



Lifting Up Communities by Empowering Women

How to support women, grow your business and raise up your community

Women are key to eradicating global poverty. Across the developing world, they play a central role in farming and remain the main caregivers, looking after both children and dependent relatives. In addition, they make most domestic decisions, choosing which products and services to buy.

Empowering women—who fill all of these roles across their communities—helps them raise themselves and their families out of poverty. It is also good business, providing small and medium enterprises leaders with workers and/or customers who are critical agents of change in their communities.

This insight paper contains key findings from an evaluation of five women-friendly enterprises that are funded by impact accelerator TRANSFORM, which supports visionary social enterprises across Africa, Asia and beyond. The research highlights practical ways to make your workplace more welcoming to women, and to attract more female customers, with a view of increasing both your profitability and your positive social impacts.

“She says that working at Sampurn(e)arth was the solution to so many problems. Her daughter has studied to graduate level and her son is doing IT. She was able to give them her money as her husband’s money is used for loans, so her money goes to the kids and household. Now she doesn’t have to ask her husband for money.”

Research fieldwork notes from Sampurn(e)arth, a waste management enterprise that provides improved income opportunities for India’s informal waste workers



How Harmira went from housewife to shop owner

Married mother-of-eight Hamira lives in Hagere Selam, Ethiopia. The 40-year-old had been looking for a way to earn an income to support her family when she came across Kidame Mart, a social enterprise that sells household products in rural locations through a network of female entrepreneurs. Following training on sales, bookkeeping and customer service, she became a sales agent and discovered her natural flair for business. With the money she made, she initially bought some goats, which she then fattened and sold for profit. Later, she had earned enough money to open her own shop.

“During initial training there were women who had some challenges in their households, in particular their husbands restricting them from being a part of the project or trying to control their bank account or mobile phones. But through the process, the women realised that they didn’t need any support to set things up... It paved the way to understanding that they are capable of doing things and learning things independently.”

Partner of Kidame Mart

Find out more

Collaboration is key to scaling social enterprises. Learn more about the successful programmes that other enterprises and funders have delivered together. [Read more stories here](#)

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We

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Lives

SIX WAYS TO EMPOWER WOMEN:

1. Set out to support women

In a male-dominated world, women do not become employees and/or customers by accident. The enterprises we spoke to all deliberately set out to support women – either through direct employment and/or by increasing women’s access to quality products and services.

These SMEs all also make a clear link between women’s outcomes and those of their households and wider communities – understanding that boosting women’s financial security and independence helps to improve living standards for the whole family.

2. Target women for recruitment and training

All the enterprises that we researched deliberately target and then train women. They support recruitment plans, for example to become sales agents for domestic products, with tailored training – such as bookkeeping and business skills. To increase retention, they also create career development plans, so individuals are motivated to do well and progress.

3. Offer flexible employment

An important strategy to attract women to a workplace is to offer flexible employment. It works well for women with childcare or family caring responsibilities – as well as those with other income streams to work around, like retail or laundry services.

4. Provide access to credit and saving schemes

Access to quality credit and saving schemes helps women manage day-to-day supply issues, which are largely outside their control. It also motivates them, as it gives them the chance to plan for their families’ futures. Two of the enterprises we interviewed offer credit and savings options with competitive interest rates. In doing so, they support women to manage unanticipated expenses and build towards their goals.

5. Design for women

Current workplaces and/or products are not necessarily designed for women. To shape safe, harassment-free spaces, the enterprises in our research asked women about their needs and their ideas, which could look like a ‘home from home’ working environment, with communal social and eating hubs.

To reach women customers, understanding their barriers to purchase is crucial. For example, discreet and confidential order and delivery processes help overcome stigmas around the purchase of women’s personal health and hygiene products.

6. Work in partnership

Use the power of bigger organisations and businesses to expand business opportunities, empower women and lift up communities. The enterprises we researched all used partners at strategic points in their evolution. Such partners can include governments, NGOs, or relevant brands who can use their influence, reducing any duplication of effort and maximising impact.

CONCLUSION

Businesses that do not consider women as employees and customers miss an opportunity to grow, as well as to help create a wider positive impact. The businesses we evaluated helped women to increase their incomes, broaden their skills, boost their self-esteem, improve their health and increase their social status.

In turn, the women then helped to lift their entire communities – by raising living standards, improving wider health outcomes, increasing wellbeing and even challenging certain gender norms.

Women around the world have been left behind for too long. They are used to multi-tasking, problem-solving and high levels of responsibility, and have so much to offer.



“Most of a family’s life depends on the personal life of women. If they thrive, their families thrive”

Employee of Kasha, an online personal health product shop for women in Rwanda and Kenya

“I learnt how to approach people and how to market solar products. The way I play with them enabled a lot of people to buy from me. In my provision business, I still apply the same method of playing with customers that I learnt from the training. I don’t argue with customers at all. Now any product I introduce to my community, people always buy because of the sales technique I learnt.”

Employee of D2D Pro, a Nigerian enterprise that sells household goods via door-to-door saleswomen using a bespoke digital payment app



TRANSFORM is an impact accelerator that unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support visionary enterprises across Africa, Asia and beyond. Together, we test and scale new solutions that tackle environmental challenges, improve health and wellbeing, and build inclusive economies.

Combining grant funding, business insight and research, TRANSFORM is advancing the development of innovative business models to help solve global challenges. It was established in 2015 and is led by Unilever, the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY.