Three Ways Businesses Can Improve Their Women's Economic Empowerment Programs

by Linda Midgley & Marissa Wesely October, 2018

Corporate programs that focus on women's economic empowerment need to incorporate women-centered, context-specific design and business-aligned measurement from the start.

Many companies are spending millions of dollars to address issues of women's economic empowerment across their value chains. These include efforts like Coca Cola's 5by20 program seeking to economically empower 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2020, and Gap Inc.'s P.A.C.E. program, providing life skills training to women workers in its factories. These companies and a growing number of others increasingly view advancing gender equality as the right thing to do, particularly in light of the momentum for business to contribute to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But the deepening understanding of the strong business reasons for economically empowering women is equally, if not more, important. As Unilever CEO Paul Polman has stated: "When we empower women, society and the economy benefit, grow and thrive. … And it makes enormous economic sense too, with an overwhelming number of studies showing time and time again that gender equality is good for talent development, culture, innovation, leadership and performance."

Yet even in this context, few companies appear to be designing their women's economic empowerment programs for lasting impact—or measuring or reporting on that impact. Indeed, an October 2014 report by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Dalberg, and Witter Ventures, found that only three of the 31 corporate-funded programs studied provided empirical evaluations with quantitative metrics beyond program size and scope. Without knowing if programs result in women gaining not only new skills and resources, but also control over those resources and the power to make economic decisions, companies cannot assess whether the intended economic empowerment will endure for women or for business.

So how can companies design and measure effective women's economic empowerment programs? We believe these three elements are essential:

- Employ women-centered design. Having the women affected at the heart of the design process will produce programs that address the critical building blocks for economically empowering women in a given context. Such programs are more likely to have impact on the business

Leading companies increasingly see opportunities to economically empower women across their value chain to create lasting change for women, their communities, and the world. Yet it still is often hard for companies to know where to start.

- Build in measurement tools from the start to assess a program's impact on women and on business

- Align social impact goals and reporting with existing measurement frameworks like the GRI Standards and the SDGs. Such alignment allows companies to replicate successful programs in similar contexts and bring them to scale

1. Contextualized women-centered design

Women's economic empowerment requires interventions that are customized to each setting. What makes sense to empower factory workers in Bangladesh may not meet the needs of smallholder farmers in Kenya. To design context-specific programs, companies must work to identify the barriers preventing women from realizing their full economic potential: Are they constrained by lack of education or skills? Are they limited by violence in their homes or their workplaces, by laws, customs, or safely issues that limit their mobility, or by taking on a disproportionate share of unpaid household or care obligations? Do social norms limit their decision-making power in households and communities?

Designing effective programs in highly local contexts requires gathering input from the women that a company is trying to empower. Local women's organizations are an oft-overlooked resource in gathering this critical context. Without this input, companies often default to solutions that are easily accessible and simple to scale—programs to train or mentor women, or to provide resources to build or advance in a business. While these interventions may be helpful, without a deeper understanding of the local gender context, they may not lead to the desired long-term impact for women or for business. For example, a recent study of gender in rural Africa covering 2,000 households in six countries found that land ownership alone—often a key focus of public and private women's economic empowerment programs in farming communities—did not lead to stronger bargaining power or higher incomes for women. "[P]olicymakers … should adopt a multifaceted approach that includes aspects beyond agriculture," the author noted. "These include issues of sexual and reproductive rights, for instance, and freeing women from the heavy and time-consuming drudgery of domestic work in poor, rural settings. … Women's lack of empowerment is also related to their limited mobility, which makes it harder for them to reach markets."

The ICRW report mentioned above described eight building blocks for sustainable women's economic empowerment. We have adapted these as follows:

(Image adapted from the 2014 ICRW/Dalberg/Witter Ventures report cited above)

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Some companies leading the way on women's economic empowerment issues have developed an appreciation of the need to address multiple building blocks to achieve lasting impact. Among those are some cocoa companies participating in Cocoa Action, a voluntary, industry-wide strategy that engages the governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana and other key stakeholders.

The business case for empowering more women involved in cocoa production is quite clear; companies participating in Cocoa Action recognize the need to build stronger farming communities for a more stable and sustainable supply chain, and recognize the importance of truly empowering women farmers in this process. The Mars Chocolate Women's Empowerment Plan and Cargill's work on women's empowerment as part of Cargill's Cocoa Promise are two examples. To increase the number of women attending farmer training schools from the 5 percent reported in a 2016 study, Cargill is looking closely at issues like:

- Whether taking women's household responsibilities into account when selecting the location and timing of trainings can make a difference

- Building women-only classes where women feel safe to speak up and lead

- Presenting materials that show women in leadership roles as role models

Unilever is also working to engage women in farmer field schools by supporting one supplier's development of a mobile education platform for Indian gherkin farmers. The flexibility of the platform addresses issues presented by more traditional farmer trainings. It includes a digital textbook on tablets, and videos made locally by field officers. The videos star local farmers and many of them feature women as decisionmakers, leaders, and teachers on their farms. The use of videos also enables flexible viewing hours and helps break down literacy barriers. Early results of the pilot showed a 300 percent increase in reach, with women outnumbering men at training sessions.

Of course, building block design principles hold true in sectors and settings outside agriculture. Gap Inc.'s P.A.C.E. program—one of the longest-running and successful life-skills programs for female factory workers—was built with a holistic approach. The curriculum addresses areas including reproductive health, legal literacy, and gender roles, as well as more commonly taught life skills like communication and problem solving.

2. Measure impact on women and business

Creating a measurement framework that can track successes and failures and allow for replication and adaptation is equally important. While contextualized design is the best way to ensure that impact for women and business is transformative and not fleeting, this approach is typically more time-consuming than program development approaches that do not take local issues into account. In order to achieve scale using this approach, companies will need to identify the most successful women's economic empowerment programs and implement them broadly in similar contexts. Figuring out which programs are the most successful is not easy, as companies must measure both the social and business impact.

On the social side, many corporate women's economic empowerment programs began in philanthropic contexts, with little understanding of social impact measurement beyond counting the number of women "touched" by a program or increases in a woman's income. For many of these programs, little consideration was given to measuring indicators of lasting impact, like changes over time in women's and men's knowledge, attitudes, behavior, and social status.

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In the farmer field school example, the company might want to measure factors like whether female participants felt they had greater decision-making authority in the household and whether household tasks were shared more equally, in addition to changes in the number of women attending farmer field schools. Other measures of more lasting change might be whether women reported not just increased income but also control over that income. Measurement of impact over time might even extend to whether women had greater confidence in participating in—and willingness to lead—co-operatives or other community initiatives. Another Cocoa Action member, Mondelez, considered a number of these factors in a report on its experience building women's leadership within cocoa farming in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire.

Designing women's economic empowerment programs with business impact in mind is even more rare. Few programs even take into account how social impact can play a role in creating value for the business. Bringing women's economic empowerment programs out of the sphere of pure philanthropy means recognizing the integral links between business and social value and working across a company to ensure that business and social metrics are linked.

Cocoa Action developed a framework for the companies in its network that links and measures business and social impact. The framework has dual long-term goals of "increased yields" and "thriving communities," with the latter including increased opportunity, capability, and women's influence as one targeted outcome intended to also have a positive effect on productivity and yields. By linking business and social impact, and developing meaningful metrics for both, it's more likely that successful programs will become embedded in a business and shared publicly, increasing opportunities for replication and scaling.

3. Report on impact in a way that businesses recognize

The final element to enable companies to identify and replicate successful women's economic empowerment programs, is to measure and report on impact—both internally and externally—in a way which businesses recognize. This allows key decision makers inside the business to make better decisions about which programs to replicate. In addition, public reporting on program impact will enable others to identify successful programs for replication in their companies.

There are several ways to report impact for the business world. First, qualitative description of a program's successes and learnings should be backed up by quantitative impact data. This requires a baseline measurement at the start of the project and continued tracking over time to see whether the effects are lasting. Corporate decision makers rely on data, and program sustainability and replication will likely depend on the quality of this data. This will likely include appropriate gender disaggregated data.

While any metric should fit the program context and be based on a thorough understanding of the building blocks of women's economic empowerment, there are also significant advantages in terms of efficiency and internal acceptance to aligning with existing reporting frameworks like the GRI standards or SASB, both of which are used for business sustainability reporting.

Aligning impact measurement and reporting with the SDGs is even more important. The SDGs apply to all countries, all sectors, and all actors in society. They provide a common language for reporting on the world's sustainable development challenges and for bringing actors together along the value chain.

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Aligning reporting with the SDGs instantly makes the program's contribution to women's economic empowerment clear. For instance, should the Cargill's farmer field schools result in promotion of shared responsibility within the household, that would advance one of the stated targets of SDG 5: Gender Equality, on recognizing the value of unpaid care work. If more women were participating as leaders in cocoa cooperatives after going through the farmer field school program, it would be advancing another target of SDG 5: ensuring women's full and effective participation and opportunities for leadership. This in turn would have a positive effect on various targets under SDG 8: Good Jobs and Economic Growth, through improving productivity and yields.

It might seem as though there is a contradiction between metrics that offer specific, contextual insight, and aligning with existing frameworks which by their nature are more general. In practice, it's about finding a balance between the two; maximizing insight into contextual nuance for deeper impact, while sharing that impact broadly using more widely recognized indicators for sustainability and scaling.

Impact metrics that are more recognizable for stakeholders within the company are easier to interpret in the business context, leading to a better understanding of program value and better decision making. Impact metrics that are more recognizable for external stakeholders, like investors, can give them a better understanding of the long-term impact and value the company is creating, making investment more likely. Finally, aligning with existing metrics can also lead to process efficiency gains and reduce the administrative burden of data collection and reporting.

Creating Lasting Impact, at Scale

Today, leading companies increasingly see opportunities to economically empower women across their value chain to create lasting change for women, their communities, and the world. Yet it still is often hard for companies to know where to start. First steps may simply involve doing an assessment and analysis to understand where in the value chain women are critical to the business, or putting a gender lens on existing programs for employees or suppliers to see if the programs are equally effective for women and men. Once companies see where increased focus on women's economic empowerment can have real business impact, working closely with the women targeted to co-design programs will ensure that they are designed for transformative social impact from the start. And by taking time at the outset to incorporate broadly used metrics to measure social and business impact, companies will be able to share successes and failures more effectively, fostering replication of the most impactful models and expanding benefits for all.

Programs like Cargill's Cocoa Promise aim to build stronger farming communities for a more stable and sustainable supply chain, and recognize the importance of empowering women in this process.
(Photo courtesy of Cargill)

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