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Gender and extreme poverty

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Since 1990, over 900 million people have seen their consumption rise above \$1.25 per day.¹ If this trend continues, extreme poverty could be eradicated within the next two decades. However, this projection depends on ensuring inclusive economic growth that reaches typically excluded populations, and women in particular. A nuanced understanding of the role gender plays in efforts to end extreme poverty can lead to better results; for women and girls themselves, their families, and their communities. When women's productivity in areas such as agriculture increases, the benefits are amplified across families and generations. Evidence from a range of countries shows that relative to men, women spend more of the income they control in ways that benefit their children, improving nutrition, health and educational opportunities.² Research also shows that an increase in the female share of labor force participation results in faster economic growth,³ which can help countries move out of extreme poverty.

While many data gaps remain, we know that women are vulnerable to extreme poverty because they face greater burdens of unpaid work,⁴ have fewer assets and productive resources than men,⁵ are exposed to gender-based violence (GBV),⁶ and are more likely to be forced into early marriage⁷—all factors that reduce their ability to participate fully in the economy and to reap the benefits of growth. This paper begins with a discussion of these factors and how they predispose women to extreme poverty. It then presents opportunities for reducing women's extreme poverty through gender-sensitive programming in three key sectors: agriculture, education, and reproductive health. It outlines the challenges inherent in this type of work, including a need to better connect how sector-specific outcomes—which reflect improvements in women's lives—also contribute to poverty reduction. Recommendations for moving forward include considering the unique links between gender and extreme poverty early in the project design process, taking into consideration underlying cultural practices and gender norms, and collecting rigorous, sex-disaggregated data to evaluate the effects of interventions on women.

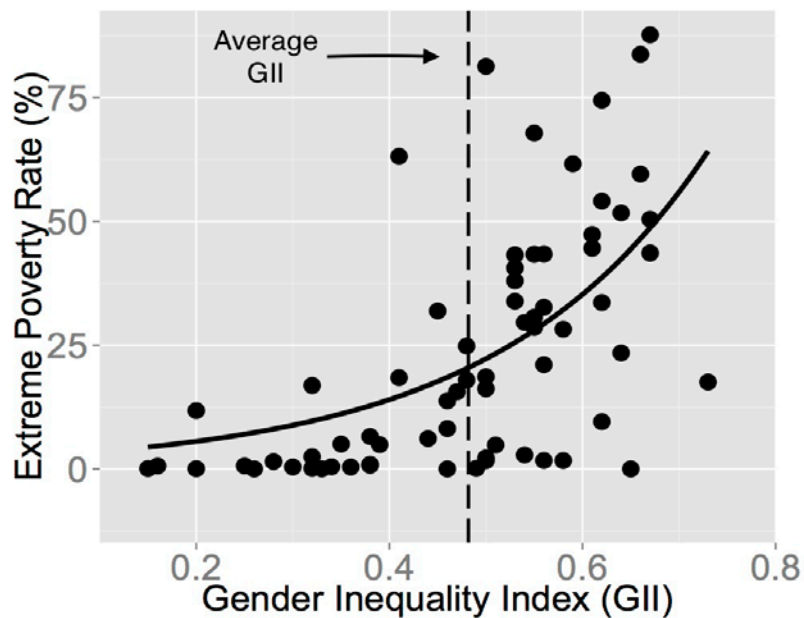
MULTIPLE FACTORS UNDERLIE WOMEN'S VULNERABILITY TO EXTREME POVERTY

Extreme poverty is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon, typically measured quantitatively using a proxy consumption-based metric defined as living on less than \$1.25 a day. USAID defines extreme poverty as the inability to meet basic consumption needs on a sustainable basis. People who live in extreme poverty lack both income and assets and typically suffer from interrelated, chronic deprivations, including hunger and malnutrition, poor health, limited education, and marginalization or exclusion.⁸ Extreme poverty weakens the resilience of households and communities, and limits the ability of individuals to participate fully in society and better their lives. According to household-level data, it is estimated that roughly one billion people lived below the \$1.25 consumption threshold in

2011.⁹ However, in gender-unequal situations women often lack access to household income and have less control over household resources, meaning that using household-level data limits our ability to clearly establish how many women versus men live in extreme poverty. In order to fully understand the experiences of women living in extreme poverty, it is necessary to move beyond consumption-based measures and examine their disproportionate susceptibility to the chronic deprivations included in USAID's multidimensional definition.

While some level of gender inequality persists in all regions of the globe, these inequalities are particularly pronounced in developing countries. Graph 1 examines the relationship between gender inequality (measured via disparities in reproductive health, political empowerment, educational attainment and economic status) and extreme poverty. Although the direction of causality is not clear, countries with above-average gender inequality, as a group, have higher extreme poverty rates than countries that are more gender equal. This is true even when controlling for per capita GDP.¹⁰ This suggests that it is vital to consider gender inequality in extreme poverty contexts, since the two frequently co-occur. While fully understanding the complex, bi-directional relationship between gender inequality and extreme poverty is difficult, we can identify some of the key links between the two. These links include: time burdens imposed on women by unpaid household work; the inability of women to acquire and retain assets; gender-based violence; and child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM), among others.

Graph 1- Gender Inequality and Extreme Poverty*



*Extreme poverty rate is approximated here as the percentage of people living on less than \$1.25 a day, based on the World Bank's PovcalNet database, located at: <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/index.htm>. The UN Human Development Report's Gender Inequality Index measures gender inequality based on factors such as reproductive health, political representation, and school completion: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>. The countries represented here are all for which these data were available.

Time poverty and overall work burdens

According to the UN Statistics Division, women globally spend at least twice as much time in unpaid domestic work as men, and the disparity is much greater in many developing countries.¹¹ Women employed outside the home work significantly more hours than men due to the double burden of paid work and unpaid domestic responsibilities. Extreme poverty exacerbates this problem because time spent on critical tasks, like accessing safe drinking water or cooking fuel, preparing meals, or caring for children, is often extended due to lack of transportation, technology, or sanitary conditions. The gender disparity in work hours is most striking among low-income groups: the poorer the household, the more hours women work, relative to men.¹² Being “time poor” affects both the current wellbeing and the future opportunities of women by limiting their ability to invest time in expanding their capabilities, for example through formal education.¹³ It can also prevent their participation in wage employment and labor markets.¹⁴ Within a family, time allocation tensions can result in sacrificing the education of daughters, who are expected to perform household tasks. These disproportionate household responsibilities create a cycle, as women slide further into poverty and have less time to invest in activities that yield economic returns.¹⁵

Limitations in access to productive resources and assets

Access to productive resources and assets—physical as well as financial—frequently determines the livelihoods available to poor women. In many countries, women are far less likely than men to own or control key physical assets such as land, housing, agricultural equipment, large livestock, and vehicles.¹⁶ Women’s land ownership is low in developing countries, particularly across sub-Saharan Africa; for example, women individually own just 17 percent of all documented land in Malawi, 11 percent in Tanzania, and 5 percent in Niger.¹⁷ Women also face diminished access to financial instruments, which are vital for poverty reduction.¹⁸ In developing economies, women are 20 percent less likely to have a formal bank account than men, and are substantially less likely to use savings and lending instruments.¹⁹ Female entrepreneurs are less likely than their male counterparts to obtain financing from formal institutions and more likely to pay high interest rates.²⁰ Cultural, regulatory, and legal barriers constitute the root of these discrepancies. For example, according to the *Women, Business and the Law 2014 Report*, almost 90 percent of the 143 countries studied restrict women’s economic opportunities, in areas such as registering a business and inheriting property, through at least one legal difference between the sexes. Twenty-eight countries have ten or more legal differences.²¹ The lack of access to assets and productive resources often leads women to the informal sector, where earnings are typically low, economic uncertainty is high and few social benefits are available.²² This continues their asset deficits and limits their ability to break the cycle of poverty.

Gender-based violence

Poor women are more vulnerable to GBV because they often live in uncertain and dangerous conditions. Traveling long distances to fetch water, food, and firewood in relatively isolated areas puts women at risk for violence and sexual assault on a daily basis. Cases of daily violence and rape are perpetuated because they often go unreported and unpunished in impoverished areas, due to discriminatory cultural norms or limited local capacity to enforce laws and protect citizens.²³ Studies have found that violence directed towards girls in schools, or on the walk to school, can be a factor in low enrollment, absenteeism, and high drop-out rates,²⁴ which can in turn impact future opportunities. Intimate partner violence (IPV), which occurs within a family, domestic unit, or between former or current partners, is the most prevalent form of GBV and is also linked to poverty. IPV was found to be more frequent and severe

among poorer groups in several countries and has a prevalence of 40 percent and over in Africa and South Asia.²⁵ This form of violence impacts women’s physical and mental health, increasing the risk of chronic illness, depression, HIV/AIDS, and substance abuse.²⁶ These effects and others contribute to health costs, absenteeism, and decreased productivity, leading to lost income and limited access to opportunities for human capital development.²⁷ Some estimates have found that IPV costs equal approximately 5 percent of worldwide GDP.²⁸

Child, early and forced marriage

CEFM is most common in the world’s poorest countries and is often concentrated in the poorest households within those countries.²⁹ Globally, in 2014, about one in four young women (aged 20–24) were married before age 18, and eight percent were married before age 15. The fraction of girls married before age 18 is even higher among the poorest quintile of women; from 1990-2010 it has remained around 40 percent.³⁰ Overall, girls living in poor households are twice as likely to marry young as girls in higher-income households,³¹ possibly because families see marriage as a way to provide for a daughter’s future and reduce their own economic burden. CEFM creates a power differential that can result in a woman lacking access to household income. It also increases girls’ vulnerability to GBV, and can result in curtailed education, increased fertility rates and a higher risk of maternal mortality or other health complications.³² These factors combine to severely limit girls’ abilities to shape their own futures and move out of poverty. CEFM perpetuates the cycle of poverty, by negatively impacting the health and future development of both the women who are married young and their children.

KEY AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY FOR GENDER-SENSITIVE INTERVENTION

According to the USAID gender policy, gender equality and female empowerment are universally recognized as core development objectives, fundamental for the realization of human rights, and key to effective and sustainable development outcomes (see Box 1). Building on the Agency’s decades of experience, the policy provides guidance on pursuing more effective, evidence-based investments in this realm and incorporating these

efforts into core development programming. Gender-sensitive interventions are crucial in all sectors, and are necessary for successfully addressing the problem of extreme poverty. Doing so requires an understanding that increasing women’s participation in the economy alone cannot ensure that they will be lifted out of extreme poverty without corresponding long-term

investments in access to productive assets, health services, and education, where stark gender inequalities still remain in many nations. This section of this paper examines successes, challenges and lessons learned from gender-sensitive programming implemented at USAID and elsewhere in three sectors: agriculture, education, and reproductive health—all of which are linked to crucial facets of

Box 1: USAID Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy³³

Gender equality concerns women and men, and it involves working with men and boys, women and girls to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviors, roles and responsibilities at home, in the workplace, and in the community. Genuine equality means more than parity in numbers or laws on the books; it means expanding freedoms and improving overall quality of life so that equality is achieved without sacrificing gains for males or females.

Female empowerment is achieved when women and girls acquire the power to act freely, exercise their rights, and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. While empowerment often comes from within, cultures, societies, and institutions create conditions that facilitate or undermine the possibilities for empowerment.

extreme poverty in women. It also considers to what extent these programs can help women and their families escape extreme poverty.

Women and agriculture

Women comprise, on average, 43 percent of the agricultural labor force in developing countries and up to 50 percent in Eastern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.³⁴ However, disparities in land holdings are severe, with women representing fewer than 20 percent of all agricultural holders in the developing world, including fewer than five percent in many countries in Africa and Asia.³⁵ Additionally, discrimination in access to markets such as credit makes it difficult for rural women to purchase productive inputs, including seeds, farming technology, and fertilizer, leading to yields lower than those of their male counterparts.³⁶ These restrictions inhibit women's ability to secure their own livelihoods and provide nourishment for their families. This insecurity, in turn, forces them to select strategies based on survival rather than long-term sustainability, continuing the cycle of poverty.³⁷

Many countries with high rates of extreme poverty rely heavily on agriculture as the basis of their economies. Across sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, growth in agriculture has been associated with reductions in extreme poverty.³⁸ This suggests that agriculture is key to reducing poverty for women, who make up a large fraction of agricultural holders. However, to achieve this, gender inequalities that inhibit the productivity of female farmers must be addressed. Studies have found that in general, gender differences in agricultural productivity diminish considerably when access to and use of productive inputs are taken into account.³⁹ For example, studies in Malawi and Ghana found that ensuring women farmers have the same access as men to fertilizer and other agricultural inputs increased their maize yields by nearly one sixth.⁴⁰ Other benefits of improving women's access to assets have been documented as well: in Nepal, women who owned land were twice as likely to have children who were adequately nourished as women who did not, and this was true independent of socioeconomic status.⁴¹ Taking into account the share of female farmers and assuming they have access to the same resources and assets as men, agricultural output could increase by 2.5 to 4 percent overall. This additional output, if directly consumed, could bring down the number of undernourished people by as much as 150 million.⁴² All of these findings suggest that lowering the barriers women face in the agricultural sector could increase productivity and raise incomes, as well as address hunger and malnourishment, all components of the multi-dimensional definition of extreme poverty.

Empowering women in agriculture to reduce extreme poverty

To better understand the role of women farmers in household decision making, USAID's Feed the Future initiative has designed a survey tool called the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). Sex-disaggregated data is collected and used to rigorously evaluate interventions and examine critical questions related to gender equality, gender integration, and women's empowerment (See Box 2). According to findings from the WEAI baseline survey, for the majority of countries the greatest constraints on empowering women in agriculture are: lack of access to credit and the power to make credit related decisions; excessive workloads; and low membership in groups brought together by issues such as agricultural production, credit and microfinance.⁴³ A USAID-funded study also found women's empowerment to be positively associated with calorie availability and dietary diversity at the household level, which can have implications for the well-being, productivity and future opportunities of women and their children.⁴⁴ The data reveal new insights about women's empowerment and are being used to shape program design in several partner countries with plans to expand to others in the future.

The WEAI and related findings can be used to guide agricultural program design so that women benefit without incurring unintended negative consequences. Important considerations include: not increasing women's time burdens, providing schooling or making sure extension services are understandable to less-educated women, and promoting technologies that are more affordable and relevant to women.⁴⁶ Additionally, agricultural programs that require a minimum level of physical or financial assets could incorporate activities to address gender biases in land and inheritance laws and promote the importance of women's land rights. In Kenya, for example, USAID supported policy reforms that strengthened women's land rights and promoted awareness of these new norms as well as women's governing capacity, increasing the fraction of female elders elected from zero to two thirds.⁴⁷ In Tanzania, USAID is training women and men to better document their land rights using a mobile application, resulting in about a third of parcels being registered to women as individuals and a further third being registered jointly.⁴⁸

Box 2: Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)⁴⁵

The WEAI was designed to measure progress toward women's empowerment and to maintain the effective use of evidence-based solutions and innovative approaches in agriculture. The WEAI tracks rural women's empowerment relative to men in five key areas:

- Decisions over agricultural production
- Access to decision-making power over productive resources
- Control of use of income
- Community leadership
- Time use.

Studies have observed some promising results of gender-sensitive agricultural interventions: a drought and pest-resistant rice variety deployed in sub-Saharan Africa improved women's productivity and increased household school attendance, consumption spending, and calorie intake,⁴⁹ while new vegetable varieties disseminated in Bangladesh through women's groups improved the nutritional status of women and children, as well as women's assets relative to men's.⁵⁰ Because women frequently lack control over household income, further work is needed to understand how increasing a woman's agricultural productivity can impact her individual experience of poverty. A comprehensive approach to agricultural productivity that directly addresses women's asset gaps through tailored financial instruments, strengthened land rights, and other creative solutions may best contribute to reducing extreme poverty.

Women and education

Girls living in extreme poverty face many barriers to accessing a quality education, with far-reaching consequences. These barriers include school fees, continuing costs of supplies and transportation (more likely to be allocated to male children), time constraints due to girls' roles in domestic tasks, GBV in and near schools, lack of sanitary facilities, early marriage, and pregnancy.⁵¹ Even with significant progress toward universal access to education, girls make up about 54 percent of the global population of children who are out of school.⁵² Among low-income countries, just 20 percent had achieved gender parity at the primary education level, 10 percent at the lower secondary level and 8 percent at the upper secondary level in 2011.⁵³ The disadvantages are greatest for the poor: in some developing countries as many as nine out of ten of the poorest women have not completed a primary education.⁵⁴

However, when these barriers are surmounted and women attain high levels of education, they have access to better paid occupations and higher earning jobs within those occupations.⁵⁵ Education narrows the income gap between men and women, increases the likelihood that women will engage in wage-employment, and allows women to acquire skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that raise their incomes.⁵⁶ For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, where many of the extreme poor live, men earn

twice as much as women on average, but education has a strong effect on closing the earnings gap.⁵⁷ For each additional year of schooling completed by a woman, her labor market earnings, averaged globally, increase by 11 percent for primary education, 9 percent for secondary education and 17 percent for tertiary education.⁵⁸ These returns to schooling are generally even higher in developing regions: in sub-Saharan Africa, the returns rise to 18 percent for primary, 13 percent for secondary, and 21 percent for tertiary education.⁵⁹ Skills acquired in school are also an important indicator of future income: in Pakistan, working women with a high level of literacy skills earn 95 percent more than women with weak or no literacy skills.⁶⁰

Education has additional benefits for women living in extreme poverty and their children because it also improves health-related practices. According to UNESCO's 2013/14 Education for All Global Monitoring report, if all women in sub-Saharan Africa completed primary school, maternal deaths would decrease by 70 percent.⁶¹ Additionally, children around the world whose mothers completed secondary education are twice as likely to survive past the age of five and 26 percent less likely to be stunted than children whose mothers have not.⁶² Ensuring that all women and girls living in extreme poverty receive an education is a key catalyst, improving job opportunities, ensuring more informed health choices, and generating economic benefits across generations.

Educating women to reduce extreme poverty

USAID integrates gender throughout its education portfolio as well as through specific initiatives, most notably Let Girls Learn.[†] USAID's education programming approach includes training teachers to promote positive gender norms and safe learning spaces; lowering social, cultural and time barriers to girls' access to schools; and protecting girls in crisis and conflict environments (See Box 3). While increasing school enrollment and attendance of girls is a significant first step, it does not ensure equality of treatment and attention in the classroom nor equality of educational achievements and resulting career opportunities.⁶⁴ For example, a rigorous evaluation of a USAID-funded project in Malawi found that the focus on getting girls into primary school, without addressing sexism in the classroom, pressures in the home, and other barriers to learning, put girls at a disadvantage.⁶⁵ Truly transformative interventions require shifting from a focus on females alone to dynamics between the sexes. Attracting and keeping quality female teachers has also been identified as a key way to keep girls in the classroom and to promote learning.⁶⁶

Box 3: Examples of USAID Programs Focusing on Girls' Education:⁶³

In Liberia, the Girls' Opportunities to Access Learning (GOAL) Plus program supports over 7,000 young and adolescent-aged girls through primary school enrollment, attendance, and retention. The program provides scholarship packages for girls' uniforms, supplies, backpacks, and hygiene kits, along with grants for Parent-Teacher Associations.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Empowering Adolescent Girls to Lead through Education (EAGLE) seeks to equip adolescent girls with educational, life, and leadership skills, including sessions on health, HIV/AIDS awareness, and self-esteem. The project also includes teacher training and programs to reduce school-related GBV and provides 3,000 scholarships.

Studies have found that high levels of education improve women's chances of entering the labor market and that education reduces gender gaps in earnings among those who are employed.⁶⁷ A

[†] For more information see: <https://www.usaid.gov/letgirlslearn>

comprehensive approach to education programming, which engages with school administrators, families, communities, and country-wide policies, can help keep girls in school. Legal reforms that ensure equal opportunity and pay, as well as leadership training and targeted recruitment into non-traditional sectors such as science and technology, can further enable women to leverage their education to enter the labor market and increase their earnings.⁶⁸ This can in turn drive reductions in extreme poverty for women and their families.

Women and reproductive health

Women living in extreme poverty often have limited control over their reproductive health, resulting in early childbirth, narrow spacing between births, and increased fertility, all of which can impact a woman's overall health and keep her from continuing her education or pursuing wage employment.⁶⁹ Poor women in several countries in Africa were found to have become sexually active at earlier ages and were less likely to use condoms than wealthy women, putting them at higher risk of unplanned pregnancy and disease transmission.⁷⁰ On a household level, high fertility rates contribute to extreme poverty since they reduce the per capita investment in the health and education of children.⁷¹ Nationwide, high fertility rates reduce a government's per capita investments in infrastructure and social services.⁷²

Additionally, each pregnancy puts a poor woman's health at risk: a woman living in sub-Saharan Africa is 47 times more likely to die of maternal causes over her lifetime than a woman living in the United States.⁷³ However, a one-year analysis across 172 countries showed that the use of contraceptives reduced maternal deaths by 44 percent.⁷⁴ The death of a mother is a tragedy in itself, but it also has devastating effects on the survival of her children, the economic stability of her family, and the productivity of her community. A 2010 study in Bangladesh showed that an infant whose mother had died was approximately eight times more likely to die in the first year of life than one whose mother remained alive.⁷⁵ In Kenya, a 2014 study found that maternal death led to withdrawal of children from school, family financial instability, crippling expenditures on health and funeral costs, and loss of crops and agricultural productivity.⁷⁶

Lack of empowerment in the realm of reproductive health also contributes to disease transmission. For example, young women 15–24 years old in sub-Saharan Africa are twice as likely as young men to be living with HIV.⁷⁷ HIV/AIDS can push people and households into poverty, by reducing labor capacity and increasing medical expenses, and can have long-term consequences on children and families.⁷⁸ When women are empowered in the realm of reproductive health, far-reaching, multigenerational effects can ensue, because healthier women with fewer children are more able to seek employment and increase household income and assets, maintain the health of their families, and send their children to school.⁷⁹

Improving women's reproductive health to reduce extreme poverty

USAID programming aims to empower women to take control of their reproductive health, strives to be grounded in voluntarism and informed choice, and provides a broad range of family planning methods. Women living in extreme poverty may prove particularly likely to benefit from programs that take barriers to access into account. To ensure access, USAID programs negotiate unit cost reductions for the most in-demand methods, ensure that both urban and remote communities are adequately stocked with contraceptive supplies, and use community health workers to reach those distant from fixed health facilities who may not have the means or time to travel. Innovation expands the range of contraceptive

options by refining technologies for long-acting injectables or combining contraceptives with anti-viral technologies to decrease HIV transmission. Because transforming attitudes is often as important as making technologies available, USAID interventions also use a community-based approach, with example programs targeting adolescents and men to influence gender norms and attitudes early and systemically.⁸⁰ Decreasing high-risk or too-frequent pregnancies improves maternal as well as child mortality and morbidity. USAID also invests in programs specifically designed to improve outcomes for pregnant women by providing better and more easily accessible maternal health services (see Box 4).

Reducing early childbearing and maternal mortality has the potential to increase the overall health and education of women and their children.⁸² Although more research is needed to fully understand the link between family planning and economic gains, a study of a government-run program in 141 villages in Bangladesh found that declines in fertility resulting from an outreach program were accompanied by improvements in women's health and economic productivity outside the home as well as increases in household assets.⁸³ In Uganda, an intervention that simultaneously provided adolescent girls with vocational training and information on sex, reproduction and marriage increased their engagement in income-generating activities by 72 percent.⁸⁴ A synthesis of findings from various family planning interventions noted that successful programs typically took into account cultural norms and barriers to contraceptive use, adopted varied approaches to reach women, and harnessed community support.⁸⁵ An integrated approach to reproductive health, which is sensitive to economic and cultural barriers, may hold promise for women living in extreme poverty as well as directly translate to benefits for future generations.

Box 4: Example Maternal Health Program at USAID:⁸¹

Saving Mothers, Giving Life in Zambia and Uganda aims to ensure every pregnant woman has access to clean, safe delivery services and life-saving emergency care in the event of complication. Since its launch in 2012, the program has reduced the maternal mortality ratio in institutional facilities in 4 initial districts by 35 percent in Zambia and 30 percent in Uganda. The program:

- Strengthens existing health networks so every woman can reach care within two hours
- Ensures health facilities are well equipped, supplied and staffed
- Provides birth attendants with training and mentoring.

MOVING FORWARD: PROGRAMMING THAT ADDRESSES THE NEEDS OF WOMEN

Integrated, innovative approaches are needed to address the social and economic barriers that prevent women from achieving equality and empowerment and inhibit extreme poverty reduction. Although USAID has done significant work in agriculture, education, and reproductive health to help lift women and girls out of poverty, much remains to be understood regarding what works best—for which women, and under which circumstances. However, some common themes emerge from successful programs.

Recommendations for programming

Consider gender-specific links to poverty in program design

Successful programs consider the gender norms that constrain women's options and decision-making ability as well as the unique links between gender and extreme poverty early in the process rather than as a refinement to existing designs. These links include time and asset scarcity, vulnerability to GBV, and detrimental effects of child marriage. For example, interventions should take into account time spent travelling, especially through violence-prone regions, and waiting for services, which could bar poor

women from participating in programs like conditional cash transfers. Investing in technologies and innovations, ranging from cell phones to contraceptives, can reduce women's time burdens, increase access to financial services, and protect their health. Finally, the links between gender and extreme poverty often coexist and interact, suggesting a need for integrated programming. Rigorous evaluations of several interventions in Bangladesh, including BRAC's Ultra-Poor program, found that combining large asset transfers with intensive skills training effectively raised the earnings of poor women, and was more successful than either alone.⁸⁶ Programming that provides wrap-around services in combination with the main intervention, such as basic education, financial tools, or family planning resources, thus has great potential to affect women's lives.

Take underlying causes into account

Many of the links between gender and extreme poverty stem from cultural practices and deeply rooted beliefs about gender norms, which must be addressed to bring about systemic change. Yet gender norms do not change overnight, and attempts to directly challenge them can result in pushback and yield poor results. Successful approaches carefully consider the role of women in households and communities and the dynamics between the sexes. In-depth, community-based work, often engaging men and boys as well as women and girls, is required to shift these norms. However, this type of work is very time-intensive and requires careful attention to the local context when being scaled up to benefit the vast numbers of women who remain in extreme poverty.

Carry out rigorous data collection and evaluations

Sex-disaggregated data to assess inequalities, as well as data on gender norms and attitudes, can inform policy on extreme poverty and enable evidence-based solutions. However, although nearly 80 percent of countries produce sex-disaggregated statistics on mortality and education, less than a third produce such statistics on assets, informal employment, and unpaid work.⁸⁷ Because women may be differently affected than men by interventions, comprehensive quantitative and qualitative gender-sensitive indicators, such as the WEAI, should be included in monitoring and evaluation efforts. Additionally, evaluations must consider how both positive and unintended negative consequences (e.g., additional time burdens) vary by sex. Finally, while a number of studies demonstrate the effectiveness of gender-sensitive programming on outcomes such as farm yields, fertility, or school enrollment, fewer studies link gender-sensitive programming directly to measures of poverty. Widely disseminating the findings of rigorous evaluations and institutionalizing lessons learned is vital for enhancing best practices for programming that benefits extremely poor women.

Asking the right questions

Many gaps remain in the data and scientific literature pertaining to the gendered aspects of poverty. Below are some of the key questions that remain to be answered:

- How can we better identify and fill the key data gaps, especially those related to time-use and assets, necessary to fully capture how women experience and are affected by extreme poverty?
- What types of development programs most effectively lead to poverty reduction among women? How cost-effective and scalable are these programs?

- How can we move beyond measuring only sector-specific outcomes in programming focused on agriculture, education, and reproductive health and show more directly the effects of work in these sectors on reducing extreme poverty?
- Are interventions in some sectors more effective for reducing extreme poverty among women and their families than others? Should work in some sectors be prioritized and what are the benefits of multi-sectoral programs?
- How do programs designed to reduce poverty affect gender-specific responsibilities and norms in low-income communities?
- How can the power of science, technology and innovation be more significantly and specifically harnessed to help move women out of extreme poverty?

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