



## Women's Economic Empowerment in Practice: ADDRESSING GENDERED BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND SUCCESS



*On November 18th, 2016, Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC) hosted a roundtable discussion, bringing together development practitioners to share their successes, challenges and lessons learned in implementing women's economic empowerment projects.*

*Designed to facilitate active participation, the roundtable featured case studies from AKFC, CARE Canada, Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA), Oxfam Canada, Save the Children and World University Service of Canada (WUSC), illustrating diverse strategies to address gendered barriers to economic access and success for women. The case study presentations were followed by small group discussions in which participants from civil society and the public sector explored themes, approaches and lessons from each case.*

*This summary provides brief descriptions of the case studies, highlights notable observations, lessons, and recommendations from the roundtable, and identifies questions for further reflection. A detailed roundtable report will be available in early 2017.*



## Summary of Key Points

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- ◆ A gender analysis performed during the project proposal phase or prior to project implementation is necessary to identify key barriers to women’s economic participation and strategies to address them and mitigate potential risks;
- ◆ Defining and understanding what “success” means for beneficiaries will ensure the development of proper context-specific monitoring and evaluation tools;
- ◆ Women’s economic empowerment may be linked to gender-based violence towards women and girls; risks to participants should be continuously assessed and mitigation strategies developed and monitored;
- ◆ Establishing the business case for a women’s economic empowerment project will assist in bringing on board the right partners;
- ◆ Flexibility within projects is required to encourage dynamic approaches to addressing barriers that reflect the changing and complex circumstances of participants and communities.

## Opening and Closing Addresses

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“Patience, courage and time.” Ms. Yasmin Karim, Gender and Development Manager for the Global Affairs Canada-funded *Enhancing Employability and Leadership for Youth (EELY)* project in Northern Pakistan, highlighted these three key factors for success in engaging in women’s economic empowerment work in her opening address to the roundtable.

Ms. Karim shared insights from her more than two decades of experience with the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme Pakistan (AKRSP), guiding participants through a sample of approaches developed by her team, such as piloting “gender pairs training” to change household power structures.

Gloria Wiseman, Director of the Pakistan and Sri Lanka Development Program, Asia Pacific Branch at Global Affairs Canada provided closing thoughts to the roundtable, echoing many of the key successes that emerged during the deliberations and emphasizing enabling environments and individual agency as interconnected aspects of women’s empowerment. Ms. Wiseman concluded by underlining the importance of ensuring a dynamic, flexible process which empowers women as equal agents of change, and challenged practitioners to bridge the gap between policy and implementation.



## Description of Case Studies

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**AKFC/AKRSP:** The EELY project aims to increase the employment and engagement of youth in the Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral regions of Northern Pakistan. The two AKRSP case studies demonstrated strategies to create an enabling environment for (i) women in highly conservative areas; and (ii) in non-stereotypical trades. Both cases emphasized dealing with stakeholders in their own ‘language’ and the importance of being patient and going “door-to-door” for individual outcomes.

**CARE Canada:** *Promoting Opportunities for Women’s Economic Empowerment in Rural Africa – POWER Africa*, is a multi-country project being implemented in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Cote d’Ivoire and Burundi. The aim is to increase financial inclusion and expand opportunities available to adolescent girls for greater economic and social participation. Beneficiaries join Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA), are provided with financial education and linked to financial service providers. A second case study looked at the use of a participatory video evaluation method to answer the research question, ‘Is VSLA methodology adaptable to adolescent girls?’ with the main objectives of evaluating the POWER Africa VSLA program and to build the capacity of CARE staff.

**MEDA:** The *Pakistan ENTREPRENEURS Project* goal was to increase the incomes of 75,000 micro-entrepreneurs and small enterprise owners, the majority of whom were women. It focused on four traditional value chains: dairy, medicinal and aromatic plants and hand embellished fabrics. The aim was to provide increased market access, market outreach, and product information through the Female Sales Agent model, and build institutional capacity of partner organizations, producer associations and support providers to enhance the value proposition of female micro-entrepreneurs.

**Oxfam Canada:** “Women’s economic inequality and domestic violence: exploring the links and empowering women,” produced by Oxfam Canada, highlights the findings of a desk-based research project. The research looked at projects in the global south, with an emphasis on South Asia. It focused on why, and to what extent, women’s economic empowerment (WEE) programming contributes to raising or lowering the risk of domestic violence (DV) for women and how to improve the integration of violence against women and girls (VAWG) considerations into WEE program design and implementation.

**WUSC:** The *Women’s Economic Empowerment through Technical Education and Vocational Training (TVET)* program in Sri Lanka aims to improve the skills and socio-economic conditions of project participants, with quality, employment-oriented vocational training. WUSC showcased two project approaches: The Project for Rehabilitation through Education and Training (PRET), which identified sectors for training and then placed trainees in jobs, and *Advancing Specialized Skills for Economic Transformation (ASSET)*, which engages with the private sector to locate existing (but unfilled) jobs and provides targeted training to address labour shortages.

**SAVE the Children Canada:** *Youth in Action (YiA)* is a six-year learning and livelihood program which aims to improve the socio-economic status of 40,000 rural out-of-school girls and boys between the ages of 12 and 18 in Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda; and support them to find safe and viable livelihoods, mostly in the agricultural value chain. The case study presented focused on Egypt. Beneficiaries in the project i) gain foundational skills and knowledge to support self-led pursuits of market-driven income-generating opportunities, ii) are linked with financial institutions, businesses and support networks, and iii) are given ongoing consultation and mentorship.



## Lessons, Recommendations and Observations

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The following is a summary of the key points raised during the roundtable discussions. More detail on each case study discussion will be available in the full report.

### The need for comprehensive gender analysis

A critical component for women's economic empowerment projects is a comprehensive gender analysis, completed prior to project design. A gender analysis identifies key interventions, informs gender-focused training curricula, and can better ensure appropriate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools are used. Participants stressed the importance of integrating the right M&E tools, throughout the project cycle, from design to review, and working with stakeholders to define what "success" for women's economic empowerment and gender equality means to them to reflect the local context and manage expectations.

The other key purpose for a gender analysis is the need to ensure project teams receive gender training. Participants emphasized the benefits of having a gender expert on the ground. This proved to be particularly successful when the gender expert worked directly with M&E, policy and programming team members. It was strongly recommended that project teams not work in silos, but rather, take an integrated approach that brings teams together to share best practices and address gendered barriers.

### Moving towards enabling environments

Underpinning all the barriers discussed are discriminatory gender norms. These norms can result in backlash towards women and girls participating in women's economic empowerment activities, such as moving into non-stereotypical trades. This was identified as being particularly acute where advances in gender equality were noticeable at household and community levels. One case study, presented by Oxfam Canada, looked specifically at the effect women's economic empowerment has on increasing and decreasing the instance of violence towards women and girls. As a measure to support participants, Oxfam recommended that projects work with social service providers to understand what support services are available for women at risk, and to equip implementation teams to connect participants to these services in safe and appropriate ways.

Lack of family support is also a key barrier to participation and long-term success in economic activities. Risks to reputations, fear of violence (including domestic violence), lack of role models within a community and expectations of reproductive roles and productive roles, limit how and when women can participate. This is exacerbated where laws and mechanisms, meant to protect women and address risks of harassment and violence, are not enforced by the implementing parties.

Participants emphasised the need for flexibility when addressing issues of family support. Each situation will have a nuanced context and therefore will require a tailored approach.

Whether working with service providers, community influencers or private sector, participants stressed the importance of identifying the right partners. An effective strategy used by some participants was to invest time in establishing the business case for the project. Using the terminology and rationale of a respective stakeholder, articulating the mutual benefits of a project from the priorities of the partner, builds deeper buy-in, and helps target the most appropriate partners for the project.



## Fostering individual agency

Participants also identified a lack of self-confidence, termed “informal agency,” as a barrier for women and girls entering into spaces traditionally occupied by men. From the discussions, greater focus on confidence-building soft-skills training, in bargaining and negotiation in particular, is needed to complement technical vocational education and training (TVET).

In addition to infrastructure and communication barriers in project locations, the mobility of women and girls to access spaces outside their homes was highlighted as a consistent barrier to participation. Mobility is restricted for cultural and security reasons, due in part to concerns from families, communities, and the women themselves, related to issues of safety and reputation for female participants.

Finally, participants noted that low levels of technical information, knowledge and skills in business, termed “formal agency,” increased employers’ reluctance to hire, or take on female apprentices, especially in non-stereotypical trades. Participants provided several unique strategies, from working with employers directly to raise their awareness on gender equality, to finding strategic interventions for women into market value chains and exploring opportunities in emerging non-gendered trades like green energy technology.

## Flexible, dynamic solutions to complex issues

The roundtable discussions wrapped up in a plenary session, pulling together the many gendered barriers to women’s access and success in the economy, and the successful strategies and dynamic approaches undertaken by participating organizations. The overarching theme that emerged was the need for flexible approaches throughout a project life-cycle. Flexibility ensures approaches can be reviewed and adapted to meet the changing needs of participants and communities.

## For Further Discussion

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Roundtable organizers and participants emphasized that this event was a starting point for further sharing and learning between these organizations working on women’s economic empowerment and gender equality. The following questions were raised as areas for further discussion:

- ◆ How can projects manage communication issues and expectations in women’s empowerment projects, including between the field teams and head office?
- ◆ How do project designers account for their own perceptions of gender norms in the design of projects, theories of change and indicators of success?
- ◆ By selecting non-gendered emerging sectors, such as the green energy industry, for affirmative action opportunities into technical trades, is the notion of “gendered work” being reinforced?