



# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

## Introduction

GEM projects aim to maximise the potential for women to participate in, and benefit from, enterprise and livelihoods, by identifying and addressing the practices and structures that exclude, and discriminate against women.

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

## Why women's economic leadership?

### Better for women, better for everyone

While investing in women's leadership in agriculture has obvious benefits for women themselves, women's economic empowerment is also a critical precondition for increasing productivity, poverty reduction, and agricultural development globally.

Women comprise an average 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, have critical roles in on-farm and off-farm processes and are therefore key to meeting global food demand. When women have income and assets, this contributes to increased productivity. It also leads to better human development and poverty reduction, family welfare and child nutrition.

### Gendered markets, and institutionalised inequality

Despite the clear value of women's contribution within them, market systems are gendered, and women and men have different opportunities to earn from, and participate in them.

Globally, unequal power relations result in rural women producers often being concentrated in perishable and low-added-value agricultural products; higher-risk, high-labour-input and low-paid positions in markets, or as low-paid and temporary labour on farms or off-farm agricultural activities.

This not due to inherent lack of skill. Rather it is the market actors, policies and practices, along with socio-cultural expectations that restrict their access to opportunities, and perpetuate and ex-acerbate gender inequality.

### What creates change?

Yes, rural women need support to develop skills and acquire assets– the most common being land, credit, inputs, jobs and training – but, to ensure that all women are able to sustain control over these, markets programmes must assess and address social and political issues.

Oxfam highlights four dimensions that commonly require investment and interventions: violence against women, excessive and unequal unpaid care work, women's collective action and voice, and positive social norms:



# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

## Social Norms

Social norms are the rules about behaviour and beliefs that are considered acceptable in a community or society. Social norms define what is deemed appropriate behaviour and desirable attributes for women, men, boys and girls, creating gender roles. Those who do not follow these norms may be criticised or shamed, or suffer some kind of consequence. Restrictive norms have been identified as major constraints to implementing even the best legislation or market policy.

Positive social norms are essential to support rural women in empowering themselves in agricultural markets, but often they serve to restrict the social and economic mobility of women.

Our ability to create a better world for women is strongly linked to our ability to influence social norms. An understanding of the gender norms held by communities, as well as an understanding of how behaviours and attitudes change, is critical when designing effective projects.

The **social norms** exercise provides guidance and leading questions to inform your intervention, and to generate discussion on the positive and negative impacts of gender norms within communities.

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

## Women's Collective Action

As we all know, there is power in numbers.

Collective action is about promoting effective, inclusive organisations for and by women producers and waged workers. It is about helping groups of women, not just the exceptional few, gain more stable and powerful positions within markets — as input-providers, certifiers, quality assurance, processors or wholesale traders – adding value in diversified, higher-skilled, lower-risk, profitable positions in markets.

Transformation of market systems will only happen when groups of women gain power in product, service and labour markets, when women have voice, time, knowledge and skills to influence policy- and decision-makers, and have the ability to maintain control of lucrative, stable market positions as markets evolve and change.

Research has found significant economic and social benefits for women producers who join collective action groups.

Organised women labourers are more likely to have employers respect their rights to minimum and equal wages, to reasonable hours, rest breaks and health and safety.

Group members are more productive and their products are higher quality, so they receive more income from what they sell

Women in groups have also been seen to have more decision-making power on the use of credit, some benefit from increased freedom of movement or autonomy over the use of agricultural incomes, and are consulted more on community and organisational decision-making.

Informal and formal groups are both important, and links between informal women-only groups and formal (usually mixed) groups play a significant role in building women's leadership skills and in access to markets, respectively.

The **women's collective action tool** provides more information on how to create effective groups for production and influencing.

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

## Unpaid care work

In most countries of the world, market actors do not recognise or respect the value, and necessity of unpaid care work, most of which is done by women.

**What do we think about care?**  
**Bangladesh Focus Group**

**Women have 8.5 hours of care work a day; men do only 1 hour. In the chilli harvest, women work 2-3 hours more, reducing time for personal care and sleep – usually only 6.5 hours. If we don't reduce or share care tasks, the project cuts into the limited sleep and personal time of the women we are trying to empower.**

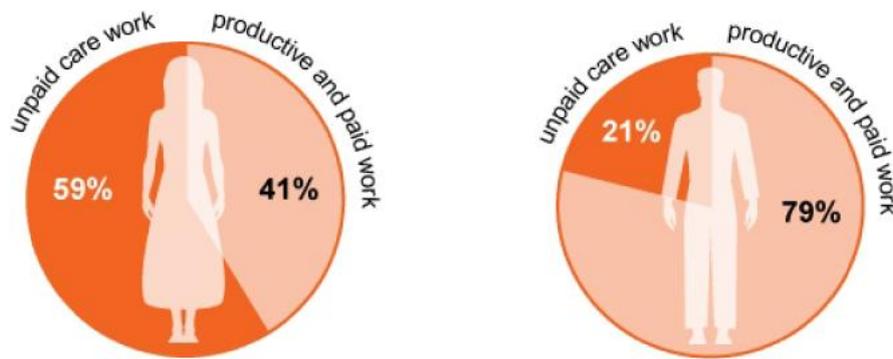
Oxfam staff, Bangladesh.



Source: Oxfam Rapid Care Analysis 2013



**Who works more?**  
**Argentina National Time Use study**



**Women's total work hours 50.9**  
 (weekly average, all adults)

**Men's total work hours 49.2**  
 (weekly average, all adults)

Data Source: Budlender, UN RISD 2008



An “invisible” task, policies and practices rarely take unpaid care work into account, restricting access for women to opportunities within the market space.

When it is given a market value, this ‘women’s work’ is considered of low or no value, and market tasks related to cleaning, food preparation and cooking are

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

often lowly compensated, although the activities may be as skilled as 'male activities' of similar worth.

In order to succeed in market systems, women require control over their own time and labour. Oxfam aims to promote quality care of families, and promote women's rights, by recognising, reducing and redistributing housework and care tasks. The **Household Care Survey**, and the **Rapid Care Analysis** tools will help you to design projects that recognise and respect the role of care work in women's work lives, and provide evidence from which communities can begin developing their own action plans to address the issue.

**How can we balance care responsibilities?  
Advocacy with local governments**



Installing water pumps	Installing electricity	Providing childcare services	Improving healthcare and sanitation services	Providing public parks where children can spend time safely	Building capacity to improve and enforce laws on labour and women's rights	Providing a bus service to take children to and from school	Raising awareness on family planning
------------------------	------------------------	------------------------------	--	---	--	---	--------------------------------------

Source: Oxfam Rapid Care Analysis 2013



## Violence against women

Women require safety and security in their homes, their communities, transport and markets in order to sustain increased market activities, whether as producers or waged labourers. Unfortunately, however, increased economic empowerment can also lead to an increased risk of violence for many women.

Despite this, women-specific risks tend to be ignored in risk assessments; although all women face threats of violence, divorce, abandonment, widowhood, childbirth or illness, these events happen erratically rather than to large numbers at once - such as floods or blight. Potential violence against women and girls in all forms therefore must be identified, and projects must contain plans to prevent it occurring.

The **Violence Against Women** toolkit provides guidance on how to assess risks, and offers strategies to reduce and mitigate them.



# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

## Further reading

IDS. (2011). *Who Cares: unpaid care work, poverty and women's/girl's human rights*. [Video content]. Retrieved 10 December 2015, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVW858gQHoE>

Kidder, T. (2014). *Beyond a 'glass wall' – women address invisible barriers to economic empowerment* Retrieved 10 December 2015, from GrowSellThrive Blog: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/change-making-how-we-adopt-new-attitudes-beliefs-and-practices-145255>

Williams, S. and Aldred, A. (2011). *Change Making: How we adopt new attitudes, beliefs and practices*. Oxford: Oxfam GB. Retrieved 10 December 2015, from <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/change-making-how-we-adopt-new-attitudes-beliefs-and-practices-145255>