WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Lessons Learned from the EEP/Shiree Scale Fund
Women’s empowerment, whilst not an explicit objective of the Scale Fund (SF), was a key feature of many projects. Some Partner NGOs (PNGOs) exclusively targeted female beneficiaries, and others were indiscriminate in their support. In both cases it was found that female-headed households (HHs) were less likely to graduate than male-headed households. This important finding suggests the need to look for ways to ensure the core components of SF projects are gender-sensitive, but also to include specific and measurable women’s empowerment objectives in project designs. Some key lessons around women’s empowerment from SF projects and partners are summarised below:

Need for explicit focus on women’s empowerment and interventions targeted at female beneficiaries

One of the important outcomes of SF projects was increased social and political empowerment for women. Improvements for women included: increased bargaining power; increased voice in household matters; reduction in domestic conflict; increased participation in community events/weddings; more visibility buying/selling in local markets; reduction in the gender wage gap; more confidence to approach local authorities with issues; increased participation in local mediation/salish; more engagement in institutional and social committees; and participation in local elections. Even though some gains were made in projects which did not include targeted activities for female empowerment or a specific focus on female-headed HHs, evidence from the SF suggests that women’s empowerment should be an explicit focus of projects, rather than expected to emerge as a latent benefit. This requires specific and focused project gender strategies that are measurable and regularly monitored. Even SF projects that deliberately targeted female-headed households often lacked an adequate gender focus in project monitoring and evaluation (gender indicators, gender-disaggregated data, and gender analysis), and lacked female front line staff to interact with and coach beneficiaries.

Female-friendly selection of Income-Generating Activities (IGAs)

Many SF partners found that female beneficiaries preferred year-round IGAs close to their homestead (livestock rearing, homestead gardens, tailoring and small trades), over labour-intensive and seasonal IGAs (rice cultivation, sandbar cropping, cage aquaculture). Even where agricultural IGAs demonstrated impressive potential and significant uptake by women, for example one PNGO’s innovative sandbar cultivation method, some beneficiaries viewed this more as a short-term stepping stone than a long-term option, due to labour-intensiveness and distance from the homestead. Even in ‘female-friendly’ homestead-based IGAs, cultural barriers sometimes prevented women from purchasing livestock at markets or negotiating a fair price, or restricted women from selling vegetables from homestead gardens in markets. Female friendly IGA selection and business planning should take into consideration the specific constraints facing women, including time constraints arising from other domestic duties, and cultural barriers to participation in markets.

Asset ownership and control of revenue

Given that female-headed households are less prone to graduate, it is important to consider factors that prevent
women’s empowerment even after they become asset owners. Evidence from EEP suggests that women’s control over IGAs is equally important as their access to productive assets, in terms of a role in financial decision making, ownership, management and operation. However, many SF projects encouraged women to relinquish operational control over IGAs, with the rationale that shared responsibilities can ease time management and cultural barriers to women taking on high potential, labour-intensive IGAs away from the homestead. For example, some projects encouraged women to opt for rickshaws that their male relatives or neighbours would then operate on their behalf, and others encouraged widows to engage in cash crop IGAs by enlisting the support of neighbours and family members for cultivation and harvest. This distinction between owner vs operator could be made more explicit when supporting female beneficiaries to select IGAs, to further encourage uptake of high potential IGAs and diversification away from livestock and other homestead-based IGAs as the default choice. The challenge is then to ensure the female beneficiary retains clear ownership, management responsibility and control over revenue generated, and there is no clear evidence of best practice from SF projects on this issue.

**Development of women’s leadership through systematic group formation**

Projects that deployed specific group-based strategies to develop women’s leadership and tackle social norms around women’s place in society and the economy effectively increased women’s empowerment. There were many good examples under the SF of group-based programming for women’s empowerment. Groups for women and adolescent girls discussed issues including dowry, violence against women and girls, early marriage, and wage discrimination, supported women to become advocates for family planning, and saw impressive results in reducing and eliminating harmful or discriminatory practices, including a reduction in the wage gap and complete elimination of early marriage. SF evaluations suggested that men should be involved in these group-based counselling and training sessions, where possible, to avoid creating imbalances or conflict in the home, and to support community-wide change to social norms.

**Recommendations – Women’s Empowerment**

- Programmes should include targeted support for women, and interventions specifically aimed at women’s empowerment, to overcome the ‘graduation gap’ between male and female headed households.
- Gender should be mainstreamed in PNGO operations, including project level gender strategies, gender-focused monitoring and evaluation and recruitment of female management and front line staff.
- Female-friendly IGA selection requires consideration of barriers to women’s participation, including time constraints (preference for low-intensity IGAs close to home to allow juggling with domestic duties) and cultural barriers (preventing women from buying and selling in markets).
- Business plans for female beneficiaries should distinguish between asset ownership, management and control, and support women to adopt high potential labour-intensive assets, whilst retaining control over asset management and revenue streams.
- Group-based approaches to social and political empowerment demonstrate success, but gains across each of these domains should be complemented by strategic and targeted female-focused economic empowerment interventions.
- Interventions targeted at women should also involve men in training, facilitation and group counselling to avoid creating imbalances within the home, to provide a support base for IGA development, and to create community-wide behaviour change around social norms.
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