

THROUGH THE GENDER LENS

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF GENDER ON THE
FINANCIAL LIVES OF DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

2ND

● STATE OF
● THE REFUGEE
● FINANCE SECTOR
SERIES



SUPPORTED BY:
Agence Française de Développement (AFD)



Above: Signage of One Youth One Heart Initiative, a Refugee Led Organisation based in Kampala that supports refugees and hosts to deepen their access and usage of financial services to achieve self reliance.

Through the Gender Lens: Investigating the impact of gender on the financial lives of displaced communities

Mercy Corps

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Above: A facilitator supports a refugee micro-entrepreneur to use digital tools from commerce at a ReFine Digital Clinic in Kampala

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Executive Summary

Financial services today do not work for marginalised communities as they should; this situation is even graver for forcibly and internally displaced women who face a host of barriers, stereotypes and limitations when accessing, using and benefiting from financial services compared to their male counterparts. Refugee women, in particular, continue to face legal and identity documentation issues, economic barriers such as low and unstable incomes, mobility restrictions impeding the accessibility of financial access touchpoints, a persistent digital gender divide, and a confluence of social and cultural barriers that affect resource ownership and use. As the global humanitarian funding deceleration forces attention to refugee finance and market systems development, the needs of displaced women must be prioritised by development and market actors alike to ensure that no one is left behind and that balanced growth is achieved for all. This report develops the ideas introduced in the first State of the Refugee Finance Sector report and advocates for a financial sector that adequately responds to the needs of refugee and host women, not just in rhetoric but also in reality.

While comprehensive global statistics specific to forcibly displaced persons (FDPs) and gender are largely limited, broader studies indicate that the gender gap in financial inclusion is likely wider among FDPs than the general population. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), a region with the highest gender gap in financial services access in the world, (13% compared to the global average of 4% - Global Findex 2021) those living in forcible displacement are likely to face even greater disparities in access and usage of formal financial services and economic wellbeing. Despite the progress made by humanitarian, development and financial institutions in rolling out notable financial products and projects to address the financial exclusion gender gap in recent times, real and sustainable gains can be achieved if the financial sector leads on gender-inclusive finance from a commercial standpoint. That can happen when financial service providers (FSPs) prioritise women's needs from the product design stage and re-design the many "gender-neutral" financial products on the market with women's needs in mind.

The varied needs of women, often different from those of men, are driven by the obstacles they face in their attempt to access and use formal financial services. The report delves into the spectrum of issues affecting:

- Women's economic advancement and opportunity (driven by women's difficulty in accessing decent employment, their low incomes and low return on labour driven by society's expectations of women around domestic work and child care),
- Access to opportunity, skills training or education (hampered by women's mobility restrictions, cultural norms, and the digital gender divide),
- Access to assets and support services (fueled by negative societal beliefs about women's ownership and control of resources) and
- Women's agency and decision-making power (typified by cultural and religious beliefs in what women should and can exercise control over, exemplified in instances such as elite capture within savings groups and other leadership structures).

Collectively, these barriers are crippling factors to the self-reliance and financial inclusion of refugee women; however, they also serve as clues to the underlying needs of women for FSPs who wish to design for and retrofit their existing products and services to meet those needs. Successful strategies adopted by refugee-serving FSPs globally as well as in Uganda, have focused on the following:

- Proactively working with regulators and legislators to adapt policies and products to women's needs;
- Collecting gender-disaggregated data on product access and use - and using this data to inform collateral requirements, loan repayment schedules, and product packaging;
- Complementing business and digital curricula with mentoring and handholding; and
- Being intentional about working with refugee-led organisations (RLOs) throughout the loan origination process till recovery.

Increasingly, more FSPs are beginning to implement these strategies either partially with funder support or independently, which speaks to a growing recognition of a business case for women in marginalised settings. They are also beginning to experience the payoffs: they are seeing more loyal clients in women than men, recording better loan repayment rates and higher savings-to-income ratios, becoming more compliant with emerging regulatory trends and enjoying more brand equity in their markets.

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List of Abbreviations

AFD	Agence Française de Développement
BG	Business Group
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRB	Credit Reference Bureau
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
FDP	Forcibly Displaced Person
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FinTech	Financial Technology
FSP	Financial Services Provider
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GDP	Gross Development Product
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IGIQ	Institutional Gender Integration Quotient
IT	Information Technology
MC	Mercy Corps
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MFI	Microfinance Institution

List of Abbreviations

NDP	National Development Plan
NFS	Non-financial services
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPL	Non Performing Loan
RLO	Refugee Led Organisation
SACCO	Savings and Credit Cooperatives
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USSPM	Universal Standards for Social Performance Management
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment

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Chapter 1: Gender overview and context in inclusive refugee finance.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

At 51%, the global percentage of forcibly displaced women is an attractive market for financial institutions and other market actors willing to move beyond the gender rhetoric to prioritise, design products for and measure impact achieved in serving women. Despite the challenges and barriers to women achieving meaningful economic independence, there is sufficient evidence that prioritising women's needs in the delivery of financial services has more than just sentimental benefits: it positively affects a business's economics.

Structure of the report

This report develops the theme of gender, introduced in the first release of ReFine's State of the Refugee Finance Sector report, by highlighting critical gender issues that impact finance delivery in displacement settings. Gender inclusive finance recognises that men and women experience financial inclusion differently and that this discrepancy is influenced by various socio-cultural, economic, and political factors.

In the context of displacement, women face more binding physical, social and cultural constraints than their male counterparts when accessing finances and control over resources. As a result, they are less able to leverage financial resources to transform their lives and futures. They are also more likely than men to suffer greater challenges in the labour market of their host community than displaced men, as seen in many Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries¹. The result is an exacerbated situation where the existing vulnerabilities of migrant women are entrenched, driving them further into poverty.

This report focuses primarily on women's needs by examining the importance of gender and gender inclusive finance in displacement settings, assessing the current accepted situation and highlighting inspiring case studies and innovative financial inclusion strategies. The goal is to inform policymakers, financial institutions, and humanitarian organisations on the best practices and interventions that can promote equitable financial access for all refugees, thereby fostering economic empowerment and resilience.

This report is structured into four main chapters:

- **Chapter 1:** This chapter introduces key definitions on gender and women's empowerment and highlights their significance in displacement settings. It also expounds on the importance of intersectionality, cultural and societal norms, and binding constraints faced by women and touches on the imperative for prioritising refugee women in financial services delivery. The chapter concludes by addressing the issue of whether a business case exists for delivering financial services to women (including migrant women) by providing real world evidence to support the claim.

¹ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/impacts-of-displacement-displaced-by-violence-jos-nigeria/>

- **Chapter 2** highlights the common challenges faced by refugee women and other vulnerable women, such as smallholder farmers, microenterprise owners, and housewives in their day-to-day access to and use of financial services. Barriers to financial access for forcibly displaced persons are considered from various perspectives, including policy, legal, regulatory, supply-side, and demand-side. Comparisons are made with similar experiences in the ongoing ReFine program funded by Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and implemented by Mercy Corps.
- **Chapter 3** builds upon the identified gender gaps and proposes approaches and innovative solutions that have worked in Uganda and other displacement contexts. Through a stakeholder lens, the chapter underscores opportunities for the diverse actors in Uganda's refugee response to address identified gender gaps within the Forcibly Displaced Persons (FDP) community in key areas such as economic advancement, access to economic opportunity, access to assets and services, and women's agency and decision-making.
- **Chapter 4** concludes by complementing the narrative and evidence presented in earlier chapters on the importance of gender intentionality in financial services delivery with a practical guide/toolkit to kickstart gender mainstreaming within the reader's institution. The toolkit focuses on helping stakeholders in Uganda's refugee response to develop a tailored approach to gender mainstreaming or finetune their existing gender strategies to be more gender intentional and transformative.



Above: Refugee homesteads in Bidi Bidi settlement, the second-largest refugee settlement in the world. Over 285,000 refugees are hosted in this settlement of which 53% are female and 71% are children below the age of 18.

Introduction

Forced displacement is a global phenomenon of significant importance. It is the leading outcome of two of the three biggest social crises in our time: conflict and climate change. While its growing influence impacts the lives of all affected, it is increasingly obvious that men, women, boys and girls suffer unequal repercussions. In times of displacement, women and girls face increased risk due to factors including higher instances of discrimination, economic marginalisation and gender-based violence³.

The situation is no different considering access to financial opportunity in the migratory context: women refugees are disproportionately affected by exclusion from formal financial systems due to gender-based violence, limited mobility, lower literacy rates, and restricted access to formal employment opportunities. They also have less access to markets, networks, technologies, and skills than their male counterparts and face a much larger financing gap.

This reality is further complicated by the fact that even the refugee-serving financial service providers - the commercial banks, MFIs, fintechs, and SACCOs - often struggle to leverage the gender-disaggregated data they collect on refugees and hosts. This presents further challenges for tailored product development and delivery to meet women's needs. Additionally, observations show that many financial actors remain unconvinced about the business case for prioritising women's needs in financial services provision, particularly in displacement contexts. This results in a gender-blind financial system that responds primarily to the needs of men, does not take into account the different roles and diverse needs of women, and does little to transform the unequal structure of gender relations in society.

Global gender split of Forcibly Displaced Persons (FDPs)

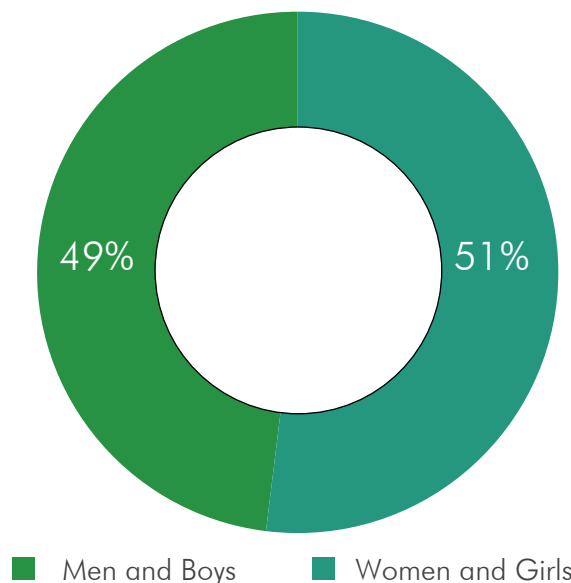


Figure 1.0 Percentage of Women and Girls living in Forced Displacement compared to Men and Boys (2021)

³ IDMC, IMPACT, PLAN, March 2020, Hidden in Plain Sight: Women and Girls in Internal Displacement

The issue of gender is more pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) than in other regions. Both regions have the highest gender gap in financial services access in the world (13%) compared to the global average of 4%. Empirical evidence increasingly reveals that when women (a 50% representation of the total addressable market in most countries) participate in the financial system, there is significant economic growth and benefits for societal well-being. A 2020 report from Oliver Wyman⁴ estimated that financial services firms are missing at least a \$700 billion revenue opportunity each year by not fully meeting the needs of women customers.

Research from the International Monetary Fund also suggests that narrowing the gender gap in labour markets could increase GDP in emerging and developing economies by almost 8%⁵. The gains from fully closing the gender gap would even be higher, lifting GDP in those countries by 23% on average⁶. In displacement circles, when one considers that women and girls make up over 50% of all refugees, whether internally displaced or stateless, the logic becomes simple: if governments, the private sector and the development community can co-create a gender-inclusive financial services ecosystem for displaced populations, the vision of an inclusive financial system for vulnerable persons would be realised much more quickly.

First Principles: Understanding Gender and Associated Terminology

The concept of gender is more enigmatic than most would imagine. More than categorising male or female persons based on biological attributes (sex), gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, and identities of women, girls, men, and boys. It is built around the social definitions of what it means to be male and female⁷. This usually includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. It often defines the duties and responsibilities expected of women, girls, men and boys at any given time. It does not biologically define one's sexual orientation; however, it does confer on them the benefits and constraints of a particular sex as perceived by society.

The definition of gender also sets some barriers for women, girls, men, and boys and determines the power that individuals have and their ability to access and control resources. These barriers and consequent exclusions that women in the context of FDPs face are amplified due to gender-related discrimination and social norms that are patriarchal in nature. In most contexts, men and boys take gender roles that often hold more social, economic, and political power than those of women and girls. Thus, they tend to exercise more decision-making power and autonomy over their own lives and over the decisions in their communities and families.

⁴ <https://www.oliverwyman.com/our-expertise/hubs/gender-diversity-in-financial-services.html>

⁵ <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/PP/2024/English/PPEA2024003.ashx>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1

Women's Economic Exclusion by the Numbers

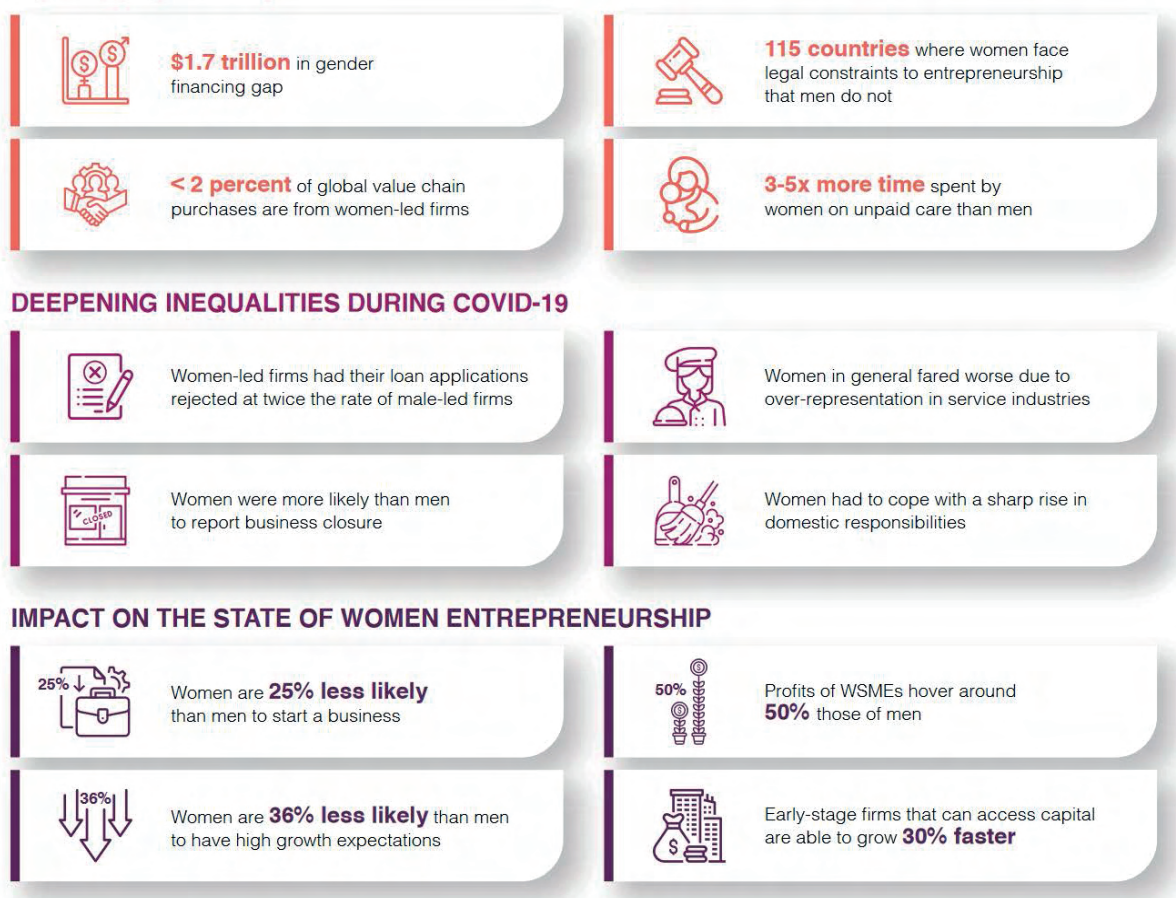


Fig 1.1: Women's Economic Exclusion by the numbers
 (Source: *The Case for Investing in Women Entrepreneurs (2022): Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi)*)

Uganda is home to over 1.6 million refugees and 46,000 asylum seekers, primarily from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi⁸. Although Uganda has a commendable refugee policy, integrating into the formal financial system remains complex, particularly for women. Despite existing policies and frameworks on gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV) in Uganda (see Box 1), the country ranked 138th on the Gender Inequality Index in 2022, placing it in the bottom third⁹. In Ugandan and refugee contexts, men and male youth remain the main decision-makers at household, community and national levels. Inequitable gender norms still hinder many women and girls from making financial decisions, even at the household level.

⁸ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>

⁹ <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/documentation-and-downloads>

Box 1: Key Gender Policies and Conventions Instituted in Uganda

The Constitution of Uganda (1995):

Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination: The Constitution of Uganda upholds the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. Article 33 explicitly provides for the rights of women, ensuring their equal treatment and protection under the law.

The National Gender Policy (2007):

Framework for Gender Mainstreaming: The National Gender Policy provides a framework for gender mainstreaming across all sectors, including economic development and financial services. It aims to address gender imbalances and promote women's empowerment.

The National Development Plan (NDP) III (2020/21 – 2024/25):

Inclusive Growth and Gender Equality: The NDP III emphasises inclusive growth and the importance of gender equality in achieving sustainable development. It includes specific strategies to enhance women's economic empowerment and access to financial services.

The Uganda Gender Policy (2007):

Economic Empowerment: This policy focuses on promoting gender equality in economic development. It includes measures to increase women's access to credit, savings, and other financial services, and to support women's entrepreneurship.

The Microfinance Deposit-Taking Institutions Act (2003):

Access to Financial Services: This act regulates microfinance institutions in Uganda, ensuring they provide accessible financial services to marginalised groups, including women. It aims to create an inclusive financial sector that supports their economic activities.

The National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2017–2022):

Enhancing Financial Inclusion: The strategy aims to increase access to financial services for all Ugandans, with a focus on women and other underserved groups. It includes specific targets for improving women's financial literacy and access to credit and savings products.

The Equal Opportunities Commission Act (2007):

Promotion of Equal Opportunities: The act establishes the Equal Opportunities Commission to promote equal opportunities for all, including women. It addresses issues of discrimination and ensures that women have equal access to economic opportunities and financial services.

International Conventions and Agreements:

CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women): Uganda is a signatory to CEDAW, which commits the country to eliminate discrimination against women and promote gender equality, including in economic and financial sectors.

SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals): Uganda is committed to achieving the SDGs, particularly Goal 5, which focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment, including their economic participation and access to financial services.

Intersectionality¹⁰, a term coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate, provides a lens to understand the complex and multifaceted experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalised groups. Refugee women, for instance, navigate not only the challenges of displacement but also the specific disadvantages related to their gender, ethnicity, nationality, and other identities. A Congolese refugee mother living in Uganda is, therefore, more susceptible to greater discrimination compared to her husband because she faces at least one more barrier to accessing resources or exercising her rights. This barrier is her identity as a woman. These intersecting factors can exacerbate vulnerability and hinder access to financial services. This vulnerability and financial disempowerment are critical gaps that Women’s Economic Empowerment aims to address.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation defines Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) as “the expansion of **choice** and strengthening of voice through the transformation of **power relations**, so women and girls have more control over their lives and futures”¹¹. Expansion of choice and strengthening of voice however, must be matched with a transformation of unequal power relations. Unequal gender power relations characterise patriarchal societies—social systems in which men hold primary power in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property and other resources¹². Power relations transform when women and girls exercise **agency** and take action through expanded access to and control over resources and changes to the institutional structures that ultimately shape their lives and futures.



Above: Refugee women are assisted as they leverage their phones for commerce and employment.

¹⁰ Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 139-167

¹¹ https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/BMGF_EmpowermentModel.pdf

¹² Ibid

In the context of finances, refugee or host women are limited in the array of opportunities available to them, compared to their male counterparts, because of the entrenched gendered social norms either in their culture of origin or in the host country where they settle. In Uganda and many developing countries, often these traditions or customs exist around land or asset ownership, financial account registration, access to legal status and property rights, employment, and technology, all of which hinder women's participation in the formal economy. The concept of WEE is crucial because it allows humanitarian programs, development initiatives, and even private sector-led projects to move beyond merely delivering value to beneficiaries and towards achieving sustainability by empowering women to be agents of change in their communities. WEE benefits not just women but ultimately affects society on multiple levels.

The business case for prioritising women:

A big question most private sector actors wrestle with is whether the topic of gender has any bearing on the economics of their business beyond its social and sentimental value. The inertia that many financial service providers (FSPs) exhibit in developing women-centric financial products is usually rooted in the belief that the business case for making financial products work for women is unconvincing. There are at least four major reasons why commercial entities, particularly FSPs, may want to prioritise gender and specifically women's needs in their businesses.

1. Market Opportunity

Women represent a significant, often underserved market. Currently, 52% of Uganda's 1.6 million refugee population are women, with 29% being children¹³. This population is involved in both formal and informal economic activities. IFC's Consumer and Market Study in 2021¹⁴ posits that this population, together with the host populations across the major refugee-hosting areas in Uganda (West Nile and South-West Uganda), constitute a 1.1 million addressable market involved in the formal and informal economy. When one considers that roughly one-third of business owners in the IFC survey are women, the business opportunity to engage women is clear. This compelling potential market is not exclusive to just financial service providers but also to other private sector actors, including off-takers, last-mile distributors, off-grid energy suppliers, and agro-processors. As more efforts are directed towards increasing women's economic participation in Uganda and globally, their need for financial services will grow correspondingly and will ultimately impact the viability of the business case.

¹³ <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/giz-project-gives-women-refugee-and-host-communities-access-financial-services-and-also>

¹⁴ <https://www.ifc.org/en/insights-reports/2021/consumer-and-market-study-in-southwest-and-west-nile-refugeehosting-areas-in-uganda>

2. Profitability

Beyond the market size, the economics of prioritising women in FDP contexts is also attractive. Studies indicate that women tend to save more than men. BRAC, in collaboration with Women's World Banking, conducted a study in Bangladesh and found that women, especially in rural and conflict-prone areas, have higher savings rates than men¹⁶. This is partly due to women's greater focus on long-term family security and education. Similar findings emerged from research conducted by the Financial Access Initiative¹⁷ in connection with several African countries in fragile contexts. These savings, even if meagre, provide a stable source of deposits for financial institutions.

Women have also been shown to be reliable borrowers with lower default rates, making them attractive for credit services¹⁵. Evidence from one of the participating financial institutions in a three-year refugee finance program (called ReFine) in Uganda, funded by AFD, attests to the fact that female-led savings groups consistently record the lowest default rates compared to male-dominated or male-led groups. They demonstrate more loyalty as customers, which can lead to long-term business relationships and reduced churn. In developed markets, 61% of female customers stay more than five years with a bank compared with 46% of male customers¹⁸. Additionally, within the mobile financial services industry, women agents tend to be perceived as being more approachable and trustworthy, yielding higher customer satisfaction than male agents in many contexts¹⁹.

3. Economic and societal benefits

Women's financial inclusion can play a pivotal role in the economic recovery of FDP contexts. When refugee women have access to financial services, accompanied by a broad array of rights, such as access to legal status, the right to decent work, the right to build livelihoods, etc., they can contribute more effectively to economic activities. Improved economic participation by all actors leads to a thriving market economy.

Emerging research also shows a strong correlation between a woman's access to financial services and the economic empowerment of the woman, her family, community and broader society as a whole. Mary Iskenderian, President and CEO of Women's World Banking puts it well: "Women are far more likely than men to spend money they have under their discretion on the education of their children, the health care for their family and improving the housing ... the kinds of developmental changes that can really have long-term intergenerational impact"²⁰. In a sense, bringing women into the formal economy creates a multiplier effect in terms of poverty reduction, access to opportunity, intersectoral linkages and long-term customer value.

¹⁶ BRAC and Women's World Banking. "Financial Behavior of Women in Bangladesh."

¹⁷ The Financial Access Initiative is a research centre established in New York university, U.S.A. that explores how financial services can better meet the needs and improve the lives of poor households.

¹⁸ <https://www.cgap.org/blog/which-kind-of-microfinance-institutions-can-serve-women-best>

¹⁹ https://www.cgap.org/sites/default/files/publications/WorkingPaper_Women%20Agents_Final.pdf

²⁰ <https://thecsrjournal.in/bridging-gender-gap-women/>

4. Compliance and Brand Equity:

Governments and international bodies are increasingly mandating or incentivising institutions to prioritise or feature gender themes and concerns in their interventions, aligning with regulatory trends. Gender lens investing is a popular theme in the impact investment world, and businesses that demonstrate strong commitment to its principles and embrace it are potential targets for funding.

Prioritising women's needs in financial services delivery also strengthens an institution's corporate social responsibility (CSR) profile and enhances brand reputation. Aligning with government and international policies on gender equality and financial inclusion often contribute positively to the institution's standing with regulators and policymakers. Additionally, tailored financial products and services for women can enhance a company's image as a socially conscious entity and attract a loyal customer base, which also enhances brand loyalty and recognition. A classic case in point is BRAC Bank, whose pioneering effort in establishing 'Tara' - Bangladesh's first 360-degree, comprehensive, and dedicated women banking solution - has garnered domestic and international recognition, earning numerous prestigious awards and accolades since 2017²¹



Above: Urban refugees undergoing digital skills training in Kampala. Research shows that women tend to respond better when technology is complemented with in-person assistance.

²¹ <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/corporates/brac-bank-pioneering-financial-inclusion-women-bangladesh-803826>

Box 2: Proof that gender lens prioritisation positively affects the bottom line and the poverty line.

Grameen Bank's prioritised lending to women, who make up over 90% of its borrowers

Grameen Bank is a microfinance organisation in Bangladesh founded by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, aimed at providing small loans to the rural poor. The bank has served over 10 million customers with loans by using a collateral-free model. The following have been outcomes of the approach:

- **High Repayment Rates:** Women borrowers showed higher repayment rates compared to men, contributing to the bank's financial sustainability.
- **Economic Empowerment:** The loans enabled women to start and expand small businesses, increasing household income and economic stability.
- **Social Benefits:** Empowering women through financial inclusion led to improved health, education, and well-being for their families.

M-Pesa targeted women by providing a secure and convenient way to save, transfer money, and access financial services via mobile phones:

M-Pesa, Vodafone and Safaricom's flagship financial product, is a mobile money service that has revolutionised financial inclusion in Kenya. In 2012, Jack and Suri, researchers from the World Bank and MIT respectively, co-authored a paper: Mobile Money, the Economics of M-Pesa²², that showed that mobile-money services had notable long-term effects on poverty reduction in Kenya — especially among female-headed households — and had inspired a surprising occupation shift among women. An estimated 185,000 women were recorded to move from farming to business occupations²³. It also revealed that women used M-Pesa to manage their finances, start small businesses, and improve their economic standing. The service's focus on women contributed to high user retention and loyalty, driving M-Pesa's success and contribution towards increasing overall financial inclusion.

AXA, a global insurance company, launched the Women's Market Initiative to address the specific needs of women in financial planning and insurance:

AXA, a world leader in insurance and asset management, serving 107 million customers – individuals and businesses – in 64 countries, birthed the initiative when it began conducting research with IFC and Accenture for the She for Shield report which probed into the specific insurance needs of women, with a focus on emerging markets²⁴. Through the innovation, AXA developed products tailored to women, such as health insurance, retirement planning, and investment options, and trained agents to better serve female clients.

By prioritising women, AXA positioned itself as a leader in serving this demographic, differentiating itself from competitors. Today, 40% and 47% of their clients and sales force are women respectively. The Women's Market initiative attracted a significant number of female clients, contributing to AXA's revenue growth. The initiative also reinforced AXA's commitment to social responsibility and gender equality, enhancing its global corporate reputation as an inclusive provider of financial services.

Goldman Sachs launched the 10,000 Women initiative to provide business education and access to capital for women entrepreneurs:

The program offers training, mentorship, and access to capital to women entrepreneurs in developing countries

- **High Repayment Rates:** Women entrepreneurs who participated in the program reported significant business growth and job creation.
- **Economic Impact:** The initiative contributed to local economic development by empowering women to scale their businesses.
- **Corporate Reputation:** Goldman Sachs strengthened its corporate reputation as a champion of women's economic empowerment and social responsibility.

²² https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w16721/w16721.pdf

²³ <https://news.mit.edu/2016/mobile-money-kenyans-out-poverty-1208>

²⁴ <https://financialallianceforwomen.org/members/axa/>

Chapter 2: Gender–related barriers impacting adoption of refugee finance.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Formal finance does not work well for marginalised women, including displaced women, due to a confluence of social, cultural, legal, market and technology constraints and stereotypes that intricately affect women's economic empowerment. Constraints place limits on women's incomes and employment opportunities, access to opportunities and support services, weaken their agency over economic resources and easily roll back global efforts to empower and integrate them into society after a displacement crisis.

Introduction

Despite the growing interest and funding for refugee finance globally, a myriad of barriers continually hinder the uptake and usage of financial products in the displacement context - and gender is a significant driver. In Uganda, the negative effects of gender are especially prevalent among refugee women and youth in both refugee-hosting districts and urban contexts. This is in spite of extensive efforts made by donors, government, financial institutions, funders, regulators, NGOs, and other stakeholders to prioritise women needs and communicate the benefits of gender mainstreaming in programs.

Existing research confirms that refugee women face multiple constraints that impede their access to and usage of existing financial instruments. These constraints usually manifest as significant socio-cultural, legal, educational and systemic obstacles that limit women's economic advancement (such as those affecting incomes, and return on labour), limit access to opportunity (such as skills training or education), limit access to assets and support services needed by women to advance economically or weaken women's agency and decision-making power in different spheres. Overcoming these gender-specific challenges is essential for sustainably developing an inclusive financial system that does not minimise women's contribution or their opportunity. This section provides a deeper dive into the prevailing gender barriers in displacement contexts that when addressed, would move global efforts closer towards sustainability of refugee financing interventions targeting women.

2.1 Socio–cultural barriers

Just like in other developing economies, societal norms and cultural practices in Uganda often dictate gender roles and responsibilities, relegating women and girls to traditional spheres, and thereby, limiting their participation in significant income generating activities outside of the household. Similarly, refugee households in both urban and rural settings face the same challenges. According to a SCCR/CARE²⁵ research conducted within refugee and host communities in Yumbe and Terego districts in Uganda in 2022, women and girls spend most of their time on domestic work including cooking (43%), housework (38%),

²⁵ SCCR/Care Document "Gender Analysis Uganda: Refugees and Host Communities in Yumbe and Terego Districts", from August 2022

and collecting fuel and water, while men and boys spend more time on farming (30%) and leisure (19%, compared to 10% among female respondents). Women aged 18-24 and child head of households (HoH) reported spending even more time on unpaid work compared to all other age groups interviewed (12-17, 25-59, 60+). These entrenched cultural beliefs among refugee communities, coupled with systemic gender inequalities, create formidable obstacles for refugee women entrepreneurs seeking self-reliance and financial inclusion.

The socio-cultural barriers include the following:

2.1.1 Knowledge, belief, customs and norms

Refugee communities often exhibit a strong patriarchal structure, as evidenced in their beliefs, customs, and practices, providing men with significant advantages. In such communities, it is customary for women to not enjoy financial privacy from their husbands, have little or no savings of their own, own few to no assets, and not own large businesses. Additionally, some communities view women as inferior and less intelligent, consequently limiting their participation in critical discussions that impact their own livelihood



Above: *Refugee women attending a business skills development training in the settlement.*

Communities have delegated specific roles and responsibilities to women which often limits their ability to affect change. A recent Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) research conducted by Mercy Corps in Bidi Bidi settlement of Uganda reveals the following roles expected of women within refugee communities as documented below.

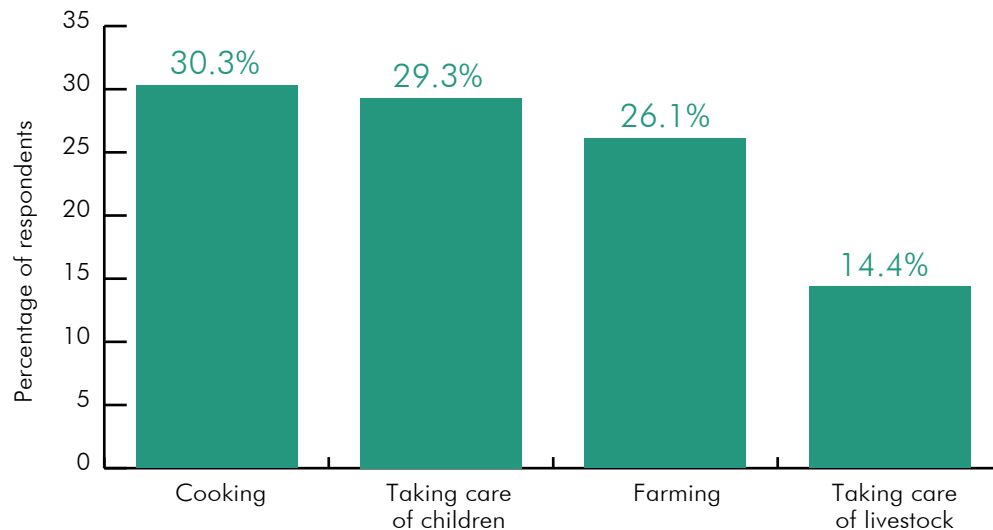


Figure 2.0: Graph depicting what refugee and host women spend most of their time on.

Source: MC GESI assessment (2024)

The findings reveal that the majority of women spend their time cooking (30.3%), taking care of children (29.3%) and farming (26.1%), all of which are non-income generating activities. The pattern stems from societal expectations that assign women to domestic, non-income-generating roles such as home-keeping and subsistence farming. Meanwhile, men are positioned as the breadwinners and financial controllers and are typically expected to take on more crucial and advanced roles. Women who take on more advanced roles such as large business management, are often met with scepticism within their communities.

Forced displacement, however, has seen a rise in female-headed households among refugee communities. Globally, women-headed households now represent 64% of all households in displacement settings and this has led to a reduced adverse impact of sociocultural barriers²⁶. Since women are often compelled to take on important roles due to the absence of their husbands, they gain some influences over traditional customs which are otherwise, typically biased towards men. Despite this, there is still little to no meaningful participation of women in refugee leadership structures and service committees.

2.1.2 Agency Barriers

The epitome of women's empowerment lies in their ability to make prudent and significant decisions at household level. This gives women the chance to decide how homes and communities are managed to their benefit. Findings from Mercy Corps' Gender and Social Impact (GESI) assessment (2024) provide an understanding of women's impact in decision making in displacement settings, as shown below.

²⁶ <https://www.nrc.no/expert-deployment/2016/2017/uganda-inadequate-response-for-women-and-girls/>

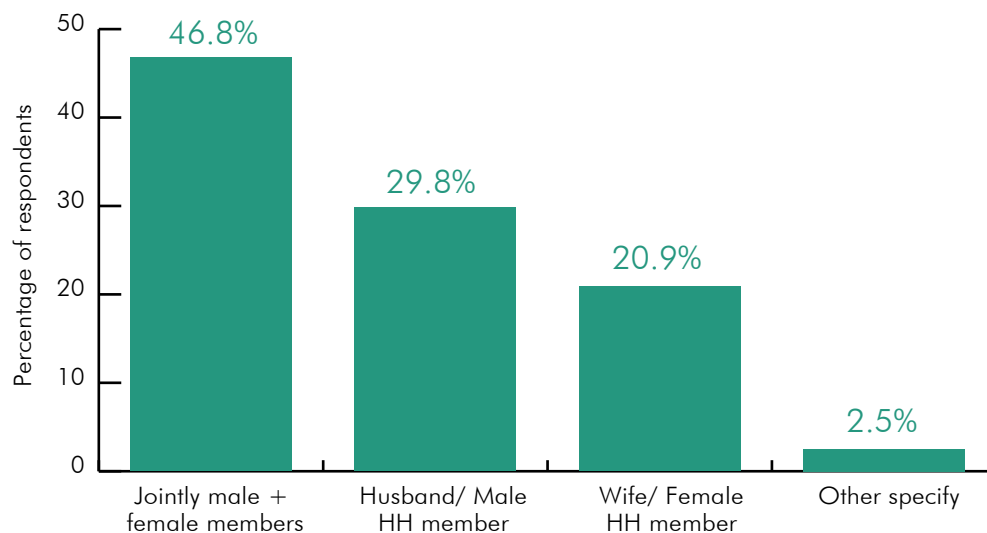


Figure 2.1 Graph showing decision making among refugee households

The majority of the respondents (46.8%) revealed that decisions within the households are jointly made by men and women. Further, 29.8% of respondents revealed that men solely dictated the decisions. While the survey indicated that women made decisions in 20.9% of the households, it also revealed that this was only from female-headed households. In cases where the household is headed by a man, the majority of the decisions are made by men with little consultation, or with consultation as a formality. Two “rapid gender analysis” studies in West Nile, Uganda revealed that even when refugee men are not always present in the household (either because they passed away, still lived in South Sudan, or lived with multiple partners), women still need permission to take certain decisions (family planning, income expenditure, mobility) from male relatives, clan/religious leaders or their absent husbands/partners (as indicated in male FGDs in Rhino Camp)²⁷.

Surprisingly, women’s agency and decision making power is also challenged in savings groups or village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) where they have majority representation. Most VSLAs are often composed of 25-30 members who save an agreed amount of money per week for an agreed cycle usually 1 year upon which money saved is shared proportionate to the savings. The phenomenon, known as elite capture, occasionally occurs when more powerful group members (usually male leaders) exploit the loan fund by taking more than their share of loans disbursed, leaving the “weaker” members (usually the poorer women) with less than is due them. The situation worsens when the powerful members default and saddle other members with a debt burden that is not theirs, which adversely impacts the group’s credit rating or reputation. This phenomenon is common with younger, immature groups that are linked to FSPs for additional capital injection.

²⁷ https://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/SCCR_Gender-Analysis_Uganda_Final-Report.pdf

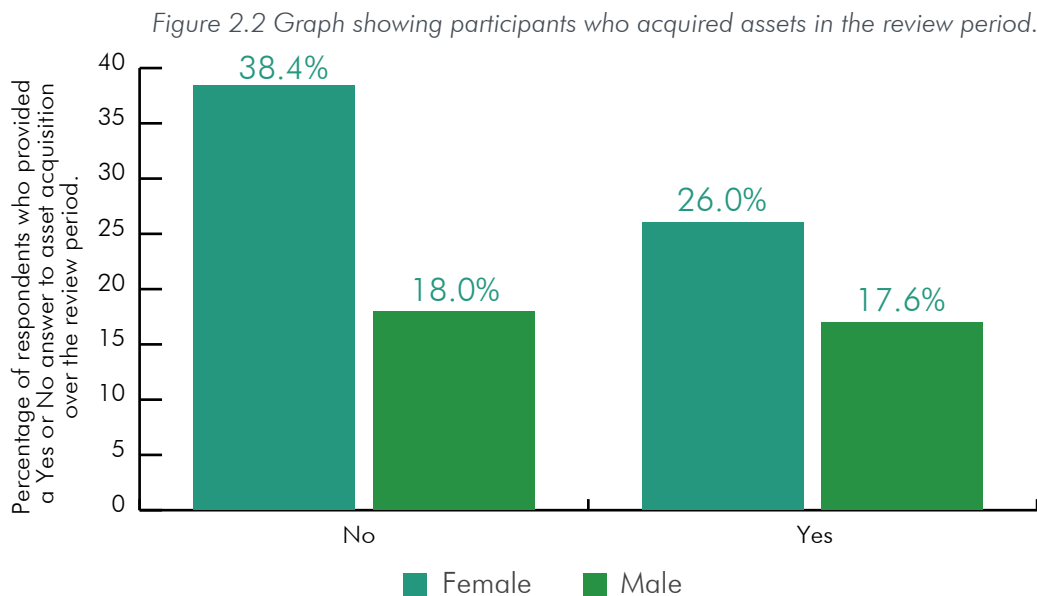
2.2 Barriers to female ownership of assets and economic resources

Access to legal status, including ownership of assets and economic resources, is an imperative for acquiring financial services. This especially applies to loans, as most FSPs require some form of collateral/chattels for credit. Refugees face an uphill task in asset ownership, especially immovable assets such as land. Upon arrival, many are offered small plots (50 square metres) for basic farming and house construction; however, documentation of legal ownership is not provided. Without legal documentation, such as lease agreements or land titles, this land cannot be offered as collateral for financial services. Additionally, societal beliefs about women's ownership and control of resources hampers their ability to acquire and accumulate assets. Society tends to be more accepting of men owning assets in comparison to women, and where women do, it is often considered unacceptable to use these assets as chattels for borrowing.



Above: Refugees and hosts engage in role play in a business clinic held under the Mercy Corps' ReFine program

The ReFine midline assessment conducted in February 2024 sought to assess ownership of assets among the beneficiaries over a 12-month period and highlights the key findings below.



38.4 % of the women did not acquire assets over the review period compared to 18% men which reveals a significant gap in ownership and use of business/household assets as collateral for credit.

2.2 Mobility barriers to accessing financial access touchpoints and support

While financial institutions have made significant investments and progress leveraging digital technologies to improve user access and experience, physical access to financial institutions still significantly influences the usage of financial instruments. Financial institutions that have opened up branches within refugee settlements have more visibility and acquire loyal customers who are often repeat users of their products. Others (mostly commercial banks) increasingly pursue branchless banking strategies and leverage independent agents as financial access touchpoints through which customers access a suite of financial services in proximate locations. In Uganda, most MFIs, unable to legally operate through independent agents until recently in 2024, work in partnership with the commercial banks by leveraging their agents to penetrate the rural communities.

Despite these developments, access to financial services between men and women differs. With society essentially relegating refugee women to the role of home makers, there is often little time for them to travel long distances to bank branches (which are often located in urban/peri-urban centres) and incur associated transport costs thus restricting access to financial products. Mobility restrictions of women also affect the effective resolution of challenges encountered in the use of financial instruments or channels, especially in cases where in-person support is required to address issues. Alternative delivery channels, such as bank agents, while more accessible, are often sparsely located within settlements and often have liquidity challenges.

This situation is amplified by the low capital base among the majority of women-owned micro businesses, particularly in settlements. This can be a disincentive for demanding formal financial products.

2.3 Digital gender gap

The advancement in digital infrastructure is proving to be a game changer for the financial sector, enabling digital early adopters to outperform traditional FSPs and remain profitable while greatly reducing operational costs. The combination of mobile telecom infrastructure enhancements, government's initiatives and policies on expanding IT infrastructure in rural areas, and the growth of tech hubs and innovation incubators such as Outbox and Innovation Village, have led to a vibrant tech ecosystem and in promoting digital entrepreneurship even in rural settlements. These digital technologies have the potential to remove mobility barriers for refugee women, enabling them to fully participate in the digital economy. This can lead to improved self-reliance and resilience. Digital technologies serve as a means for financial inclusion by providing innovative personal and business digital wallets, creating opportunities for accessing credit.

While providing immense opportunities, the digital infrastructure left on its own cannot level the playing field for both men and women, given the challenges women face in accessing and using digital tools. Women generally require a combination of digital tools and in-person assistance (often referred to as "high-tech" and "high-touch") to benefit from digital financial services. There is a need for deliberate efforts to stimulate interest in the use of digital tools in order to harness their benefits. A 2023 gender assessment by UNCDF on opportunities and barriers to women digital inclusion in Uganda revealed several digital gender gaps as follows²⁸:

- The findings revealed that only 58% of women owned phones compared to 86% of the men in the refugee communities. More than three-quarters of the phones owned were basic phones without internet capabilities and only 15% of women had access to the internet compared to 53% of men. Additionally, more men than women had received digital literacy training and possessed more digital skills than women. The primary constraint to access and ownership of digital devices was affordability.
- While nine out of every ten people could make and receive phone calls by themselves (indicating the ability to operate the essential functions of a phone without assistance), only four out of every ten men and one out of every ten women could browse the internet. Out of all the forms of usage online, browsing the internet was the most common advanced digital skill in the communities. The findings generally indicated that women trailed men in advanced digital skills.
- Only 2.3% of women in the refugee community and 8.7% of women in the host community used phones to access digital products and services. This was due to the fact that the internet-enabled phones are too expensive for women to afford. Additionally, women are also usually occupied with household duties, and therefore have no time to navigate phones.

²⁸ UNCDF: Barriers and opportunities for women in digital technologies: UNCDF IDE Gender Assessment – March 2023

- Men had more decision-making power over which digital tool/device to use compared to women, with a decision gap of 9.6% between men and women attributed to fewer restrictions on the movement of men beyond their households, which exposes them to an array of digital solutions on the market. On the other hand, most women usually require permission from their husbands to leave their homes. They also spend less time away due to household responsibilities.

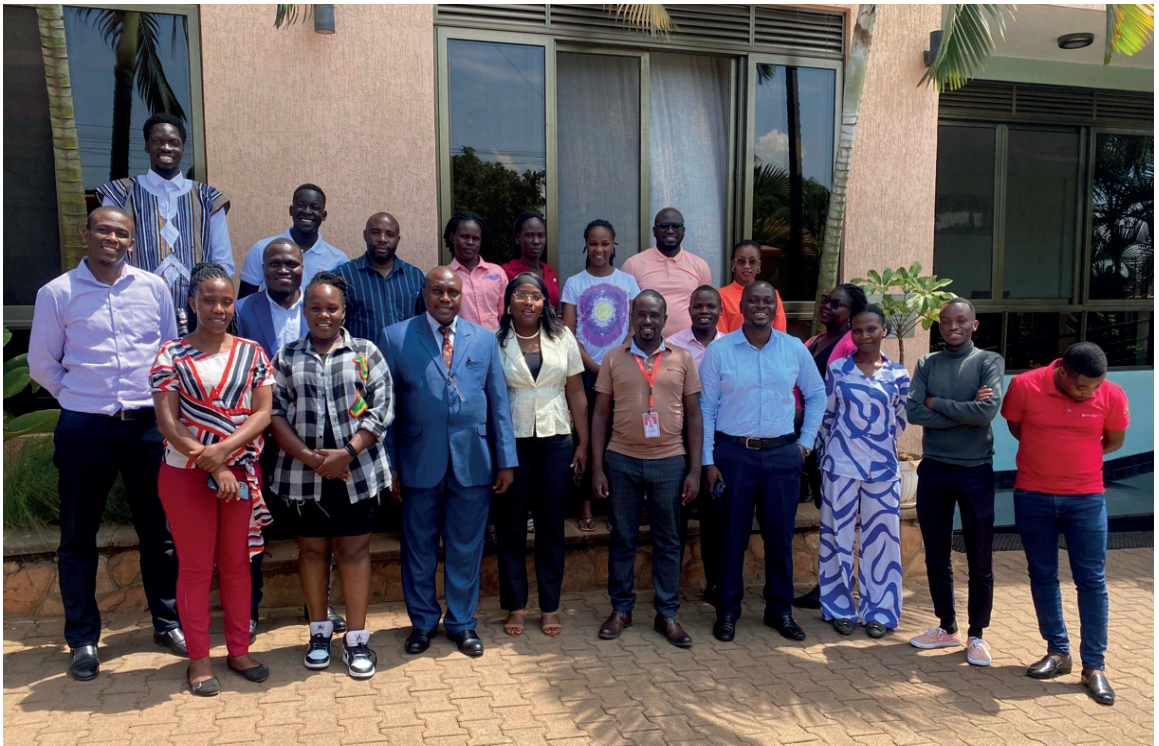
With the increased advancement of digital financial technologies geared at improving outreach and customer user experience, women’s appreciation and capacity to use digital devices must be systematically improved if refugee finance is to grow exponentially in the foreseeable future.

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“...sometimes we do not have data for internet.”

FGD in Bidi bidi when asked about challenges they faced in accessing and using digital financial solutions.

#Refine Midline assessment Mar 2024



Above: Representatives from partner financial institutions, Refugee Led Organizations, Mercy Corps ReFine team, and trainers pose for a group picture after a digital skills Training of Trainers workshop

2.4 Access to decent work/livelihoods

In a bid to improve the livelihoods of refugees in the East African region, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) member states (which included Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda) jointly signed the 2019 Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods and Self-Reliance of refugees. This declaration includes a commitment to ‘...develop, review and amend national policies and legislation to expand access to labour markets by simplifying procedures for accessing employment including work permits, self-employment and business opportunities’²⁹.

While the policy framework and regulation around identification documentation, movement, access to employment and economic opportunities are favourable, little has been done to narrow the gender divide in access and utilisation of these opportunities. In addition to dealing with the effects of violence, trauma and displacement and the responsibility of building a new life in a new country, refugee women seeking jobs and economic opportunities also face challenges navigating a labour market mired in complex and gender-discriminatory dynamics.

Experience indicates that paid work can boost women’s confidence, and self-esteem and is key to refugee women’s empowerment. However, adverse society beliefs, norms, and customs coupled with a sense of inferiority among some women, present a constraint to their access to decent and fulfilling work opportunities. Research by UNHCR shows that the labour market outcomes for refugees are consistently worse than those of their host communities. It even worsens for women when compared by gender within the refugee community, as depicted below³⁰.

- Just 29% of refugees in Uganda are actively working, versus 64% of their host communities. Even after considering differences in age, gender and education, refugees are 35 percentage points less likely than Ugandan nationals to be employed. This is more than double the 17 percentage point employment gap between refugees and nationals in Europe.
- Significant gaps also exist in labour force participation and unemployment rates among refugees in Uganda. Working aged refugees are 27 percentage points less likely to participate in the labour market than host community members (42% and 69% respectively) and 24 percentage points more likely to be unemployed (31% and 7%, respectively). Additionally, 41% of female refugees are unemployed compared to 16% of female nationals.

The ReFine program has worked to strengthen the sustainability of women owned businesses as an avenue to self-reliance and empowerment. This has been delivered through financial, business and digital literacy training, in addition to fostering linkages to participating formal financial institutions. Key approaches adopted by the program include working with women-led RLOs to identify specific challenges refugee women face in rebuilding livelihoods, articulating

²⁹ <https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Annex-to-the-Kampala-Declaration-action-plan.pdf>

³⁰ UNHCR: Uganda Knowledge Brief - 2021

the business case for prioritising women to FSPs, and supporting all partners to assess their organisation's gender position and sensitivity, along with a clear plan of action to address gaps. In doing so, women are gradually increasing their demand for financial services, thereby improving business/ household incomes and acquiring the assets needed to further their financial status.



Above: A female refugee entrepreneur showcases her product and the digital platform she markets the same on to expand her reach after a practical session. In ReFine's digital clinics, refugees and hosts were taught the basics of digital commerce, digital transformation for microenterprises, and introduced to key service providers who can support them to improve their business.

Chapter 3: Opportunities to address gender gaps in inclusive refugee finance.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

The diverse and intricate gender obstacles confronting women require the faithful pursuit of a broad array of solutions to achieve results. Adapting financial policies and products to women’s needs, using gender-disaggregated data, among others, to inform collateral requirements, and repayment schedules, deliberately nurturing partnerships with refugee grassroots organisations, and complementing business and digital curricula with coaching/mentoring is a winning prescription for circumventing many of the identified barriers.

Introduction

The myriad of challenges preventing forcibly displaced women from meaningfully participating in the formal financial system reveal opportunities to address the economic fallout caused by a gender-blind financial system for displaced populations. Addressing the barriers to financial inclusion of refugee women requires targeted interventions, institutional and political will, and co-creative effort from all market actors. Below are some considerations policymakers and FSPs - whether traditional commercial banks and MFIs or cutting-edge fintechs and mobile money providers - must prioritise to realise the commercial potential in women’s financial inclusion.

1. Deepen collaboration between regulators and commercial actors to make policies work for women

Policymakers are at the forefront of leveraging legal, regulatory changes and supply-side economics to build inclusive economies for financially excluded women - including refugee women. To overcome the legal barrier of stringent identity proofs and financial account documentation requirements, FSPs should explore the opportunity to work with governments and regulators to simplify documentation requirements for opening bank accounts and accessing financial services, such as accepting alternative forms of identification or mandating government-issued identification like Refugee IDs.

Additionally, regulators and central banks are increasingly more open to offering no-objections for identity waivers and process exemptions to vulnerable segments such as refugees and women. Actions such as a no-objection statement by the Bank of Uganda to use Refugee ID and attestation documents in 2017, and a more recent inclusion of the Refugee ID in the National Credit Reference Bureau (CRB), have provided confidence within the financial sector to serve refugees. Regulators also offer opportunities for commercial innovations usually, within the framework of regulatory sandboxes,³¹ once the financial institution fulfils the necessary requirements. Uganda’s regulatory sandbox has been used to test innovations running the gamut from mobile money transfers to non-bank account holders to cryptocurrencies. It is a testament to the government’s commitment to financial innovation.

³¹ Regulatory sandboxes are frameworks set up by financial sector regulators to allow small-scale, live testing of innovations by commercial firms in a controlled environment under the regulator’s supervision.

In many cases however, the proactiveness and the initiative to suggest regulatory amendments must come from the FSPs and private sector actors.

To close gaps in economic opportunity for women, NGOs, development agencies, and FSPs should deepen collaboration to promote opportunities for refugee women to work and own property in host countries. Uganda's progressive refugee policies, viewed as a model globally, have been implemented through a combination of legislative frameworks, practical initiatives, and partnerships with international organisations. It is important for private sector actors to intentionally engage these organisations through partnerships that offer vocational training, job placement services, and support for entrepreneurship to help refugee women gain employment or start their own businesses. For example, FSPs can make their financial products to women more nuanced by complementing them with business mentoring and coaching services, or offer linkages to market actors in relevant value chains through viable partnerships with International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) or development agencies.



Above: Female facilitator educating refugee and host women on requirements for accessing finance from the MFI. Women are generally more effective in dispensing technical financial knowledge to fellow women, compared to their male counterparts..

2. Be intentional about using gender–disaggregated data and insights for tailored product development.

Through numerous advocacy efforts, policymakers have come together to collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data, helping them regulate the sector appropriately and track and evaluate progress on pro-women and youth policies and national financial inclusion strategies. FSPs, too, should independently prioritise the collection and use of such data and view it as a way of understanding customer profiles and behaviour to enable them to position their products better for women and allocate resources more efficiently.

FSPs that effectively leverage the insights from the gender-disaggregated data collected are more likely to develop smaller, low-interest loans with flexible repayment terms or savings accounts that cater to the income patterns of refugee women. Their products are also likely to have low or no minimum balance requirements and no monthly fees. Their digital products are likely to be distributed through women mobile agents to provide additional assistance and help overcome the mobility restrictions of most women. Discerning FSPs must pay attention to the way financial education is packaged and delivered, as research has proven this has a connection to female acceptance and adoption. Women tend to be less technically and financially literate than men and have lower confidence using mobile money services. Consequently, reducing abstruse financial language (for example, calling PIN secret code) is likely to reduce a barrier for women and enable them to better understand the terms and conditions of a financial product or service.

3. Go beyond financial literacy training and incorporate microbusiness and digital content

Development agencies and FSPs are familiar with offering non-financial services (NFS) to refugee and vulnerable populations. Most NFS offerings focus on developing skills and foundational knowledge in concepts such as budgeting, saving, and managing debt. Incorporating additional entrepreneurship and business management content in traditional financial literacy curricula whilst pairing it with mentorship and support networks can make a tremendous difference in women’s economic growth. Business-specific training and support are necessary because the majority of forcibly displaced women manage or are involved in micro businesses and in need of acquiring relevant business skills to operate their businesses profitably.

While business and financial knowledge are necessary for microentrepreneurs to thrive, they are still insufficient for business growth and expansion in the current economic climate. To effectively function in today’s knowledge and digital economy, it is essential to sensitise women regarding relevant basic digital technologies and platforms needed to expand revenue opportunities, pare down costs, coordinate logistics, and connect better with their customers. Featuring content on digital financial tools and services, including mobile banking, online payments, and digital wallets, and offering custom support to enable them to use the tools to their advantage is a great way to close the digital gender divide and lower the barriers to entry for women entrepreneurs by minimising the need for physical infrastructure and resources traditionally required by commerce.

Sub-Saharan Africa records the highest gender gap in internet use globally, with women 37% less likely to use the internet than men. The World Economic Forum also posits that women generally have lower digital literacy and skills levels than men, affecting their ability to use and benefit from digital technologies effectively. These statistics showcase the opportunity in this regard and make it abundantly clear that building women’s digital skills is imperative for NFS programs to achieve maximum impact.



Above: Madame Pelina, a refugee from South Sudan poses in front of her shop in Ofua, Rhino Camp.

Madam Pelina, a refugee from South Sudan and a single mother in Rhino Camp, expressed her gratitude for attending the business and financial literacy trainings under the ReFine project. She proudly stated that she can now maintain proper business records, calculate her profits, manage her expenses, and make informed decisions about where to keep her money. Currently, she is fully engaged in growing her business and transforming her life and the lives of her family members.

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“.....I am now able to keep my business records, know my profit, how to spend my money, and where to keep my money. I am now focusing on building my business and changing my life and my family.”

Meling Pelina, ReFine program beneficiary in Ofua, Rhino Camp (West Nile)

4. Develop more partnerships and collaborations with women Refugee Led Organisations

Partnerships between governments, NGOs, financial institutions, and the private sector are critical because, realistically, only a functioning network of actors can address the financial exclusion and gender-neutrality problem. Partnerships with community-based organisations (CBOs) that have established trust and credibility among refugee populations are also instrumental in delivering financial services and training and creating sustainable linkages with the financial sector. Refugee Led Organisations (RLOs) are unique CBOs representing a pathway to multiply impact within the refugee community. As grassroots organisations that aggregate multiple affinity groups within the refugee community, they are often very influential and effective intermediaries between refugees and private sector actors, including FSPs.

Learning from Mercy Corps’ ReFine program in Uganda has shown that women-led RLOs tend to be more committed to training and more enthusiastic about leveraging opportunities to improve incomes for both the organisation and their own households. Women tend to be underrepresented in “mixed” RLOs, which is why they often turn to women-led organisations which address their specific needs. FSP linkages that work through women RLOs and build relationships that prioritise women’s concerns are more likely to be effective in reaching and transforming lives sustainably than those who do not. Financial institutions intentional about working with women RLOs are likely to confront or become acquainted with the real issues women face that impact their financial product adoption; this provides them the opportunity to re-design products or adjust policies to address the barriers they face. As research from Women’s World Banking reveals, designing products to meet women’s needs often leads to exceeding men’s expectations, and does not alienate them³².



Above: Refugees excitedly engage in a digital financial services training session held at one of ReFine's partner RLOs in Kampala. RLOs are critical grassroots institutions that FSPs must consider as allies in introducing financial services to refugees.

³² SCCR/Care Document “Gender Analysis Uganda: Refugees and Host Communities in Yumbe and Terego Districts”, from August 2022

Box 3: VisionFund Uganda's secret sauce for successfully banking women

VisionFund Uganda, a tier 4 financial institution and microfinance institution incorporated in Uganda, serves over 50,000 customers with a variety of financial and non-financial services with a loan portfolio of over UGX 30 billion. Women feature prominently in their client base, representing over 60%, and together with the parent organisation World Vision, impact over 200,000 children in Uganda.

In 2019, VisionFund expanded its outreach to the West Nile region to serve refugees and their host communities in a world-first pilot. The project has improved financial inclusion with its first branch in Moyo serving the Palorinya refugee settlement, Yumbe branch serving Rhino Camp and Bidi bidi Refugee Settlement. In 2024, VisionFund Uganda became the first financial institution to set up a presence in the Palabek Refugee Settlement, located in Lamwo District in Northern Uganda. Their customer engagement model is hinged on deliberately accessing only stable savings groups seconded to them by their non-profit parent (World Vision) and from partner NGOs working in the space. The savings groups they engage typically have 70% female membership and participation, leading them to prioritise women's needs, expectations and constraints in their product design and delivery.

Their eligibility criteria include groups that are past their second cycle (year of savings), are willing to undergo a comprehensive financial literacy programme, and have good records and a stable membership. The requirement that savings groups be past their second cycle ensured that the MFI was working with both mature and stable groups and members, which minimised the risk of flight. The continuous financial literacy education that was embedded in the sales process and capacity building ensured members were exposed to responsible borrowing practices, sound money management theory and practices and business management skills. This helped to reduce the likelihood of default and its impact on the overall portfolio. Being women-intentional has also helped them reap dividends in their portfolio health: they have consistently recorded the lowest non performing loans (NPLs) or defaulters in exclusively women groups or from women-led groups. This lends credence to the claim that women and women groups are often a financial institution's best client in terms of loan repayments.

VisionFund also established additional protocols internally to curb anti-women behaviour in many savings groups: elite capture. This is the practice where more powerful group members exploit the loan fund by taking more than their share of loans and by defaulting, leaving the burden on the vulnerable members, usually women. VisionFund overcomes this by ensuring they are directly involved in the loan distribution process. Whereas previously, disbursements were done exclusively digitally, they now require a loan officer to be present on disbursement day to capture and confirm loan amounts received by each member to curb instances of elite capture. They have also, for the first time, approved individual lending to refugees using the Refugee ID, a decision that will unlock additional loan capital to refugee women who seek larger ticket sizes and are willing to break out of the limited loan limits savings groups regularly face. These actions, both individually and collectively, helped the MFI control the well known "flight risk" issue, attract and support a community of female refugees and hosts in their livelihoods, and establish a client base that have exhibited an impressive repayment record despite the impact of the global pandemic on refugee livelihoods and resilience.

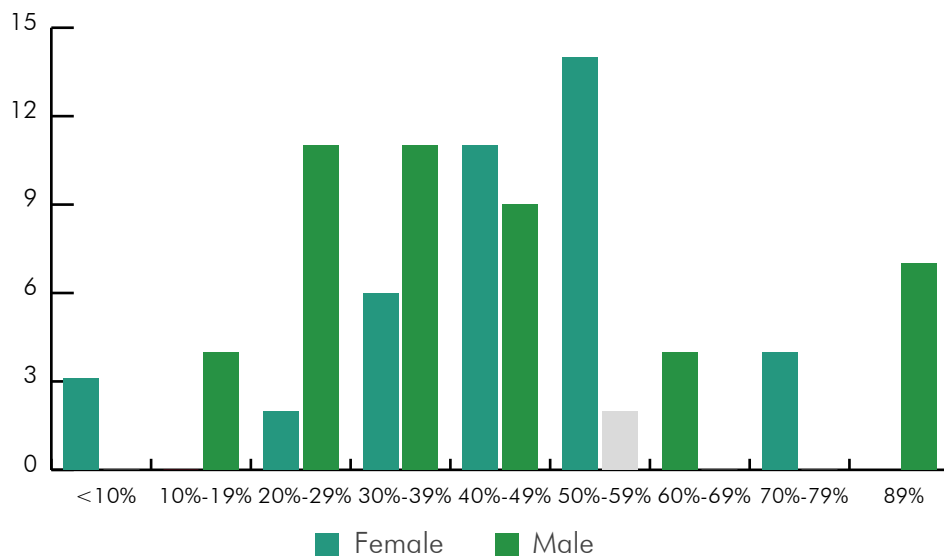
Source: VisionFund website and ReFine midline interviews with staff (2024)

5. Provide support services to women and develop women–centric infrastructure

Lack of self-confidence and women’s limited decision-making power are key obstacles impeding their use of financial services to achieve self-reliance. Helping women gain more confidence is, therefore, a central issue, which also increases their capacity and agency over their lives and resources. Avenues for women to exchange ideas, experiences and values such as female-only settings, and in more recent development contexts, the inclusion of men as gender equality champions, are potentially empowering and go a long way in promoting women’s inclusion in fora previously designated for men only.

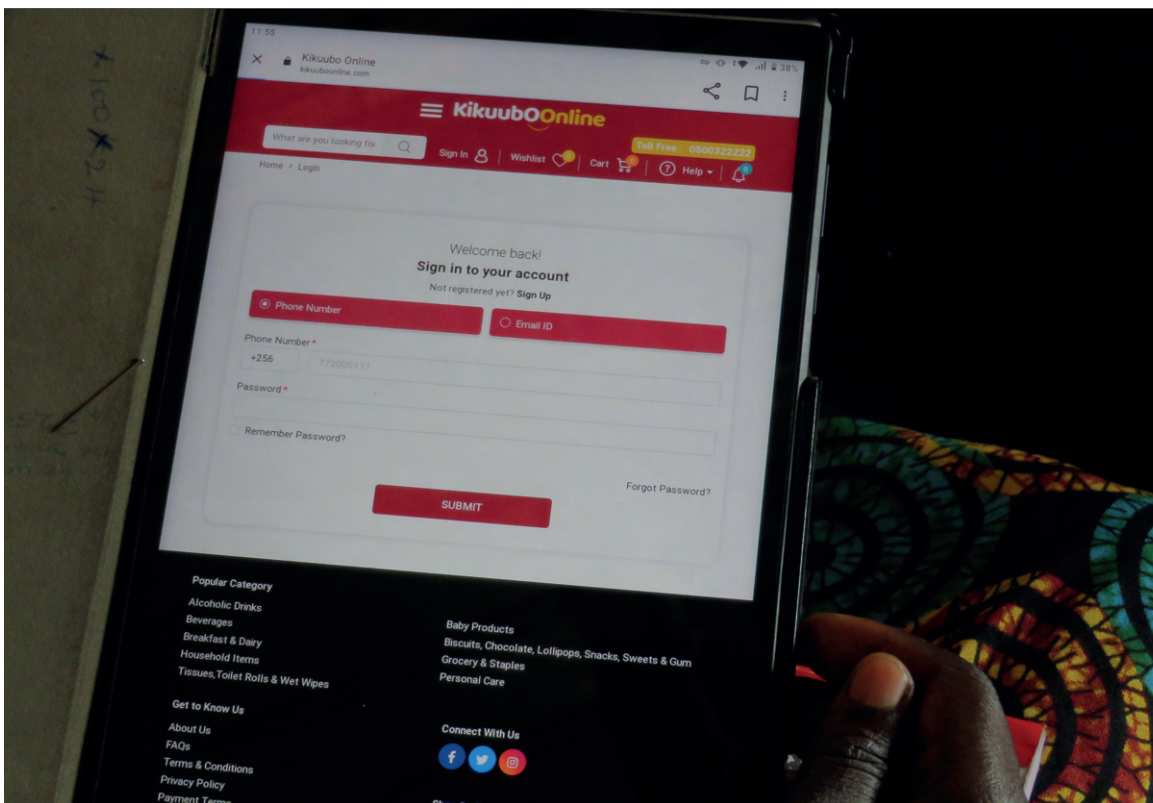
Supplemental support services like deliberate provision for child care during training and workshops as well as offering ongoing mentoring and coaching for women in various fields, can enhance existing efforts to improve women's financial and social capacity. Empirical research has proved that business groups (BGs), VSLAs and other village-level structures are often safe spaces for women to improve their livelihoods, especially in developing economies. Members borrow at an agreed interest rate within the groups to finance personal and business needs. Member composition of groups is usually majority women; this gender composition means that women can easily access credit and have some measure of financial independence within group structures. Research also reveals that women are much more likely to be members of a VSLA whose membership is predominantly female, whereas men are more likely to be members of VSLAs with a more even gender split, as visualised in figure 3.0

Figure 3.0 Graph showing typical gender distribution of VSLA membership



Source: Village savings and loan association assessment. USAID/AVSI April 2019

Active participation by refugee women in VSLAs provides an opportunity to access financial and business literacy training, farming best practices and formal financial linkages. Women in groups are well positioned for livelihood support programming and can access market-level information to enhance linkages to factors of production, markets and financial services. While some groups may never link to the formal financial system, exposure to formal financial and business training will encourage some members to seek access to more formal and a more comprehensive array of financial services needed for upward economic mobility. Efforts, therefore, need to be expended in digitising VSLA groups to lay the foundation for linkage to formal FSPs, connecting them to markets, and leveraging the VSLA methodology for credit extension and linkage banking if holistic women’s economic empowerment and growth are to be achieved.



Above: A female program participant attempts to create an account on Kikuubo Online for her wholesale business. Kikuubo Online is one of the many digital commerce platforms introduced to refugees and hosts in a recent digital clinics activity under ReFine in July 2024.

Chapter 4: Institutional Gender Strategy Toolkit

Introduction

To address gender disparities effectively, institutions need robust strategies and tools. An institutional gender toolkit provides a collection of relevant templates or frameworks that are crucial in guiding partners in developing, implementing and evaluating gender strategies that promote inclusivity and equality.

Guided by Mercy Corps Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Framework, Mercy Corps' GESI tool can be applied by organisations to measure the degree to which their operations and program implementation models are responding to gender and social inequality. The framework provides a set of self assessment parameters that can enable organisations to determine their level of responsiveness guided by the 5 steps of the GESI continuum below.



Interpretation of GESI continuum³³:

In 2023, ReFine's gender consultants conducted a self assessment of all the program partners and revealed a few gaps in gender inclusivity.

Gender Harmful: Approaches and activities that reinforce inequitable gender stereotypes or disempower women and/or girls in the process of achieving program goals.

Gender Neutral: Approaches and activities do not actively address gender stereotypes and discrimination. Gender-neutral programming does no harm yet is often ineffective because it fails to respond to gender-specific needs.

Gender Sensitive: Approaches and activities recognize and respond to the different needs of individuals based on their gender and sexuality, thereby significantly improving access to care and/or treatment. However, these approaches and activities fail to address larger contextual issues underlying gender inequities or alter the gendered balance of power.

Gender Responsive: Approaches and activities enable men and women to examine socio cultural gender expectations and stereotypes and their impact on issues such as health, education, and power dynamics.

Gender Transformative: Approaches or activities actively build equitable social norms and structures in addition to fostering individual gender-equitable behaviours.

³³ <https://www.engenderhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/EngenderHealth-Gender-and-Youth-Guidance-and-Marker-English.pdf>

While harmful is never acceptable, application of GESI minimum standards should at least achieve gender responsiveness. Gender responsive programming should at least take action to address differences in needs among women, girls, boys, men, and other marginalised groups.

Why the gender toolkit?

In 2023, ReFine's gender consultants conducted a self assessment of all the program partners and revealed a few gaps in gender inclusivity.

- Only one out of eight partners mentioned having an explicit gender policy. No explicit strategy could mean no deliberate focus on gender issues and themes for the majority of organisations that do not have a gender strategy.
- Only three of the eight partners had a gender focal point, however, the roles of the gender focal points mentioned were not typical gender focal point roles. The roles included community mobilisation, coordination and M&E.
- All partners indicated basic and fairly good knowledge on gender. No partner indicated high level knowledge.
- Gender knowledge seems to be concentrated with top leaders who often benefit from multiple training opportunities related to their positions.

The self-assessment also revealed that different partners stood at different levels of maturity in mainstreaming gender within their organisation and beneficiaries. This observation is typical of most institutions: each one will naturally find itself on some part of the GESI continuum and will first require an assessment to first "Know Itself", before examining the gender responsiveness of its policies, processes, interventions and products. The Gender Self-Assessment tool is the best place to start; afterwards, a variety of tools and templates may be appropriate based on the assessment's outcome.

1. Gender Self–assessment framework

In order to take stock of an institution's gender positioning and capacity to mainstream gender across its products, services or throughout the institution, a self-assessment must be carried out. The canvas described in Annex 1 is a tool that can help an institution ascertain its position and capacity through a metric known as the **"Institutional Gender Integration Quotient" (IGIQ)**

2. Gender Commitment Statement Template

An explicit gender commitment statement is another important component of an institution's gender inclusion arsenal. Having a gender commitment statement affirms an institution's commitment to gender inclusion, builds its brand and establishes guiding principles for improvements in policies, practices and organisational culture³⁴.

³⁴ <https://www.v4w.org/uploads/documents/New-GSGF-Toolkit-V4-GrayOutline-May-12-2022.pdf>

A gender commitment statement should include three core elements:

- A Vision Statement
- A Why Statement, and
- A How Statement

These building blocks create a full statement describing an institution's commitment to gender, the rationale or driver of this commitment, and how it plans to translate this commitment into everyday business operations. The tool, presented in Annex 2, is borrowed from the Value for Women's Gender Inclusion Statement template for financial institutions in their 2022 publication on Gender-Smart Green Financing Toolkit.

3. Gender Analysis Framework

The Gender Analysis Framework is useful for teams trying to understand gender dynamics in their context. It should always be used during the program design process, but can also be a great tool to help check program progress during implementation. It can be applied at all stages of the program cycle. The framework is very useful before and after data collection:

Before data collection it can be used to assess information we already have and what we need to collect. The key guiding questions for integrating gender into program design can be incorporated into targeted data collection methods, such as focus group discussions, at the community level.

After data collection the Gender Analysis matrix can be used to present, synthesise and organise the data gathered. Organising the data can help to identify and plan responses to gender gaps and constraints that will affect the project's impact on women, men, boys and girls. This framework provides guiding questions around Roles and Responsibilities, Access, Decision-making and Influence, Cultural and Legal Context and Gender Based Violence Risk. These serve as a guide in collecting data and planning responses to identified gaps.

4. Gender Performance Indicator Sheet

Financial institutions intent on impacting women's financial and social lives must measure their efforts using indicators that can clearly communicate (both quantitatively and qualitatively) the reach, customer centricity, safety, and financial and social outcomes of their products or services on the lives of their customers. The Gender Performance Indicator Sheet (culled from Women's World Banking Gender Performance Indicators: How well are we serving women?³⁵) is a great way for an FSP to benchmark and improve its performance against known standards in the microfinance and financial inclusion world.

The indicator sheet in the Appendix section (Annex 4) lists 22 indicators organised by Key Strategic Areas, the Category of Impact (or Key Performance Area), the Indicator Definition, the Formula for computing the Indicator, and a global benchmark (the Universal Standards for Social Performance Management or USSPM³⁶).

³⁵ <http://www.womensworldbanking.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Womens-World-Banking-Gender-Performance-Indicators.pdf>

³⁶ Developed by the Social Performance Task Force (SPTF), USSPM provides guidelines and best practices in areas such as defining and monitoring social goals, client protection, responsible financial services, and balanced performance management. The standards help MFIs align their operations with their social mission and enhance their impact on clients' lives.

Appendix

1. Gender Self–assessment framework

Self Assessment Canvas

Scale:

A = not acquired at all | B = in development and/or partially implemented | C = systematic implementation

Self: Choose for each statement between A, B or C | Calculate the total of As, Bs, and Cs

My institution...	Answers A, B, C
1. ...has a policy and strategy for taking into account inequalities between women and men in its activities	
2. ...has a policy and strategy for achieving parity among its staff, in gender and at each hierarchical level	
3. ...has mechanism in place to ensure that career development and salary levels are fair for women and men	
4. ...has an explicit anti-sexism and harassment policy that is known to a	
5. ...employ and/or seeks to recruit people competent in gender or encourages and promotes gender training for its staff	
6. ...has appointed people responsible for integrating gender into its operations and interventions (gender focal points), granting them the necessary time, means and space for discussion	
7. ...systematically mobilises gender sensitive methods and tools for baseline studies, problem identification, project formulation and planning	
8. ...uses gender-disaggregated (process and impact) indicators to monitor and assess the evolution of boys and girls in a differentiated manner and more generally of gender relations in the different intervention contexts	
9. ...carries out specific interventions focused on the access, maintenance and success of girls in school (all levels), with appropriate budgets	
10. ...applies gender-responsive budget	
11. ...carries out specific actions to combat gender-based violence in schools	
12. ...has ensured that all approved textbooks are free of sexist stereotypes and that they convey representations that fairly value people of both sexes and equality	
13. ...favours partnerships with organisations or people who are sensitive and competent in gender and requires gender skills for any expertise commissioned from outside (training, consultation, evaluation, etc.)	
14. ...practises the epicene language in all its internal and external communication	
15. ...is involved in spaces for debate or networks (national, regional, international) on gender	
Results: Calculate your ABCs...	A B C

2. Gender Commitment Statement Template

Vision Statement



INSTRUCTIONS:

Identify a vision statement for the FSP's gender equality work. In other words, what do you want to do, in a nutshell?

How Statement



INSTRUCTIONS:

Building off of your vision and why statement, identify specific activities for actioning your gender equality goals. In other words, what steps are you taking to promote gender equality?

Why Statement



INSTRUCTIONS:

Develop a 'why' statement that articulates the FSP's motivations for promoting gender equality. In other words, what is your motivation? Why is gender equality important for your business, as it relates to your employees, customers, suppliers, or any other stakeholders in the communities you work in?

Full Gender Statement



INSTRUCTIONS:

To build the full gender statement, synthesize the three statements above into one to two paragraphs. This can additionally be tailored into two versions for internal versus external audiences.

3. Gender Analysis Worksheet Matrix

KEY GUIDING QUESTIONS – INTEGRATING GENDER INTO PROGRAM DESIGN					
Roles and Responsibilities	Access	Decision-making and Influence	Time	Cultural and Legal context	Gender Based Violence Risk
Who does what?	Who has what? Who can use what?	Who makes decisions?	How is time used?	What is the influencing	What are the potential GBV risk?
<p>What are the roles and responsibilities within the household (for men, women, boys, and girls)? Within your target program sectors or systems?</p> <p>Do roles and responsibilities differ between female-headed and male-headed households?</p> <p>How have gender roles changed over time or as a result of a crisis? What are the gains and losses for women and men in this process?</p>	<p>Do men, women, boys, and girls have equal access to resources?</p> <p>Which types of resources does each group have access to? (Men, women, boys, girls)</p> <p>Resources may include income, credit, financial services, employment, natural resources, agricultural inputs, education, knowledge, skills and information</p> <p>Who can go where? Why? Do women and girls need to ask permission? Are there safety concerns?</p>	<p>Who makes decisions at the household level? At the community level?</p> <p>For which types of resources can men make decisions about? Women? Boys? Girls?</p> <p>What are the barriers that prevent people from participating in decision-making? Are these barriers different for women, men, boys and girls?</p> <p>What is the representation of men, women and youth in community groups? Civil society? Government?</p>	<p>How much time do men and women spend on non-income work vs income-generating work?</p> <p>How do men, women, boys, and girls spend time on a typical day?</p> <p>Do they have similar amounts of free or leisure time?</p> <p>Is there a big imbalance in workloads between men, women, boys and girls? Does this vary by economic bracket, livelihood, or other variables – like IDP, host community?</p>	<p>What are the cultural perceptions, norms and attitudes that influence the behaviour of men and women? Boys and girls? (be quiet, be aggressive?)</p> <p>What are the social expectations regarding male behaviour? Female? (age of marriage, types of employment?)</p> <p>What are the formal laws and policies that impact men, women and excluded groups? (I.e. land titles, inheritance rights, gender policy?)</p> <p>How do social institutions such as media, school, religion and family influence the behaviour of males and females?</p>	<p>Who is subject to what form of violence?</p> <p>Who commits acts of violence and what is the purpose?</p> <p>Are women and girls more exposed to domestic violence in response to changing gender roles?</p> <p>What do communities do to counter such violence?</p> <p>Are there any potential risks (including backlash) resulting from program interventions?</p>

The actual worksheet for institutional use is below:

KEY GUIDING QUESTIONS – INTEGRATING GENDER INTO PROGRAM DESIGN						
Sex and Age Group	Roles and Responsibilities	Access	Decision-making and Influence	Time	Cultural and Legal context	Gender Based Violence Risk
<i>Note- age brackets below represent Mercy Corps SADD data collection guidelines. Not all categories are applicable for all programs</i>	<i>Who does what?</i>	<i>Who has/can use what?</i>	<i>Who makes decisions?</i>	<i>How is time used?</i>	<i>What is the influencing context?</i>	<i>What are potential GBV risks?</i>
Adult Men 50+ 35-49 22-35						
Adult Women 50+ 35-49 22-35						
Male Youth 20-24						
Female Youth 20-24						
Adolescent Male Late (15-19) Early (10-14)						
Adolescent female Late (15-19) Early (10-14)						
Boys 6-9 0-5						
Girls 6-9 0-5						

4. Gender Performance Indicator Sheet

Area	Category	Definition	Formula	USSPM
Client-Centric	Outreach	Women clients as percent of total clients	Number women clients/Number total clients	Standard 1B3
	Outreach	New women clients as percent of total new clients	Number new women clients/Number total new clients for the period	Standard 1B3
	Outreach	Women clients as a percent of addressable market	Number women clients estimated female microenterprise market (or country's economically active female population)	Standard 6A5
	Outreach	Women clients as a percent of total women served	Number women clients /Number total micro-finance women clients in market (country/region)	Standard 6A1
	Outreach	Percent of women clients below the poverty threshold	Number women clients under the targeted poverty threshold (PPI/poverty line)/Number total women clients	Standard 1B5
	Outreach	Average initial loan balance as a percent of per capita Gross National Income (GNI), by gender	Average initial loan balance for women (men) borrowers per capita/GNI	Standard 1B5
	Products	Percent of clients analysed through market research, by gender	Number women (men) clients analysed through market research/Number total clients	Standard 4A1
	Products	Percent of women accessing two or more distinct types of voluntary financial products	Number women clients accessing two or more products/Number total women clients	Standard 4C1
	Products	Product growth, by gender	Number new women (men) clients accessing a specific product over time period/Number total women (men) clients accessing Product at beginning of time period	Standard 4A1
	Service Quality	Client retention rate, by gender	Number active women clients at the end of the period/(Active women clients at the beginning of the period + new women clients during the period)	Standard 4A3

Area	Category	Definition	Formula	USSPM
Client-Centric	Service Quality	Share of active women clients by loan cycles Share of active women clients by join-year Women clients as a percent of addressable market	Number women clients who are in a given loan cycle/Number total women clients Number women clients who joined in a given year/Number total women clients	Standard 4A3
	Service Quality	Client satisfaction score, by gender	Average satisfaction survey score for women (men) clients	Standard 4A2
	Client Protection	Percent of clients with inquiries/complaints, by	Number women (men) clients with inquiries or complaints/Number total clients	Standard 2D4
	Client Protection	Percent of women clients who attend financial education programs	Number women clients that attended financial education programs in the year/Number total women clients	Standard 4C2
Financial and Social Outcomes	Financial Outcomes	Percent of loan portfolio, by gender	Women's (men's) Gross Loan Portfolio/ Total portfolio	Standards 1B3/4B3
	Financial Outcomes	Average loan balance, by gender	Women's (men's) Gross loan portfolio/Number women (men) borrowers	Standards 1B3/4B3
	Financial Outcomes	Portfolio at risk > 30 days, by gender	Outstanding balance of portfolio overdue for women (men) for more than 30 days /Gross loan portfolio for women (men) clients	
	Social Outcomes	Average percent change in net business income or assets by gender and/or average percent change in household income or assets,	(Average women (men) income in given year)/ Average women (men) income in prior year	Standards 1A3/1A4/1A5/1B8
	Social Outcomes	Percent of women who use their loan for their own economic activity	Number women who obtain a loan and state that they will use it in their own business/Number total women clients	Standards 1A3/1A4/1A5

Area	Category	Definition	Formula	USSPM
Financial and Social Outcomes	Social Outcomes	Percent of women clients with school-aged children whose children are enrolled in school	Number women clients with school-aged children who state that all children are in school/Number total women clients with school-aged children	Standard 1A3/1A4, 1A5/1B8
	Social Outcomes	Percent women clients that show improvement in housing conditions	Number women clients with improvement in household conditions metric (roof, floor, toilet, etc.)/Number total women clients	Standard 1A3/1A4, 1A5/1B8

(Source: adapted from *Women's World Banking Gender Performance Indicators: How well are we serving women?* (2013))

