel safe and take pride.



## KEY FINDINGS

Women know what they and their communities need, which will be different everywhere.



Being on the ground is critical. Local entrepreneurs are uniquely placed to drive growth and change.



Peer learning creates opportunities. Entrepreneurs flourish when they learn from one another and the women with whom they're working.

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Lives

## EXPERT DISCUSSION

### alongside the Skoll World Forum

At TRANSFORM, we aim to improve the lives of low-income households by supporting social enterprises designed to address local challenges and boost livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Women and girls are at the heart of what we do.

Alongside the 2023 Skoll World Forum, at the University of Oxford, we held an event for the development community on the economic empowerment of women. This paper provides key insights from the day.



## INSIGHTS IN PRACTICE

### UNDERSTAND the specific local context

Understanding local social norms is crucial for any behaviour change project. For example, social enterprise Loowatt discovered a local gender-based trend when selling its innovative waterless, eco-friendly toilets in Madagascar.

Designed to operate without any connection to sewers, these toilets offer a viable solution for the 3.6 billion people lacking access to safe sanitation. The system works by flushing waste into removable containers, which are collected and processed into biogas for green energy and/or natural fertiliser.

Among families in Madagascar, women heads of home comprise the majority contract holders for Loowatt's serviced household toilets, at around 65%. While the reasons for this have not been explored methodically, the team believes the reasons are physical, as women rely on clean toilets somewhat more than men for daily reasons, and cultural, because women here are more likely to be leading responsibility for health and care of small children and elderly relatives.

Reaching women as contract-holders for home toilets has knock-on benefits: Providing women agency for personal choices about health, and increasing women's financial inclusion, as the majority of customers adopt mobile money for the first time as part of the sign-up process and receive training from our sales team in how to use it.

Loowatt recognised that to advocate the health, hygiene and environmental benefits of these toilets, and roll them out widely to Malagasy families, they needed to start by talking to women. For this reason (and, perhaps, a reflection on unconscious biases), the local sales and marketing team currently consists mostly of women.

Sharing observations and dialogue openly about gender-based realities in local contexts is essential to development programs. Gender dynamics play an important part in market realities and ultimate success or failure of projects. Development programmes also have a responsibility to ensure gender equality is considered in their programme work.

#### QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Do you fully understand local gender norms, sensitivities and taboos?
- Do you understand who is making the purchase decision in a family? If your product or service benefits women but they are not the decision maker, have you considered how to equip women with materials to help them convince the rest of the family?
- Are you certain your own cultural biases aren't clouding your vision?
- Have you asked women for their insights, wishes and ideas around what needs to change?
- Have you considered creating informal discussion spaces, where people can openly question and support each other?

"Targeting gender equality and women's economic empowerment is not only important from the perspective of realizing women's rights but is also smart economics. Economies grow faster when gender equality is advanced; less people remain in poverty, and overall well-being increases."

The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation

## **EMBRACE** digital services

In emerging economies smartphone use is rapidly spreading. Digital technology allows information and services to flow to hard-to-reach communities, especially women, who often have been cut off from information sources as they are at home. Getting women online and training them in digital literacy can fast-track them to a wide range of benefits, including information, inclusion and employment.

As a case in point, Frontier Markets is a social commerce platform that provides women across rural India with access to high-quality, climate-friendly, gender-inclusive products and services.

The enterprise recruits and trains a network of women to act as local representatives. They sell vital sustainable goods and services – like solar powered lights, climate-resilient seeds and organic pesticides – to other women in their communities.

These representatives organise local get-togethers, so they can physically showcase and explain new agricultural or domestic products, thereby educating their communities on sustainability and green tech. They provide digital support for online purchases from the platform and a repair service for its products.

To date, Frontier Markets' women entrepreneurs have earned US \$25 million, impacting 3.5 million lives. The organisation is on a pathway to empower 100 million women, via its strategy of women-only collectives helping themselves. The ultimate objective is to build thriving rural communities by elevating women as vital drivers of economic development. And it's all down to a pioneering app designed by and for rural women.

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK:**

- Have you considered how women's digital literacy and needs are different to men's when designing your intervention?
- Do you know how much access to technology they have, in the form of tablets or smartphones?
- Are you creating safe spaces where women can learn from each other about digital literacy and its benefits?
- Have you considered telling inspiring first-person stories of positive outcomes online as part of your scaling up strategy?

## **CONSIDER** how women are perceived by their societies

When trying to enable social changes that will empower women, it's important to recognise this may have a wider impact on local norms, including men's experiences of day-to-day life. If men can gain an insight into women's perspectives and understand the benefits of their empowerment, then the chances of long-lasting change are increased. By including them in the process at the right time, they are less likely to resist change.

The team at Singapore-based reach52 learned first-hand how traditional male attitudes can undermine projects designed to empower women. The social enterprise gets its name from the fact that 52% of the global population still doesn't have access to affordable healthcare. Dedicated to creating this access, it operates in regions with no or poor access to skilled health workers, education, diagnostics, medicines, vaccines and health insurance.

In practice, it uses a combination of technology and community outreach. This includes the provision of frontline medical training to members of local communities – most of whom are women – so they can meet local needs, including providing education and referral for vaccinations or advice for common conditions.

On-the-ground, this strategy has been hugely beneficial, providing education and employment for women while also increasing the access to medical services for disadvantaged communities.

However, some men have refused to take advice from women, even ones who've been given high quality medical training. To move forwards, reach52 is working with men, to help them understand the combined socio-economic and health benefits of the initiative, to accept medical advice from women. It's about educating the entire community.

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK:**

- How can your project involve the entire community, including all generations and men?
- How are you going to create a supportive ethos, so men and women aren't set against each other?
- Have you thought about gender empowerment training for all members of the community, including men?
- How can you plan to tackle the difficulties that could arise when patriarchal standards are challenged?



TRANSFORM unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support visionary impact enterprises. Working together, they test and scale new solutions that tackle environmental challenges, improve health and wellbeing, and build inclusive economies.

Led by Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and EY, TRANSFORM operates across Africa, Asia and beyond.