
What Works for Low-Income Working Women

Summary of an Evidence Review of Economic Initiatives in the Global South

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Research, evaluation and learning are core components of Co-Impact's work. As we embark on a concerted effort to contribute to achieving gender equality at scale in the global south, we need to learn about and build on the existing evidence and knowledge. As part of our broader learning effort, we commissioned a series of rapid reviews of literature by area experts to help us understand major trends as well as new directions about what we know works - and doesn't work - to achieve gender-equitable outcomes at scale in the global south. While these reviews serve as a core component of our evolving thinking, they do not represent official opinions of Co-Impact.

Given that these reviews are focused on critical evidence of initiatives that have been evaluated at scale, we understand there are experiences and knowledge that may not be captured in these documents. We hope to invest in additional reviews in the future to cover other areas of inquiry, and also to build on a wider spectrum of evidence and perspectives.

This important work underpins the development of our own research and learning strategy, in which we will prioritize the questions and needs of practitioners working to achieve gender equitable outcomes, and also to amplify the voices and experiences of women, girls, and other marginalized groups. We hope that this evidence and knowledge, in turn, will contribute to building the global evidence base.

Background

Global evidence shows that when women earn and control income and assets, they and their households, economies, and society benefit. Women who earn, spend preferentially on their own and on children's nutrition, health, and education (World Bank, 2012). They are better able to save and accumulate assets, gain mobility and self-confidence, and protect themselves from gender-based violence—a global problem of significant dimensions for women (Panda and Agarwal, 2005 and Gupta, 2006).

Women's productive potential is, however, seriously hampered by gender gaps. Women made up just 38.78% of the labor force worldwide in 2020. Participation rates varied widely, however, as women comprised 46.5% of the labor force in Sub-Saharan Africa and just 22.2% in South Asia (World Bank, 2020). The World Bank (2013) estimates that almost half of women's productive potential worldwide is unused (versus 22% of men's) and reducing the gender gap in employment in emerging markets could increase per capita income by 14%.

Across the globe, women's earnings also lag behind men's—a shortfall of 23% in 2016. The gap has been closing for the past decade but, at the current rate, it will take 70 years to disappear entirely (UN Women, 2016). The gap is larger in Sub-Saharan Africa (31%) and South Asia (35%) than globally, and much bigger for women with children than for those without them, 4% and 14% respectively, for the two regions (UN Women, 2016). Much of the earnings disparity is accounted for by the concentration of women in less productive and low-paying occupations.

In LMICs, women are mainly self-employed in the informal sector as subsistence farmers or as micro- and small entrepreneurs, in home-based work (producing goods for sale), and wholesale or retail vending. They are also employed as wage-earners in unskilled labor on farms or microenterprises. Such work is typically seasonal and insecure, productivity and earnings are low, and benefits virtually non-existent. Employment in the formal sector, on the other hand, is better paid and more secure; but a smaller proportion of women have such jobs. Men are twice as likely as women to have jobs in the formal sector.

In entrepreneurship, as in agriculture, women's productivity and earnings are lower than those of their male counterparts (Buvinic et al., 2013). A host of social, legal and institutional constraints are involved, as are gender gaps in access to financial services, restrictions on women's ownership of property and assets, and a business environment that often discriminates against women entrepreneurs.

In addition, social norms impose unique restrictions on women. Globally, women spend at least twice as much time as men on unpaid household work (World Bank, 2013). Because the gender division of labor almost universally assigns them primary responsibility for unpaid household work and care work including especially childcare, women's time for market (paid) work is more constrained than that of men.

Purpose

This summary is based on a rapid evidence review whose purpose was to inform the development of Co-Impact's new Gender Fund. The review summarized evidence post-2000 of what worked (or did not) in achieving gender-equitable economic outcomes, at scale, in the global south. It focused on selected initiatives that explicitly sought to address gender disparities in economic opportunity, both targeted and gender-integrated programs, and in mainly low-and-middle income countries (LMICs). Initiatives targeted low-income women (poor and very poor) in both the informal and formal sectors but were weighted in favor of the informal sector given the focus on low-income women.

The four areas examined were agriculture, Public Works Programs (PWP), microfinance, and collective action, selected because they reflect the main economic activities in which the majority of low-income women are employed and self-employed. The review sought to understand how successful the initiatives were in achieving gender-equitable economic outcomes, specifically, increasing women's earnings, savings, assets, and decision-making power, the latter a measure of women's agency.

In order for women to be economically empowered, they need advancement both in terms of familiar economic measures but also in agency or the ability, among other things, to control their own income, move about freely (mobility), and participate fully in public life. Economic advancement and agency are inter-related and build on each other. With increasing agency, a woman is better able to control and use resources and to define and make choices that enable her to advance economically.

Evidence for the review was based on secondary sources and drew upon large-scale initiatives and a mix of governmental and non-governmental programs or collaborations between them. Wherever possible, the analysis was based on rigorous evaluations. However, the number of rigorous evaluations on these topics was limited, data were often not disaggregated by sex, and gender analysis was uncommon.

Availability of rigorous evaluations also varied between types of initiatives. Many and more rigorous evaluations were available in microfinance than any other area. Rigorous evaluations were limited in agriculture and little, though growing, attention was paid to gender gaps. The evidence on collective action was almost entirely qualitative with some quantitative survey data. The available evidence was inconsistent in reporting on each of the outcomes of interest in the review.

What works, what does not, and where data are insufficient

Agriculture and assets

Widespread gender disparities in assets, resources, and access to inputs, technology, information, and services combined with women's lack of authority to manage and take decisions about their farm enterprises, outputs, and incomes means that women farmers are less productive than men and their yields lower. Asset ownership, control and use are also highly gender unequal and there is growing evidence that women's ownership and control of assets is important for development outcomes and for women themselves. But a focus on women in agriculture and women's assets for development is relatively recent and the evidence somewhat thin. The review drew mainly on a study on gender impacts of eight different agricultural development projects in seven countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Johnson et al., 2016).

Results showed gender integration in development projects mattered and changes occurred in relatively short time frames of two to five years. However, this required gender integrating projects from design through implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Projects in which benefits accrued to women (and men), were informed by knowledge of local context, and by differences in gender roles, responsibilities, and norms including those governing income and asset ownership and control.

Asset gains due to project interventions were likely to be mainly or even exclusively controlled by men due to prevailing gender norms. Therefore, to increase the likelihood that women maintained, accumulated, and controlled assets, deliberate measures were needed to reinforce women's property rights and change norms including those of project staff.

Asset measures, even without asset transfers, reflected changes in relatively short time frames of three to five years, and women benefited but **only if** projects integrated gender into design and implementation.

Even when gender asset gaps did not narrow through project interventions, it was beneficial to make explicit asset transfers to women because they induced women's personal and household welfare in other ways. Results were promising for joint ownership of assets. This may be a beneficial strategy worthy of further testing and investigation.

Public works programs

Outcomes and impacts of public works programs (PWP) differ across countries, are widely disputed, and little evidence is generally available on gender gaps. In a review of 28 rigorous impact evaluations of PWPs in Africa (mostly Ethiopia) and the Middle East, Beierly and Grimm (2018) found few positive impacts on sustained employment, nutrition, and education. On the other hand, for the very poor, programs helped smooth consumption and provided a safety net after economic shocks. With women workers disproportionately affected by job losses from the COVID-19 pandemic, PWPs offer an option for addressing economic distress among low-income women.

Research on India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS, the Scheme hereafter) was more positive, and some studies examined gender issues. They found the Scheme had overall positive economic and agency effects on women workers. It increased women's labor force participation, incomes, mobility, and participation in decision-making at home and in the community. It also improved their children's health, nutrition and education. However, implementation failures in some cases disproportionately affected women negatively.

Evidence from the Scheme showed that taking account of gender issues in design enabled women's participation and benefited them. Factors included:

- equal pay for equal work
- a standard 8-hour day that helped women plan for household responsibilities
- work opportunities close to home
- provision for childcare; and
- paying women through an individual bank account enabled them to better control earnings and have greater bargaining and decision-making power.

Taking account of gender issues in design was not sufficient. Sound implementation mattered, as did fine-tuning implementation to meet women's needs. More evidence is needed to confirm factors proposed to improve implementation, namely, basing the entitlement to work on the individual rather than any one person in the household and setting, communicating, and enforcing protective anti-harassment rules. Basing data and record keeping on individuals (not households) and disaggregating by sex would help clarify women's particular needs and facilitate gender-specific research and evaluation.

Some evidence showed where NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs) had strong local community links and expertise, involving them to partner with government improved implementation and accountability.

As employment on the Scheme required hard physical labor, it was not always suitable for older and disabled women. Even though they had a high value for income and few job options, other forms of support like cash transfers may be more appropriate for them.

Microfinance: Credit and savings

Microcredit was not in and of itself sufficient to reduce poverty, improve living standards, stimulate business investment and/or growth, or improve women's decision-making power. It did, however, seem to meet a diverse set of borrower needs for consumption and crisis events.

Evidence on savings impacts was also mixed though recent rigorous evaluations demonstrated somewhat more promising poverty-reduction results than for credit, especially when combined with a package of additional services and asset transfers such as through "graduation programs."

For the very poor, also, rigorous evaluations from "graduation programs" in six countries showed a package of interventions that included an asset transfer, access to a savings

mechanism, intensive training, and consumption support had positive results. While programs did not work any better for women than men, they resulted in significantly higher household incomes everywhere, and higher household consumption, savings, household assets, and food security in all but one country. Programs were expensive but benefits exceeded costs in all but one case. Thus, participants could “graduate” to regular development programs. A similar package may also work for the less poor but determining this requires testing and evaluation (Banerjee et al., 2015a).

In entrepreneurship, as in agriculture, credit and/or savings plus a complementary package of business development services and training were needed to address the multiple barriers women face. High quality business and skills training was found to work when it was of adequate duration and done with tested materials and quality trainers. Other enabling factors included support for childcare, convenient locations, transport support, responsiveness to women’s time constraints and household responsibilities, and soft skills training that built women’s confidence.

More evidence was needed to confirm that women’s propensity to be highly risk averse posed a particular barrier to business success and that interventions that bolster their independence and control over resources were more likely to succeed. A range of enabling options is available to bolster women’s agency and ability to engage in paid work. They include individual instead of joint bank accounts, mobile banking, asset ownership, access to childcare, and safe and low-cost transport.

Collective action

Women’s collectives such as unions proved to be effective in mobilizing and empowering low-income women workers in the informal sector, bringing about positive changes in their work and lives, including higher incomes, better working conditions, and access to benefits.

Participation in collectives helped improve confidence, fostered strength in numbers, and built capacity to demand changes in the lives of women at the grassroots. When operating in a system that does not value gender equity, women-only groups gave women opportunity to build agency by discussing their issues and concerns and setting and fulfilling agendas that addressed their issues. It was a relatively long-term process not only because it challenged prevailing social norms but also because it involved building solidarity through discussion, participation, shared experiences, and learning.

Building strong and effective women’s collectives required commitment to democratic and egalitarian processes that enabled grassroots women to build confidence, leadership and management skills. Both training and “learning by doing” were needed and effective. Intermediation by educated and committed professionals was a critical ingredient for success as they performed functions for which grassroots women were not generally adequately prepared through education, exposure, and experience.

Low-income women appeared willing to incur the time and other costs of collective action. Success required that women actually obtained benefits otherwise members withdrew, a factor that could endanger the future of collective action if a large enough number exit.

Findings suggest and some studies show group actions such as in women's agricultural cooperatives and business associations can be effective in similar ways, as can integrating women within mixed-gender organizations if deliberate measures are taken to foster women's full participation as equal members and leaders.

Evidence gaps and recommendations for future research across initiatives

This section looks across the four areas reviewed to identify evidence gaps. It makes recommendations for future research to improve understanding of how to close gender gaps and foster successful initiatives to economically empower women through development programs.

- Sex-disaggregated evaluations of development programs are scarce, limiting our understanding of how to reduce gender gaps. To guide gender-responsive program design and implementation, all evaluation research should sex-disaggregate data, analysis, and results.
- Evidence gaps in determining program outcomes for women and the extent to which they contribute to closing gender gaps persist across sectors because research is still done mostly at the household level. It is both feasible and necessary to design, monitor, and evaluate all programs by collecting and analyzing individual sex-disaggregated data. Such programs should become the norm.
- We know much about the economic barriers women face in agriculture and entrepreneurship (see Buvinic et al., 2013 for additional details). Much less is known about strategies that work to reduce barriers. The demand for these strategic "How tos?" is likely to grow as more programs integrate gender. Program-based research is needed to evaluate successful strategies and how to adapt those that do not work.
- There are large gaps in information on how intervention strategies work differently for women and men (or do not) and how each gender perceives personal benefits and costs. Mixed methods research can be especially useful in determining what works for women and men and why. Studies using quantitative and qualitative methods are needed to establish causality and reveal nuances about gender gaps and outcomes due to social and cultural factors, and to identify unintended consequences, both positive and negative.
- Because of the great variation in findings about the effectiveness of PWP, more and better evaluations are needed to determine whether and how PWP can work, under what conditions, and with what design and implementation features. Evaluations should integrate gender and gender analysis should employ mixed quantitative and qualitative methods.
- In microfinance, research is needed to improve loan and savings product designs, service delivery, and targeting, and to test alternatives that answer program questions like:

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- What would help women save in different circumstances and at various social levels?
 - What products and what assistance do women need to use loans more effectively?
 - What are interventions that support women's ability to control and use their own savings and make household economic decisions?
 - Current evidence on women's collectives is mostly qualitative; more quantitative studies are needed to better determine outcomes.