

# How have value chain interventions supported FEE? What type of interventions are promising?

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## Overview

Different types of value chain intervention address actors as producers, employees, consumers, suppliers and contractors etc. Many interventions aim to improve both vertical and horizontal linkages in the chain and can be concerned with upgrading the product, the process or the function of particular individuals or groups. For FEE, this can mean creating new productive roles; creating new vertical linkages to bring women into the chain; strengthening horizontal linkages by organizing groups; and/or developing gender responsible business at all levels. Enhancing women's positions in relation to others in the chain always involves changing a power relationship: when participants are enabled to improve processes or take over activities previously controlled by others, they do so by gaining better negotiating power and stronger positions in relationships.

Companies can be powerful drivers of gender equality and can leverage five dimensions of influence to do so: internal policy and systems; through investment decisions; by using their brand power to influence communities; by making purchasing decisions to support women; and through advocacy with partners at all levels. But gender equality in business needs to be tackled holistically; it cannot be achieved without addressing systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment in society. The structural and systemic constraints to equality that women face are the same factors that underpin their disadvantage in value chains. They include: limited land access; divisions of labour that under-recognise women's contribution; limited mobility in some cases; and little access to decision making.

However, not enough is yet known about what kinds of value chain interventions work best. While experience with value chain interventions promoting FEE is growing, robust studies assessing impact or comparing different approaches are rare. It therefore remains difficult to draw conclusions on what works in promoting gender equality through value chains.

It is, however, clear that whether or not women benefit from value chain interventions can be complex and needs to be fully investigated. Factors influencing whether they benefit include who controls the gains; how labour is distributed in the chain; and how far men resist any advances made by women. Reviews suggest that consistently positive impacts are more likely from interventions that have a conscious focus on gender relations; support women's groups; promote both vertical and horizontal linkages; and address women's multidimensional constraints.

Knowledge will be enhanced by better monitoring and evaluation: while systematic impact assessments remain rare, some detailed project results have been recorded, mainly regarding improvements in income and business practices. Information on how this affects decision making at household level – i.e control of the enhanced income – is most often not collected, but a few studies have tracked this. These show that improvements in status and mobility can accompany income gains but this process is complex: gains do not necessarily include women's increased control of income or decision making. Good monitoring of results at household level is therefore essential, including of interventions made by companies.

Some indications of promising approaches are available in the literature. There is good consensus that gender equality outcomes are more likely when there is an explicit focus on gender equality and internal project policy, processes and procedures that support inclusion and democratic functioning. Project activities should therefore include supporting producer organisations to become more democratic and develop a commitment to gender equality in membership and leadership.

Strengthening horizontal linkages through groups can increase women's access to services and assets and help tackle some underlying gender inequities. Producer groups can amplify producers' voices and strengthen their hand in negotiating the terms of exchange. Women-only groups can form the basis for training, credit access, technology enhancements, overcoming labour constraints, and gender awareness interventions. At the same time, they can be instrumental in creating confidence and solidarity through collective action. However, women-only groups are not always the best group model and may be a limitation on the networks opening up to women. It is always important to fit the group model to the specific context and purpose. When pre-existing, normally male-dominated, groups control access to important resources and vertical linkages, facilitating women's participation, voice and leadership within these groups is an important strategy. Groups have also been used as the basis for extending value chains, including to strengthen new vertical linkages which enable this kind of extension.

Functional upgrading is usually seen as requiring by-passing middle men in order to secure a linkage higher up the chain. But upgrading has also sometimes been achieved by adding middle women, for example to achieve outreach when producers are home-bound. Middle women may have technical skills, market information and links to credit to pass down the chain. However, bypassing middle men has often been helpful to improve women's value chain positions. This has been achieved sometimes by making the linkage more local – thus addressing restricted mobility – and sometimes by supporting women to take on new roles in negotiation, quality control, and trading.

## 1 How can value chain interventions contribute to FEE?

### 1.1 Frameworks for intervention

Value chain analysis is an approach to understanding trade at international and national levels which identifies vertical and horizontal components in a system in which goods are physically transformed into products. In the process, transactions occur within and between firms or individuals (Mutua *et al.* 2014; Riisgaard *et al.* 2010).

Value chain interventions therefore have the potential to address actors in this chain in the different roles that they play in it: as producers, employees, consumers, suppliers, contractors, distributors and as members of communities in which goods are produced and products sold; interventions concerned with gender equality or FEE can address the situation of women in each of these dimensions (Fritz *et al.* n.d.).

Different – but related – typologies of value chain interventions are evident in the literature. Coles and Mitchell (2010) note that the majority of interventions aim to strengthen **vertical and horizontal linkages** associated with the chain – vertical linkages being connections between actors and organisations at different levels in the chain contribute to different stages in the product's journey. Horizontal linkages are connections between actors at the same level/production stage in the chain – often, for example, connections aiming to enhance cooperation and coordination among otherwise competing actors at a particular stage.

In addition, Coles and Mitchell (2010) note that many interventions also aim at **upgrading** parts of the chain – either the **product**, the **process**, or the **function** of a particular group of individuals. Upgrading product and process would develop ways for actors in the chain to get better financial returns from their products including, for example, by improving the terms of participation of selected target groups (Riisgaard *et al.* 2010). Upgrading an actor's function means moving them up the chain by, for example, making linkages with actors further along the process, thus bypassing some actors or 'middlemen' (ActionAid 2014).

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From a different perspective, KIT (2012, cited in Mangoli and Nyakanda 2013) identifies different levels or intensity of value chain interventions, which thus address gender issues to different degrees. These levels are:

- Mitigating resistance by building on tradition – which involves professionalising and creating new roles in traditional activities;
- Creating spaces for women, youth and other disadvantaged groups – involving creating vertical linkages;
- Organizing for change, such as organizing producer groups – involving strengthening horizontal linkages;
- Establishing standards, certification and labels which create spaces for women;
- Gender responsible business – which includes furthering gender equality as a core business objective, and thus integrates gender concerns into all aspects of business functioning.

***For FEE, this can mean creating new productive roles; creating new vertical linkages to bring women into the chain; strengthening horizontal linkages by organizing groups; and/or developing gender responsible business at all levels.***

Gender responsible business might include strategies described by other observers which aim to develop and brand ‘women’s products’ – such as ‘Women’s Coffee’ – through value chains and business processes which consciously aim to promote and empower women, including by building relationships between women producers and women consumers (AfDB 2015; Twin 2012).

While value chain analysis aims to understand the gendered dimensions of each stage and process in the chain, gender focussed value chain interventions aim at enhanced FEE or other aspects of gender equality. ActionAid (2014) notes that enhancing women’s positions in relation to others in the chain always involves a power relationship, and therefore awareness of how women’s individual and collective power can influence policies and decision making, is a critical element in making value chains work for women.

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Empowerment can occur *when participants gain capacity to conduct activities more efficiently and profitably, and when they are able to reduce transaction costs by taking on or integrating activities that previously might have been handled or controlled by others. It also occurs when they gain control over the value chain processes through improved negotiation capacities, and stronger positions in relationships with other key stakeholders across the value chain* (ActionAid 2014).

In addition to addressing value chain actors as producers, employers and employees, entrepreneurs, and suppliers, value chain interventions can also address actors as consumers.

## 1.2 Dimensions of intervention for companies

There are a number of opportunities for the private sector to promote and support gender equality – and when it does, it can be among the most powerful drivers of social change (ICRW and BSR 2016). Fritz *et al.* (n.d.) draw attention to 5 dimensions of intervention by companies to support FEE.

- **Internal FEE:** Supporting women in the company – female employees, leaders, and board members including by improving gender equality internally in the company – for example by making policies, systems, and workplace norms and practices gender sensitive and women friendly.
- **Investing:** Companies can use their investments, grant making and CSR (corporate social responsibility) activities to directly support women at every stage of the value chain in which they operate.
- **Using brand influence:** Companies can use their reputation and relationships with peers and customers to influence policy in the communities where they operate and in which elements of their value chain are situated.

- **Using their purchasing power in value chains:** Companies can source inputs from businesses that directly empower women as suppliers, contractors, and distributors and can establish company policies encouraging this practice.
- **Partners:** Companies can work with NGOs, governments, foundations, advocacy groups, and businesses beyond their immediate value chains to address specific barriers and to advance women's rights more generally.

A number of commentators present evidence, however, that gender equality in business cannot be achieved without advancing gender equality in society (ICRW and BSR 2016; AfDB 2015; Mutua *et al* 2014). Thus companies are urged to tackle gender inequality in a holistic way, addressing not only the surface features of women's disadvantage but also the structural and systemic barriers standing in the way of women's economic advancement.

### 1.3 Constraints

Constraints facing women as they attempt to secure better positions and terms of exchange in value chains indeed reflect this structural and systemic dimension to their disadvantage and reinforce the appeal for a holistic approach to addressing these. Such constraints include:

- **Land access and ownership:** in agricultural value chains, which is where most value chain analysis and intervention has to date been concentrated, access to land is clearly a factor affecting the position of producers. Yet *all* over SSA, women own significantly less land than men, which in turn affects their ability to become members of producer organisations in their own right, and to access credit and obtain technical assistance. (Twin 2012).
- **Household control over income:** women tend to have less influence than men over how household income is used; raising income therefore does not lead directly to empowerment. Indeed, there is evidence of reduced income control by women with increased commercialization (Njuki *et al.* 2011a in Mutua *et al* 2014). The balance of control tends to improve where income is received by women directly from their own business activities.
- **Division and recognition of labour:** women's labour contribution – especially in agricultural production – is often significant but under-recognised and under-valued. At the same time, they also carry out the majority of household labour which is often not considered as work (AfDB 2015). For example, in Burkina Faso's cotton sector, women make up approximately 50 percent of production labour, but receive less than 2 % of the income, as they are usually not remunerated and do not control crop revenues unless they are allocated a piece of land, usually by the male head of household.
- **Mobility and public life:** Seclusion of women in some cultures and restrictions on their mobility in others mean that women's access to markets is in some cases restricted, alongside their access to other services and opportunities which might enhance their negotiating positions in markets – such as their lower access to technology (FAO 2011 in Mutua *et al.* 2014). These barriers influence their level of entry in value chains and a woman's capacity to compete with other actors (Mutua *et al.* 2014).
- **Decision-making:** men tend to dominate decision making and public leadership, including in producer groups and associations designed to enhance value chain positions. For example, in Burkina Faso's cotton sector, of 9,000 cotton producer groups, only 43 (less than 0.5 percent) are run by women and only 2 percent of members are women. Women who are members of mixed groups are often prevented from participating in decision-making or negotiations. (AfDB 2015)

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## 2 What works in value chain interventions

### 2.1 Limits of current knowledge

Experience in value chain interventions aiming to promote FEE has been growing and there are now a number of manuals, tools and approaches available (e.g. AfDB 2015; Mutua *et al.* 2014). These have generally been developed by pulling together analysis of women in production systems and experience in livelihoods interventions accumulated over the past decades. However, there is very little available in terms of robust empirical evidence; rigorous review or evaluation of value chain interventions aiming to promote FEE. In a review of current knowledge and practice on gender in agricultural value chains, Coles and Mitchell (2010) observe that accounts based on pre-and post comparative studies of the effectiveness of upgrading interventions to improve gender equality through value chains are rare. This includes little comparative work comparing impacts across different types of intervention. Thus it remains difficult to make confident or definitive statements about ‘what works’.

However, a number of accounts of value chain interventions offer some analysis and evidence which can be used to suggest certain guidelines for promoting FEE through value chains.

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### 2.2 Ill-considered interventions can be counter-productive

There is a variety of evidence suggesting that women do not necessarily benefit from generic value chain interventions, nor from interventions simply facilitating their entry into the chain. Coles and Mitchell’s review (2010) suggests that this is because gaining benefits from value chain participation depends heavily on how those benefits are owned and controlled, and on how production labour is distributed. A study by Elson (1995 cited in Mutua *et al.* 2014) shows, for example, how in Kenya, introducing weeding technology in maize increased productivity yields by 56% when women controlled the output but only 15% in men’s plots where women worked but the output belonged to men. There are also accounts of negative responses on the part of men – including violent responses – to improvements in women’s value chain status – for example Goldstein’s study among women employed in flower farms in Ethiopia (cited in Mutua *et al.* 2014).

***Whether or not women benefit from value chain interventions can be complex and needs to be fully investigated. Factors influencing whether they benefit include who controls the gains; how labour is distributed in the chain; and how far men resist any advances made by women.***

Further evidence suggests that the impacts of value chain interventions can be complex and their implications hard to gauge. For example, Basset (2009) finds from case studies of Fairtrade and organic certified cotton producers in West Africa that Fairtrade cotton can increase women’s incomes and autonomy and promote greater gender equality, mainly because Fairtrade cooperatives are perceived to be more transparent and democratic than non-Fairtrade organizations and hence women experience less discrimination. However, the evidence is complex. It also shows that men are attracted by the greater returns of the Fairtrade or organic crop and may use their wives’ names to apply for certification (Mutua *et al.* 2014). This is echoed by other studies which document men taking over women’s crops and livestock once they become profitable – such as Njuki *et al.* (2011) which documents men taking over bean crops in Malawi.

### 2.3 Multi-dimensional approaches

While the literature flags this need for caution, there are also a number of examples of projects with apparently positive impacts. Riisgaard *et al.* (2010) summarise that projects with more consistent positive impacts tend to consciously address broader gender relations: they have a specific gender focus; involve creating or supporting women’s groups, and promote both vertical and horizontal linkages in the chain. Others, such as commentaries on CARE’s value-chain initiatives (e.g. Nardi 2016) and observations by ICRW and BSR (2016) note that multi-dimensional interventions are much more likely to have impact, reflecting women’s multidimensional constraints.



At both producer and company levels, these might include:

- Training for savings and loans associations. This might include training in financial literacy and financial inclusion to facilitate women's greater control over their earnings at household level.
- Increasing women's membership in cooperative type organisations and supporting their participation and leadership in local level decision making institutions.
- Addressing and tackling land ownership constraints and limitations on mobility and access to opportunities through action at community level.
- Policy advocacy among governments and sector-specific trade organisations.
- Addressing women's time constraints through promoting social protection and childcare and redistributing the household workload.

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## 2.4 Measuring results

Although systematic impact assessments are rare, a few projects have recorded and made available results and evaluations of gender equality focused value chain interventions which show a number of different kinds of outcomes. At the same time, commentators note that collecting information on decision making at household levels is almost always a necessary step to gauge gender equality effects, but this is too rarely included in monitoring or evaluation studies.

Nevertheless, some clear results are now being reported. At the level of income and business improvements, for example, Snelgrove (n.d.) reports on USAID's *Behind the Veil* project in Pakistan, which closed in 2007. The project aimed to bring rural embroiderers more advantageously into the value chain through direct links with female sales agents who would connect them to male wholesalers. The use of producer groups and buying houses also helped to enhance links between sales agents and rural embroiderers. At the end of the project, 213 female sales agent had been trained and were working with 9,295 rural embroiderers. Prior to the launch of the project, it was estimated that the average monthly income for a rural embroiderer was approximately 360 a Rupees month (US\$6.00). At the end of the project, participating embroiders were averaging approximately Rupees 1295 (\$21) a month. Annual incomes for sales agents at the end of the programme averaged Rupees 75,180 (USD\$1252) (Snelgrove n.d.; Creevey *et al.* 2011).

Similarly, an evaluation of ActionAid's project in Uganda with women vegetable producers (ActionAid 2014) confirmed that by project close women were operating across the value chain in growing, processing, packaging and trading vegetables. Some had upgraded their inputs, conducting activities to a higher standard than earlier (product and process upgrading); and women had also moved into new roles (function upgrading), via inputs such as agri-business, record keeping, and savings and credit management training. Seventy-five per cent of women participants had increased their income and 85% reported increased food availability at household level (ActionAid 2014). Many women also felt better placed to continue with these improvements: 31% stated that they have more access to information on vegetable growing; 27% stated they have more information on women's rights and 25% said they had better access to credit.

**Systematic impact assessments remain rare but some detailed project results have been recorded, mainly regarding improvements in income and business practices. Information on how this affects decision making at household level – i.e. control of the enhanced income – is most often not collected.**

### Household level results

Some projects have also made efforts to capture household level results, tracking changes in gender inequality. The *Behind the Veil* project developed a system to monitor qualitative improvements in household status and quality of life. This information revealed that women's increased contribution to household income has resulted in improved standards of living and status within the household – 78% of women reported improvements here. In addition, 76% of women reported increased mobility as a result of this income earning opportunity.

**A few studies have tracked how value chain interventions impact on gender relations in the household. These show that improvements in status and mobility can accompany income gains but that this process is complex: gains do not necessarily include women's increased control of income of decision making.**

The evaluation of ActionAid's Uganda project (2014) also found status improvements in the household: women reported increased inputs into household level decisions, particularly in relation to schooling but also on household expenditures. They also reported a decrease in domestic violence. Similarly, an evaluation of two DANIDA-supported interventions aimed at pro-poor involvement in aquaculture production in Bangladesh shows increased intra-household interaction and mobility among those women who participated in the interventions compared to a control group of non-participating women (DANIDA, 2009). However, it also found that men retained control of both pond activities and financial decisions – thus these aspects of gender relations in the household were unchanged (Riisgaard *et al.* 2010).

Other evaluations have found negative results at household level: an evaluation of Fairtrade certified banana and coffee producers in Peru, Costa Rica and Ghana (Ruben *et al.*, 2008) found mostly negative results in household decision making, as well as negative contribution by women to household income (Riisgaard *et al.* 2010). Tracking household level changes is clearly an important task in understanding project success in relation to gender equality effects.

ICRW and BSR (2016) note that the need for good monitoring and evaluation does not just apply to donor led intervention, but also to companies leveraging opportunities to make improvements in gender inequality. As they state, the majority of companies collect data on the number of women hired or reached by a particular programme, but it is rare to find them collecting more meaningful data on how, if at all, women and business are benefitting from these efforts.

**Good monitoring of results at household level is essential, including of interventions made by companies.**

## 2.5 Democratic, inclusive and gender aware process counts

There is good consensus in the literature that interventions explicitly and directly targeting gender equality are important in producing gender equality outcomes, and that internal project process and procedure influence outcomes.

For example, an evaluation of a Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment Project (SHEP) project in SSA found that farmer income doubled in the two years of the project and that income parity between women and men improved: the baseline discrepancy was 31.1% in favour of men, but 14.9% in favour of men two years later. Both women and men farmers attributed their increases in income to their gender awareness training, with 39% of respondents noting this as significant. Breaking gendered activity norms was one reason given for these changes – such as women spraying tomatoes themselves rather than waiting for their husbands to do it (Mangoli and Nyakanda 2013).

In ways that are perhaps complex, modelling democratic principles within projects which can challenge gender norms and promote social justice appears to contribute to positive outcomes. For example, Riisgaard *et al.* (2010) describe how Fairtrade organizational norms combined with organic procedural norms brought significant impacts in West Africa (Basset 2009) and Latin America (Lyon *et al.* 2009). Firstly, organizational norms required by the Fairtrade organization encouraged women to participate in village and regional organizations, which brought them into wider networks. In addition, the organic requirement of internal control systems required that records be kept of meeting attendance and participation in annual capacity-building workshops for farmers. Attendance is required from all farm operators, and as a consequence female farmers are less easily excluded. Moreover, legal requirements of organic certification lead to increased registration of land to women.

Commentators therefore advocate that project activities should include encouraging and supporting producer partner organisations to become more democratic organisations with a commitment to gender equity in membership and leadership – this in the understanding that participation in producer organisations in itself can create opportunities for women to gain skills, confidence and challenge gender norms (Twin 2012). Further, where producer organisations formalise a commitment to gender justice, such as by engaging in activities that increase the visibility of women’s work on the farm and in the household, this is seen as enabling of transformational change. Other strategies include (Twin 2012):

- Enabling more women to become members of the producer organisation in their own right by reviewing membership policy and/or encouraging men to share or gift ownership of land to their wives and other female family members.
- Establishing spaces to act as ‘incubators’ for women’s leadership and to allow both men and women to learn about gender and consider ideas about identity.
- Including women’s committees in producer organisation governance structures to enable women leaders to have more influence over decision-making and access to financial resources, and help to place a greater emphasis on women’s priorities in organisational strategy.

***There is good consensus that gender equality outcomes are facilitated by an explicit focus on gender equality and by internal project policy, processes and procedures that support inclusion and democratic functioning.***

***Project activities should therefore include supporting producer organisations to become more democratic and develop a commitment to gender equality in membership and leadership.***

### 3 Types of groups

Almost all value chain interventions – and in particular those with an emphasis on strengthening horizontal linkages – advocate the building or strengthening of groups. These can reduce gender-related disparities in bargaining and management power as a precursor to stronger vertical relationships (Coles and Mitchell 2010). Horizontal organizing can be beneficial by increasing women’s market and social power, improving access to services and assets and helping to tackle some of the underlying gender inequities, such as low social status, that disempower women in value chains. Producer groups can amplify producers’ voices and strengthen their hand in negotiating the terms of exchange.

However, there is variation in the types of groups modelled in different projects. The literature, as summarised below, does not give insight into which of these types might work better than others. Nevertheless, it does provide information on the ways that each type might work, and also clearly specifies that group models must be responsive to context; must adapt to each situation; and must be clear on the specific purpose of the group (Coles and Mitchell 2010).

***Strengthening horizontal linkages through groups can increase women’s access to services and assets and help tackle some underlying gender inequities. Producer groups can amplify producers’ voices and strengthen their hand in negotiating the terms of exchange.***

#### 3.1 Women only groups

Creating women’s producer groups is a common strategy, but commentators document mixed evidence on whether this is the most effective strategy.

On the one hand, women only producer groups can encourage the entry of women into new economic arenas, such as in traditionally male sectors (USAID 2009). Women-only groups can be a practical basis for facilitating value chain upgrading in a way that directs improvements at women, for example by using groups as the basis for training initiatives or credit access. According to Riisgaard *et al.* (2010), effective horizontal organising has been ‘instrumental in bringing about gains for women’. Their review of initiatives and interventions in the non-timber forest products sector finds that this has formed the basis for the success among indigenous women because when rural women form their own organizations they are better able to access credit, technology, training and markets, and also increase their bargaining power within the value chain.



Women's groups may also have the specific purpose of overcoming production challenges such as labour constraints – for example, collective resources can be marshalled to overcome women's relative lack of control over the labour of other family members (USAID 2009). In ActionAid's value chains projects in Cambodia, Palestine and Uganda, women have expanded collective production on land that has been bought in their name and – as groups – have been selling their household produce to traders at the farm-gate or taking it to market for direct sale to consumers. The groups encourage discussion and analysis; in this process, they aim to find ways of marketing their produce collectively and to take on more activities in drying and processing of their vegetables (ActionAid 2014).

Riisgaard *et al.* (2010) also point out that organising women into producer groups is most often combined with forging new or strengthening old vertical linkages in the value chain. For example, producer groups may become the first port of call for agricultural extension officers (Hird-Younger and Simpson 2013). They might also be the focus for skills enhancement initiatives, such as in the *Behind the Veil* project (Snelgrove n.d.) In this case, a sales agent-led membership association called Association of Women Entrepreneurs in Small and Micro Enterprise (AWESOME) was used to facilitate skills enhancement by project staff, while rural embroiderers were provided with training on practical negotiation and bargaining techniques to help counter monopolies.

Women's groups have often also been very significant in creating confidence, solidarity and the empowerment of collective action. In ActionAid groups in Palestine, for example, women stated that participation in the group was the most valuable element of the project (ActionAid 2014). Participants said that they would not have the confidence to market the products alone, and that they learned from each other and felt they gained power by standing together.

However, women only groups may not be the best solution in all contexts and to address all issues. For example, an evaluation of a project introducing mud crab supply to hotels in Unguja Island, Tanzania found that excluding men from some producer groups created resentment and anger that manifested itself in acts of sabotage as well as creating additional transaction and input costs for the group because women were reliant upon a small number of male fishers for seed stock and feedstuffs (Coles and Mitchell 2010). Gaining advantage in value chains is to some extent related to the ability to draw on networks, therefore limiting networks to female-only may in some contexts create disadvantage.

### 3.2 Mixed and pre-existing groups

Facilitating women's participation in mixed-gender groups and organizations can therefore be important when such groups control access to important resources – this is often the case with pre-existing producer organisations which may well be recipients of inputs such as tools, monitoring and technical agricultural training and marketing services. Cooperative models – such as the Bukonzo Farmers Marketing Cooperative in Uganda (Gobezie 2013) – are often used for functional upgrading, or moving rural producers further up the value chain through strategies such as building collective storage, transportation and marketing facilities.

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***However, women-only groups are not always the best group model and may be a limitation on the networks opening up to women. It is always important to fit the group model to the specific context and purpose.***

***When pre-existing, normally male-dominated, groups control access to important resources and vertical linkages, facilitating women's participation, voice and leadership within these groups is an important strategy.***

In these cases, the challenge is to ensure that women are well represented in all value chain organisations; can participate effectively; and are able to engage with the group in ways that enhance and support their voice and leadership (Mangoli and Nyakanda 2013).

Most interventions facilitating women's entry and participation in mixed groups are dealing with pre-existing groups – which invariably means groups that are exclusive to or dominated by men (Mangoli and Nyakanda 2013). Coles and Mitchell (2010) document the development of pre-existing Common Interest Groups (CIGs) through the SHEP project in SSA and suggest that using existing, sometimes informal, groups and networks has proven to be more successful than initiating them from scratch. The task for the project was to empower women within these groups and to strengthen the remaining parts of the value chain.

### 3.3 Groups to extent value chains

Women-only or mixed groups may also clearly have the purpose of extending value chains, and may need to adapt in order to respond to the particular context. For example, *Behind the Veil* aimed to bring women confined to the household into value chains by creating a cohort of female sales agents. However, it was found (Snelgrove n.d.) that

seclusion was so deeply entrenched that some of these sales agents were unable to interact directly with the embroiderers. In response, a two-tiered model was created with embroiderers selling to Community Sales Agents (CSAs). The CSAs would mainly sell the product to Local Sales Agents (LSAs), typically women based in urban areas with home boutiques. This varied model had the advantage of enriching competition in the market: as CSAs gained greater skills, they sometime competed with LSAs by selling direct to retailers and buyers. Snelgrove reports that these developments have added richness to the value chain at the same time as demonstrating that a range of options are required to ensure access to mainstream markets by women with very limited mobility and access.

***Groups have also been used as the basis for extending value chains, including to strengthen new vertical linkages which enable this kind of extension.***

## 4 The role of the 'middle man'

### 4.1 Adding middle women

Although functional upgrading in value chains is often seen in terms of by-passing middle men to create linkages further up the chain, the *Behind the Veil* project demonstrates the complexity of this situation. In this case, 'middle women' were specifically created and put into place in order for a whole section of producers to be get access to more profitable value chains. While rural embroiderers possessed excellent technical expertise, they were essentially cut off from markets due to the reliance on male family members for trading activities. As a result, they continued to produce low-quality product with traditional designs that sold through low-value market chains. Being unable to interact with the market meant that they were unaware of new market opportunities and were unable to access critical support services which would assist them in serving these new customers.

***Functional upgrading is usually seen as requiring by-passing middle men in order to secure a linkage higher up the chain. But upgrading has also sometimes been achieved by adding middle women, for example to achieve outreach when producers are home-bound. Middle women may have technical skills, market information and links to credit to pass down the chain.***

To solve this, female sales agents were effectively used as channels to disseminate important market information among these otherwise hard to reach producers. Selected sales agents were provided with training on technical topics such as cutting and marketing and modules on design needs assessment, design training, quality and innovation, group formation, mobilization and group dynamics, market survey and research, exhibition techniques, time management, etc. Mentoring was also provided to sales agents to ensure they were effectively able to act as intermediaries. According to Snelgrove (n.d.), the information and training that they delivered helped to improve the balance of power in the value chain and the relative position of those at the bottom of the chain.

In a similar example of intermediaries, women volunteer extension officers have sometimes been used to effectively increase extension services for female farmers by enhancing liaison between farmers and public sector extension officers and/or NGOs. A study of this model as operating in various countries (Hird-Younger and Simpson 2013) finds that these volunteers expand gender-specific extension services including information dissemination by liaising between service providers and women farmers but that they cannot be expected to replace agricultural extension personnel altogether. The volunteers had also worked simply to strengthen groups and help them access savings and loans: many volunteers indicated that their groups had started a group-level loan system, opened bank accounts and accessed formal loans since their involvement in the extension volunteer programme. Through their leadership, organizational skills and relationship with MoFA and NGOs, WEV volunteers are able to increase the regularity of farmer group meetings, support group growth and diversify their activities.

#### 4.2 Bypassing middle men

On the other hand, women producers are clearly very often at the mercy of unscrupulous middle men, and lack of mobility is frequently one of the factors holding this relationship in place. Even when the relationship is not particularly unscrupulous, limited access to markets due to restricted mobility carries the risk of forfeiting the advantages of market links to male intermediaries, either middle men or male family members. Bypassing middle men has thus proven successful in some circumstances – sometimes by facilitating women to make the vertical linkages themselves – i.e. to travel – and sometimes by ‘bringing the value chain to the village’ for example by developing village procurement centres.

Village procurement centres were created, for example, in a project in India addressing the lack of market linkages for poor maize producers, many of whom were women (Riisgaard *et al.* 2010). The procurement centres were owned and operated by women’s self-help group members; they addressed the lack of credit and quality control at the same time as building market linkages. Women’s involvement in these centres was found to have enhanced their technical and leadership skills and had required them to take on duties that were previously the role of men, such as negotiating with traders.

In ActionAid’s value chain projects, women invariably saw the value in taking on new roles that reduced their reliance on middle-men, and actively wanted to take on these roles. They attributed their increased confidence to the expansion in their knowledge, and informants confirmed that women were now recognised by others as negotiators and providers of high-quality goods (ActionAid 2014).

***However, bypassing middle men has often been helpful to improve women’s value chain positions. This has been achieved sometimes by making the linkage more local – thus addressing restricted mobility – and sometimes by supporting women to take on new roles in negotiation, quality control, and trading.***

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