

What's making a difference?

Collaborative learning on gender equality and women's empowerment in agricultural market systems

In March 2018, four market systems programs came together for a study exchange focused on gender equality and women's economic empowerment. The four programs - CAVAC (Cambodia), PRISMA (Indonesia), TOMAK (Timor-Leste) and MDF (Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Pakistan) - are each funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The programs reflected on what is making the difference in promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment (WEE), and what is making it challenging. They discussed approaches, analysed case studies, and explored the effectiveness of different partnership approaches with government, civil society and the private sector. They also shared their frustrations and ideas for overcoming resistance to tackling gender disparity, especially in male-dominated decision-making sectors such as agriculture.



Participants at the study exchange held in Dili, Timor-Leste. Photos courtesy of Market Development Facility.

Participants discussed the optimum enabling environment for promoting gender accountability at all levels of a program, and the constraints experienced when resources allocated for gender and WEE are mismatched. For gender advisers across a range of programs, it was useful to share analysis and ideas on topics including:

- Division of workload
- Household decision-making
- Mitigating for violence against women
- Engaging men

Some participants noted the frustration of being the only one in a big project tasked with taking these topics forward. It was useful to hear from others about positive changes in colleagues and partners, including in the private sector. The group looked for both small and big things that can make a difference, with several key themes and lessons emerging. A selection of these learnings is offered below.

1. Set explicit gender equality and social inclusion expectations and approaches from the beginning

Nothing seems to reap better program outcomes for women than investing and resourcing for gender equality and social inclusion from the beginning of a program. This starts in the design and tender process. A design that articulates the expectations for gender and social inclusion, as well as key approaches and outcomes, lays the foundations for multi-layered gender accountability in a program. For these types of programs, the design should be bedded not only in market systems development (MSD), but also in good global practice for gender and inclusion. If a program is taking a gender transformative approach, then this must be specified from the outset. If a program requires specific technical personnel to support its gender and social inclusion approaches, then this should be clearly stated in the design.

The design documents are the blueprints for any program and can influence the future culture of a program. If the expectations are not high and linked to key milestones, then it becomes an uphill battle to raise the profile of gender

issues. A program design with a solid foundation in gender and social inclusion has a better chance of recruiting personnel with the right mindset around gender, and is better able to allocate resources for gender activities from the beginning of the program, rather than waiting for other program activities to get up and running. Linking gender outcomes to inception phase milestones can also be very effective. The TOMAK design documents, for example, explicitly stated that a gender analysis for the program and a gendered market analysis were key milestones for the program's inception phase.

2. Undertake a gender equality and social inclusion analysis initially and review it periodically

Gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) analysis is a very important step when designing and implementing a program that seeks to maximise inclusion. It shows a long-term commitment to continually reflect, learn and use gender and inclusion information throughout the life of a program. A gender analysis done part-way into a program, rather than at the beginning, reduces the possibility for gender transformative outcomes and may limit a program to gender mainstreaming activities that do not challenge gender social norms. Gender analysis may also struggle to find an audience if it comes in at a time when people are busy and keen to get on with their work. In these instances, gender analysis can be seen as an add-on to people's work, rather than as a resource for improving their work. That said, if there is a commitment at all levels to implement the recommendations of the analysis, it is always possible to do a rapid catch up. MDF offers a good example of this, having undertaken a gender analysis at a mid-point in the program.



Gender analysis undertaken at the beginning of a program can yield immense benefits for a program. Photos courtesy of TOMAK.

The TOMAK Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis (GESIA) explored social and cultural norms and highlighted factors other than gender that can impact on inclusion, such as age, status, ethnicity and disability. It helped the program to identify constraints and opportunities for women in selected value chains by analysing the division of labour between men and women as well as their different access to resources. For more information, see TOMAK'S [learning paper on its GESIA](#).

3. Establish an enabling environment that reinforces gender accountability and good practice at all levels

Accelerating gender change and women's empowerment is more possible with good leadership and networking at all levels. This starts with DFAT leadership in country. Some countries had specific people at post responsible for taking gender and social inclusion issues forward across Australian Aid projects. Alongside aid counsellors, these individuals are helping hold programs to account for gender outcomes through routine reporting and AQCs. They are enthusiastically linking programs together as peers and looking for solutions to gender challenges faced by programs. In some cases, they are suggesting technical solutions to problems as well as promoting learning platforms across the aid program and between gender advisers within individual programs.

Good examples of this kind of leadership include the promotion of links between DFAT-supported market systems programs and ending violence against women programs in both Cambodia and Timor-Leste, and encouraging PRISMA's links to MAMPU (the Australian-Indonesian Partnership on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment) in Indonesia. Having a clear vision of DFAT's in country commitment to gender is very useful for programs. The Australian Embassy in Timor-Leste has its own strategy for gender equality and women's empowerment and DFAT also leads a gender and disability network that brings people together across the Australian Aid portfolio to learn, share and tackle gender equality issues more systematically and strategically as a group.

Within a program, positive senior leadership on gender issues is a key factor for success. Senior leadership that is actively engaged in understanding, addressing and resourcing gender equality and women’s empowerment sets the culture for a program and can be critical in breaking down resistance from staff and key implementing partners. This kind of leadership is highly motivating for gender advisers and other staff promoting gender. It provides them with the mandate to work across a program, knowing that their role and work is supported and recognised as important.

4. Invest and resource gender but don’t let the gender team do it all

It is important for programs to match the staffing structure and budget to meet GESI and WEE ambitions and outcomes, both internally and externally. These resources should be built in from the beginning to allow for GESI analysis and the recruitment of specialists that can influence the design and implementation phases. It is useful to support gender positions and/or regular technical assistance for programs, and to provide them with overarching gender budget to utilise for analysis, research, collaboration with partners and training. Where there are technical gaps, a useful strategy can be to support resource sharing across DFAT programs. A good balance between having designated gender specialists, and building gender into the position descriptions of all staff, is critical as these approaches together create an optimum enabling environment for gender change.

5. Take a gender transformative approach to the market system

Empowering women throughout the market system can spark a progressive and transformational change within the sector and society as a whole. Many market systems development activities and private sector partners are ‘gender blind’ and attainments that benefit women are often unintentional. Even programs that take a gender responsive or mainstreaming approach can miss the true potential for broader change.

Women want not only to be able to work productively and have a voice in how the income they generate is spent; they want the quality of their lives to be improved, greater access to land, to reduce the time they spend on unpaid domestic and care work, and to live a life free from violence. For that, a gender transformative approach is needed.

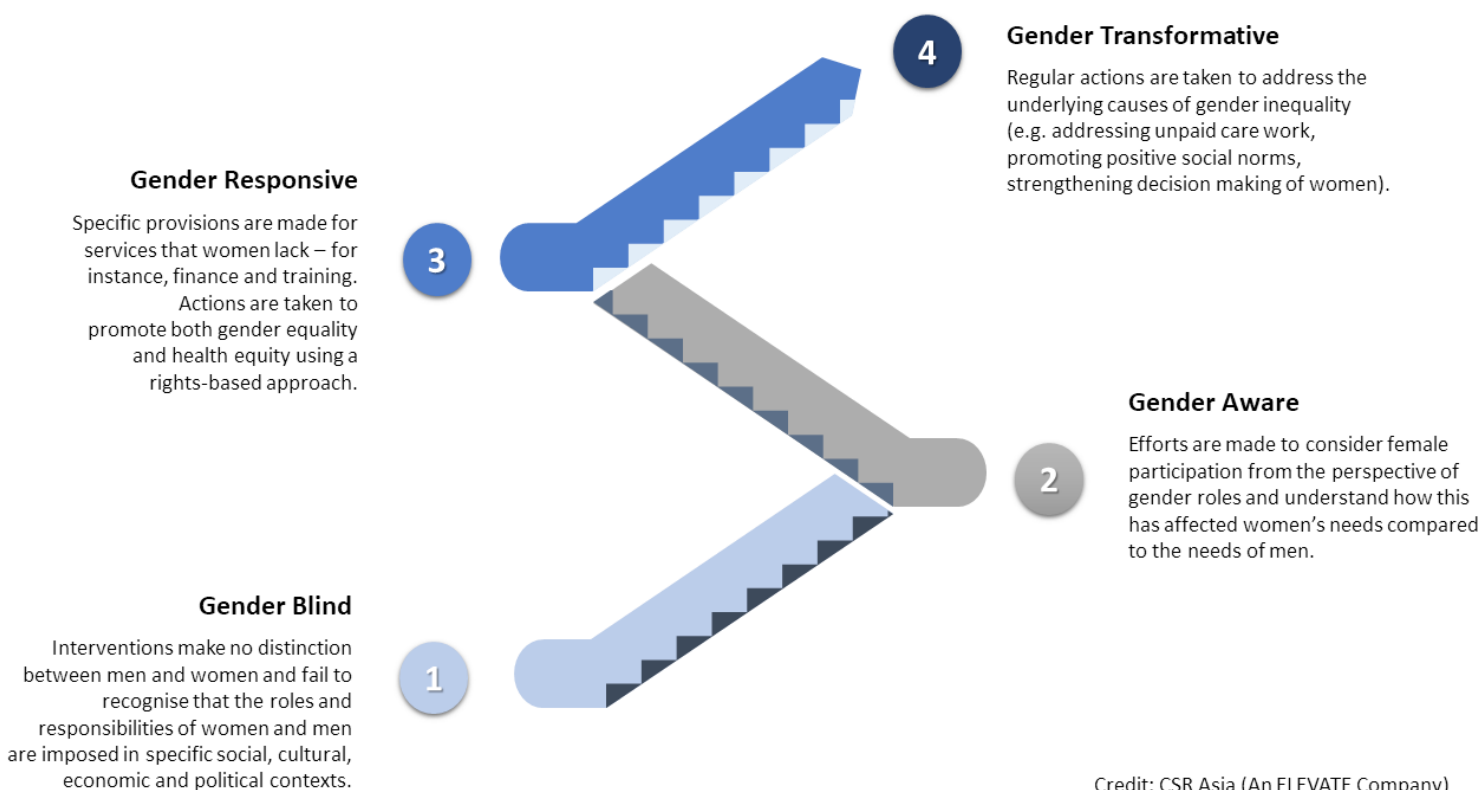


Figure 1: The Gender Ladder.

A gender transformative approach involves altering the way that women and girls are perceived in society, and this requires challenging gender norms and power imbalances. Transformative women's empowerment happens when there is a combination of efforts targeted at 3 levels and at all times. These levels are:

1. A woman's own knowledge, skills and abilities (**agency**)
2. The relationships with others through which she negotiates her path and the power she has in this (**relations**)
3. The societal norms, customs, institutions and policies that shape her choices in life (**structures**)

Examples of transformative activities include:

- Promoting women's awareness and voice around their land rights and access to land for agricultural production;
- Employing women in new sectors, upgrading women's roles in the value chain and improving their working conditions, including their personal safety;
- Supporting women in non-traditional positions such as infrastructure committees, tractor coordination, and community chairs, and then raising awareness (including men's awareness) in communities about their role;
- Addressing gender inequalities at the household level through the use of family farm or business management training for example;
- Enhancing participation of rural women and women's organisations in decision-making and policy development in the agricultural sector.

6. Create space for women's voices and collective action

There is a need to better articulate targets for women's leadership, status raising and decision-making in the agricultural sector. There are also benefits for programs that engage partners and contractors that bring the best expertise on gender issues. This may involve national or international personnel or a combination of both.

Gender change is more possible when programs expand their networks to welcome national women's networks and mechanisms (government and non-government) as partners (both funded and non-funded). Programs are increasingly seeing the value of being involved in collaborative efforts for change in market sectors, including working with such actors as: UN Women, government departments of women's affairs, women's umbrella associations, women's associations (farmer, vendor or business), and gender focal point networks.

MSD programs have the opportunity to help facilitate and broker opportunities for women's organisations to collaborate with key sector actors such as Ministries of Agriculture and Business, business associations, and the private sector. This is best done by looking for opportunities where they have the same agenda and motivation, and then providing motivation, technical support and funding to support their collaborative efforts. Women's organisations can also benefit greatly from skills-building in MSD and agriculture in order for them to engage meaningfully and contribute effectively to decision-making.

7. Focus on raising the status of women and mitigate resistance

Programs addressing agricultural market systems often focus solely on women's participation, and neglect the need to raise the visibility of women's contribution and status as farmers, vendors and traders in the system. Women's participation in the sector is already strong and in most cases, equal to that of men. Yet women's contribution remains less visible and is thus less resourced.

MSD programs have an opportunity to contribute actively to improving perceptions towards women in the sector. Within the study exchange, programs reported approaches such as: creating communications to promote women's visibility, identifying opportunities to professionalise women's traditional and informal agricultural activities, creating new roles for women in traditional activities, supporting women in male-dominated value chains, and promoting female entrepreneurs and their ideas.



MSD programs have an opportunity to actively raise the visibility of women as key actors in the market system. Photos courtesy of TOMAK.

Resistance to raising the status of women is rooted in power relations and the fear that by giving women more power, others (both men and women) will lose out. Resistance can be found both internally and externally within a program, and amongst women as well as men. It is important for programs to understand and plan to remove these constraints gently and slowly. The most effective approaches seem to build on and transform women's traditional work and roles; they tend not to shake up the status quo initially but aim to remove barriers so that traditional responsibilities can transform into new opportunities. Even when moving slowly, programs need to proactively mitigate for the possibility of backlash including increased restriction on women's mobility and gender-based violence.

Shifting the resistance of market system actors and program staff to consider issues of gender and social inclusion requires gender specialists to use the evidence they have to make a business case for women's economic empowerment. It is important to show the value of investing in gender equality and women's empowerment in business terms. PRISMA and MDF provided the following examples of key messages that are resonating well with private sector partners and program staff:

1. Underserving women harms business as women present new market opportunities as buyers, suppliers and consumers, and
2. Profiling gender sensitivity and commitment can bolster a company's reputation and consumer base.

This learning paper was produced by the TOMAK (To'os ba Moris Di'ak) program in Timor-Leste. The views, information, and opinions expressed in this document do not necessarily represent those of the Australian Government or any of its other programs.