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Economic Empowerment

Photo: Mercy Corps, Kenya, 2021

Background

In fragile markets, women, girls, and marginalized people, such as internally displaced people, ethnic minorities, and returnees of conflict-affected areas do not have sufficient opportunities to cope, adapt and thrive. Mercy Corps' Pathway to Possibility highlights that economic disruptions and stresses disproportionately affect those in poverty or at risk of poverty—many of whom are also disadvantaged by inequalities in market access and job opportunities due to their gender, identity, ethnic background, or location. Economic shocks are more likely to reduce income and increase the risk of gender-based violence for women and girls than for men and adolescent boys. **The economic empowerment of marginalized groups is integral to our programs which are focused on recovery and growth, and aim to transform market systems to be more equitable while building resilient individuals and communities.**

WHY IS GESI IMPORTANT TO THIS TOPIC?

Economies grow when marginalized actors are able to actively contribute to and benefit from economies. Mercy Corps' pathway to increased economic opportunities envisions a world where economically marginalized people grow and sustain their assets and income.¹

The rapidly growing literature on including the most marginalized in economic opportunities, shows evidence that programs are most impactful when they can clearly identify who the most marginalized are and design target interventions to address their needs through tailored service delivery, access to resources and transforming the discriminating norms in the context. For example, it is imperative that women—across age, status and other social factors—are empowered economically to increase productivity, diversify their economies, and increase income equality, all of which are prerequisites to ending hunger and poverty. Achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals requires the empowerment of women in the economy and closing gender gaps at work. Yet, according to the latest Gender Gap Report, 129 countries reported a decrease in women's labor-force participation relative to men's in 2022.

Worldwide, women only make 77 cents for every dollar men earn. According to UN Women, the compounded economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have furthermore contributed to the worsening of gender-poverty gaps.

From a GESI analysis perspective, the empowerment of marginalized groups spans 5 key domains.²

These are:

1. **Access** to income, assets, and economic inputs
2. **Agency and power** to own or control resources and have decision-making power over their life
3. **Leadership** roles and skills at the business, community and country levels
4. **Do No Harm** and **safeguarding** to ensure interventions do not further exacerbate gender-based inequities and violence
5. **Enabling environment**, to create a holistic and supportive environment for women and those around them.



Photo: Mercy Corps, Ethiopia/E. Millstein, 2019

¹ Mercy Corps, Pathway to Economic Opportunities, P2P Companion document.

² Mercy Corps 2020 Approach to Women's Economic Empowerment and Equality (WE3)

What Have We Done?

In line with our pathway to increased economic opportunities, our programs have adopted multiple examples of interventions that are:

1. Targeted to meet the immediate needs of marginalized groups, such as enabling access to goods and services, or providing financial support;
2. Aimed at transforming market systems to be more equitable, and enable the participation of the most marginalized.
3. Focused on building resilient communities.

Our most recent programs have largely identified women and girls as primary groups among the most marginalized in economic growth, and in many contexts where we operate, they are also part of conflict-affected populations. Across our geographical regions, ethnic minorities, internally displaced people, returnees of conflict-affected areas, female-headed households, and people with disabilities are also increasingly acknowledged as marginalized groups to work with.

INTERVENTIONS AIMED AT ENHANCING ACCESS AND PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Mercy Corps' MSD programming works within existing market systems to make them more inclusive for women, and ensure their participation beyond the duration of the program. While working on systemic changes, such as for example eliminating bias among market actors in trading with marginalized populations, our programs have layered direct interventions within the systems change to address immediate needs.

The implementation of saving groups, combined with livelihoods support, has helped improve the economic and social resilience of marginalized groups, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. The [Poultry Development and Resettlement \(PDR\)](#) program aimed at testing the hypothesis that



Photo: Mercy Corps, Nigeria, 2020

BOX 1

The PDR program

FUNDED BY THE BILL AND MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION (2017-2020, NORTHEAST NIGERIA)

PDR aimed to provide a viable source of income to marginalized returnee households, with a focus on displaced women, by revitalizing the poultry market systems. Similar to RRA, the program leveraged on women's existing role in poultry production, with a goal of generating sustainable income and improving the household nutrition aimed to create opportunities for marginalized households to engage in a safe, fast-returning, and income-generating activity (poultry rearing) and in parallel, it supported the establishment of village savings and loans associations (VSLA) groups, which anticipated results included enhanced incomes and assets and access to savings and loans. Findings from a 2020 USAID study¹, however, showed that the VSLAs contributed to supporting social network diversification, trust and solidarity, boosting participants' self-esteem and self-confidence, promoting equitable household decision-making, shifting gender perceptions and enhancing confidence in the future (footnote here). The social resilience outcomes were even more valued by participants than the economic outcomes, especially by women who saw the VSLAs as an essential risk mitigation mechanism during times of shock. The combination of these interventions, where women had the opportunity to participate in mother groups, and a more inclusive economy with women playing active market actor roles, has proven to be critical for broader outcomes, like nutrition.

¹ Krishnan, V., Role of Markets in Strengthening Social Resilience Capacities in Northeast Nigeria. Produced by Mercy Corps as part of the Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award, 2021.

BOX 2

Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG)

LAUNCHED WITH THE SUPPORT OF GOOGLE (2011-ONGOING, PALESTINE)

GSG is Palestine's leading tech sector development program. It provides freelancers with the technical training and support they need to earn an income online and assists local Palestinian companies to generate more revenue from overseas markets. The program assessed¹ the income profiles of females and males, the gender pay gap (as high as 56%), and time spent on unpaid work

to better integrate gender equality in the curriculum and training activities of the GSG Freelance Academy. This led to the adoption of GESI-sensitive interventions such as adopting clear salary guidelines, providing coaching sessions to support participants to manage workloads at home, increasing the offering of virtual courses and piloting free or reduced-cost child care at the new Gaza City co-working space. As of 2022, the program² achieved good results in reaching female participants. It had engaged 40,910 people (50% females) via boot camps, events and training programs: provided safe working environments and community spaces for an average of 113 users per day (50% female); and created 40 new enterprises (over 40% female-led).



Photo: Mercy Corps, Palestine, 2019

1 Mercy Corps, Gender Gap Analysis – GSG Freelance Academy, 2020.

2 Mercy Corps, Gaza Sky Geeks: Five Year Reflection (2017-2022).

poultry is a good livelihood for early recovery by contributing to vulnerable household income. Using market system development (MSD) and resilience approaches, the program leveraged and promoted women's engagement in poultry to increase income and nutrition outcome, however it also supported direct interventions with social impact (Box 1).

BOX 3

Agrifin

FINANCED BY THE MASTERCARD FOUNDATION & BILL AND MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION (2012-ONGOING, EAST AFRICA)

Agrifin supported 150 partners in driving the delivery of technology-enabled products and services for smallholder farmers.¹ In 2021, the program published a gender impact assessment of 4 partners' digital services and products². The study identified several enablers of

women farmers' adoption and use such as using trusted channels for product dissemination (e.g. farmer associations or saving groups), offering products that are valued by women (such as those enabling access to inputs, credits, markets and training), and combining product dissemination with digital literacy activities. Based on these findings, Agrifin developed a Gender Transformative Toolkit to support partner organizations in their gender integration journey, helping them design and deliver effective and inclusive products, services, and partnerships for women smallholder farmers. 96% of AgriFin partners adopted the Toolkit resulting in over 40% reach of women smallholder farmers.



Photo: Mercy Corps, Kenya/E. Millstein, 2019

1 Agrifin, Program [Website](#)

2 Agrifin, Gender Impacts Study: Cross-Cutting Final Report, 2021.

Mercy Corps also facilitates digital innovation as an approach to enhance women’s access to key labor market functions. The [Gaza Sky Geeks \(GSG\)](#) program (Box 2) promotes internet-enabled initiatives to circumvent local restrictions and build sustainable, inclusive economic growth and employment in Palestine. GSG sees internet-enabled income generation as highly inclusive as long as specific GESI interventions are put in place to reach out to women participants (Box 5). GESI can sometimes be hindered by barriers in access to digital services, particularly for women. In Phase I, [Agrifin](#) aimed to promote digital innovation services for smallholder farmers (50% women), but it only reached 25% of women. Agrifin therefore conducted an analysis to identify the factors driving and inhibiting their adoption and usage. In response to their findings, the team developed a toolkit to assist their partners in creating gender-intentional and transformative solutions (Box 3).

Mercy Corps’ interventions on increasing economic opportunities for marginalized groups include adolescent girls. *Adolescence is risky for girls in developing countries. As they come of age, gender norms within communities start to dictate their mobility and where and when girls can have access to public space.*³ The [Girls Improving Resilience through Livelihoods + Health \(GIRL-H\)](#) works with adolescents to use life skills and social capital for improved well-being and personal agency; have increased access to educational opportunities, safe economic livelihoods, and/or civic engagement; and also engages public, private, and civil sector actors to foster an enabling environment in which girls are valued and able to access their human rights and exercise personal agency. Activities are conducted through Safe Spaces, where program staff work with adolescents to promote their empowerment, combined with social behavior change methods to challenge gender norms that particularly discriminate against adolescent girls (Box 4). Leveraging on program experience, in 2022, Mercy Corps developed an Adolescent Safe Space Guide for Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) which provides a step-by-step approach for CBOs to set up safe space programs and implement them effectively to achieve positive impact on program participants.



Photo: Mercy Corps, Kenya/E. Millstein, 2022

BOX 4

Girl-H

FUNDED BY A PRIVATE DONOR (2020-2023, KENYA, UGANDA AND NIGERIA)

Multiple studies by Mercy Corps and other industry partners found that Safe Spaces¹ are key to providing girls with enhanced social networks, self-confidence, and access to information. Through community involvement, they provide an emotionally and physically safe environment for girls and women to come together to learn new skills, develop social networks, empower each other, and begin the healing process from traumas they may have experienced. The program furthermore promotes the intentional engagement of all household members, including men, boys, and parents/in-laws, to challenge behaviors that prevent a girl’s agency, such as limiting her mobility and choices because of fear for her safety and control her sexuality. Midline results from GIRL-H show that the number of girls participants who regularly save money increased significantly in Kenya (9%) and Uganda (10%), compared to the baseline.

1 Mercy Corps, Adolescent girls’ Safe Space guide for Community-Based Organizations, June 2022.

3 Mercy Corps, A Girl Can Change her World: Capacity Statement on Adolescent Girls, 2020.

IMPLEMENTING SYSTEMIC CHANGE TO ENABLE THE PARTICIPATION OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS

The examples of targeted interventions illustrated above are typically implemented within long-term interventions that also aim at creating some level of systemic change within the markets, communities, and institutions that our program participants are part of. Mercy Corps creates systemic changes within communities and systems using integrated social behavior change, market system development (MSD) and resilience approaches.

LIWAY in Ethiopia, funded by Sida and implemented by a consortium including Mercy Corps, is an example of a market system development programme. The programme aims to increase incomes for women and youth in Addis Ababa by catalysing sustainable system changes. Mercy Corps began with sectors that were desirable for women in poverty to work within and had high or growing demand for labour to understand why women were excluded from those markets. Lack of affordable childcare was identified as a barrier, leading the LIWAY programme to analyse the childcare system and find that trusted private childcare services were very expensive due to the high cost of operating space within the city. The programme then partnered with public primary schools, TVET Colleges and industrial parks to pilot the introduction of private childcare services based out of unused space in these compounds. Schools, colleges and industrial parks would benefit by offering a much needed service to their communities, and by making some extra income to add to their tight budgets to sustain service provision. Women would benefit by having an affordable childcare option at a trusted and accessible location. To date, the model has been successfully piloted in two primary schools, two TVET colleges, one industrial park and the City government and industrial park development corporation is looking to scale the model. Currently the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Affairs is working to revise childcare standards and nanny training curriculum, underscored by their committed budget towards the care sector.

In over a decade of facilitation the **Alliance Caucasus Programme (ALCP)** has included gender targeted and gender sensitized systemic interventions at scale, to increase women's economic empowerment in value chains in which they are central such as dairy, increase it in value chains in which they are apparently more tangential such as the treatment and care of livestock and increase access to public goods and finances for rural women through using the local government system. Based on initial analysis to capture the roles that women play in the value chains, household decision making over resources and detailed constraints including mobility and access to finance, interventions were calibrated to address these aspects. In a national veterinary intervention, this included addressing media systems to deliver applicable information to women through channels they could access, low interest in-store credit for veterinary drugs and satellite



Photo: Mercy Corps, Uganda/C. Robbins, 2014

vets in places where mobility limited women's access to inputs. In the dairy sector, the most important agricultural value chain across Georgia in which women played a central role, an initial understanding of women's limited time in the household and low margins from cheese was central to the programmes interventions for the inclusive formalization of the cheese making sector ensuring women could sell raw milk, daily at a higher price and retain agency over the income.

The introduction of Women's Rooms in Georgia⁴, now a national network of rooms serving thousands of rural women across Georgia and Armenia, has proved an efficient example of a targeted gender intervention to address a constraint specific to women that of being unable to access or influence use of public goods. Using the government system for scale and increasing pressure on government to improve gender integration as an incentive, the intervention encouraged women's full participation in community decision making, dispersal of public funds and accessing funds for their business ideas. In a context where women's participation in village meetings was barely 5%, the need to address childcare barriers and establish spaces for women to come together was evident. The women's rooms started as a free information consultation space for rural women coming along with their children within the municipal building, facilitated by the local government, local women and civil society, with the intent to increase their participation in village meetings. The program team then decided to incorporate business planning through the Women's Rooms. Given the success of the approach, it is now being replicated in other programs, such as the upcoming [Horn of Africa Regional Livestock Programme \(RLP\)](#) (starting in 2024), where the program will establish Women's Rooms in collaboration with the local Chambers of Commerce for women to receive business support and increase their entrepreneurship skills.

Mercy Corps has been adapting typically male-dominated business models to increase income-generating opportunities for women and young people. [Feed the Future Nigeria—](#)



Photo: Mercy Corps, Nigeria, 2021

BOX 5
Feed the Future Nigeria—Rural Resilience Activity (RRA)
USAID-FUNDED (2018-2023, NORTHEAST NIGERIA)

RRA aims to strengthen the enabling environment for agribusiness finance and investment in conflict-affected settings, with a focus on women and young people. The program identified the direct sales agent (DSA) business model, independent salespeople who distribute goods through the network they create, as the most promising to increase women's control over their revenues and time. This intervention was complemented by supporting the establishment of female saving groups to enhance women's access to finance. The DSA's results are promising¹. As of March 2023, RRA has supported 14 companies in adopting the business model with 1300 women serving as DSAs, and this number is growing rapidly. Data from RRA's market analysis shows that DSAs generate a 34% return on investment in the first year of adoption.

¹ USAID, Scaling up the Direct Sales Agent Model for Women in Northeast Nigeria: A Lever for Women's Economic Empowerment, March 2023.

⁴ ALCP (2011- 2022, ongoing ALCP2 2022-2026, Georgia) financed by the Swiss Development Cooperation, the Austrian Development Cooperation (2019) and Sweden (2022). Through the Women's Rooms, female participation in village meetings increased from a baseline of 5% to 30-40 % on average. Since 2017, ALCP's Women's Rooms has been facilitating business plan writing and fundraising training, financing 157 women-owned and 23 men-owned businesses.

Rural Resilience Activity (RRA) adopted a GESI4MSD approach⁵ to engender and transform the Northeast Nigeria market economy into a space where all actors have improved practices related to building inclusive institutions, substantive participation, and promoting productivity and socio-economic progress of women, youth, and other marginalized people like the people living with disabilities. Thus, RRA engages at least 70% women and young people in identifying and co-designing initiatives and business models. Furthermore, the program promotes GESI learning activities with public, private, and non-profit sectors, as well as capacity building for women and youth to become key market players, thereby enabling the project to adapt business models to be more inclusive (See Box 5).

What's Next?

AREAS OF INVESTMENT AND PROMISING INTERVENTIONS

- › **Tailoring the scope and participants of our GESI Analysis studies:** GESI analysis studies typically involve the investigation of the 6 domains of empowerment set by the Harvard method, and that are in line with the domains of change for economic empowerment described earlier in this brief. However, when working within programs that seek to achieve systemic change, such as Market Systems Development Programming, typical GESI analyses may pose some limitations as they tend to focus on barriers and roles of the individual, rather than collecting biases within the system. The [Exploring Gender-Inclusive Approaches to the Delivery of Veterinary Services, Products, and Information among Pastoralist Communities \(SPARC\)](#) research program (Ongoing until 2023 Q4) covering Kenya, Ethiopia and Sudan, is exploring gender norms within the livestock health systems to provide recommendations on how to promote systemic change to better include women in the value chain (as opposed to focusing on women to better fit in the system). Additionally, Mercy Corps has developed internal resources for GESI analysis within MSD programming, and the TSU GESI and MSD teams are working together (taking the CEDIS program as a reference) to develop a specific **GESI Analysis guide for MSD programs** to adapt the common GESI Analysis framework and domains to cover the market systems—the value chain and the market players, in addition to individuals, households and community.
- › Economic empowerment programs are also increasingly **addressing the nexus between GESI and climate resilience**. Agrifin is setting up an Innovator Impact Lab to support the broader private agriculture sector to achieve investible results in climate-smart agriculture for women's economic empowerment. A Working Paper on Strengthening Rural Women's Climate Resilience was recently published based on Agrifin's experience. It provides an overview of 10 opportunities for service providers, investors, and donors to improve rural women's resilience to climate change. Agrifin's partner iShamba, for instance, provides regular weather advice, timely agricultural information, and best farming practices to 500,000 subscribers, out of which 43 percent are women)⁶. In 2020, iShamba also developed Let It Rain, a weather gamification initiative to incentivize farmers' uptake of localized weather advisories.
- › There is an evident need to invest in resources to be able to **measure economic empowerment** outcomes through more systematic studies, and in combination with measurement of women's empowerment around agency and leadership, by applying

⁵ Feed the Future—RRA, GESI Approach, February 2022.

⁶ Mercy Corps and CGAP, Strengthening Rural Women's Climate Resilience—Opportunities for Financial and Agricultural Service Providers, 2023.

Indices such as those developed by IFPRI (WEAI, Pro WEAI, etc.) The [Horn of Africa Regional Livestock Programme \(RLP\)](#), an SDC-funded 12-year program starting in 2024, addresses this in its Women’s Economic Empowerment analysis and gender-sensitive theory of change. Mercy Corps partners with International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), which publishes the [Women Empowerment in Livestock Index](#).

› **Through several initiatives, especially within jobtech and MSD programming,** Mercy Corps partners with the private sector, however, companies are generally not savvy in integrating GESI considerations within their business operations. To facilitate **women’s access to employment within private sector partners,** the [Jobtech Alliance](#) conducts a series of research projects and pilots to improve gendered outcomes of at least six job platforms across Africa. The Mercy Corps team will be working with businesses to help them diversify products and operational design to reduce barriers to access for women and maximize economic outcomes.



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