The initiative ‘Women as Inclusive Business partners’ supports the private sector in strategy development to better engage women in their value chains in low-income markets, ranging from producers to consumers.

15 good practices have been analyzed of Dutch and international companies, ranging from SMEs or cooperatives to multinational corporations. The practices illustrate ‘the secrets’ to build a successful business case; which benefits both companies and women. We hope the cases of these frontrunners will inspire others towards ‘smart inclusion of women for smart economics’.

What’s in it for business?

What skills and capacities of women do businesses or sector initiatives value? What are the benefits of engaging women in inclusive business?

In short: It helps companies to become more competitive and develop new markets. Recognizing the added value of women in agricultural production, manufacturing and processing makes it possible to improve women’s capacities and strengthen their qualities; which in return results in better productivity, effectiveness and efficiency for the company. As customers, women are diverse and have different, though often unmet needs. E.g. as household managers, agricultural producers or being in their reproductive age, many women lack affordable or accessible products and services. New or adapted products or distribution models with women in ‘the last mile’ offer access to new markets for innovative companies.
In production and processing, women are recognized for skills such as eye for detail, hygiene, organization, productiveness and design, which are especially important in processes for which safety and quality control are key;

Women are often found to be loyal and reliable employees, largely because, compared to men, they take their family responsibilities into greater consideration;

In cooperative structures, women are seen to excel as cooperative leaders and achieve better business results;

Gender diversity across the organization and the value chain contributes to better business performance, as women offer new perspectives and ideas.

Good labor conditions improves productivity
As part of their brand value and to strengthen their social certification program, Eosta and Nature’s Pride not only focuses on equal rights for men and women, but also support women ‘beyond certification’ to make sure their needs are met regarding child- and health care, trade union membership, improved drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, or education.

Expertise and leadership
Engaging women in leadership roles turns out to be beneficial for businesses in several best practice cases. For Dobla in Vietnam, women working in mid or higher management contribute to new perspectives and ideas. And even when women are not contract holders, as in the case of The Fruit Republic, things can be designed in such a way that women do take part in decision making. Other cases such as NSPDT show that supporting women in poultry rearing to become technical experts act as important role models to women farmers, and thus results in higher business results.

Smallholder agriculture is a family business
Several cases recognize that in agriculture, men and women perform different, but equally important tasks. They are aware that women’s contributions are often not recognized and take actions to improve this. In the case of Land O’ Lakes, cooperatives are now 140% more productive because women, who do a lot of the work, got trained and organized.
To optimize these qualities, the cases that were analysed adopt various business practices that benefit both women and the business:

- Companies recognize that good labor conditions pay off, as they reduce sick leave and staff turnover. Moreover, companies with seasonal jobs have no labor shortage in the peak season. Proper gender-conscious labor conditions that meet women’s specific needs such as child or health care, increase productivity considerably although it requires flexibility. Measures that support female employees to cope with their work-life balance, e.g. to acquire family acceptance for the job or better water supply is good for the business.
- Facilitation of technical training, leadership and entrepreneurship for women that also takes work-life balance into account, strengthens business performance;
- Support women to become trainers and service providers, and stimulate them to provide services that are fee based and thus demand driven, promotes their entrepreneurship;
- Cooperation with NGOs pays off: Some cases are initiated by NGOs or value chain facilitators who train women producers and cooperatives or who bring value chain actors together.

Women in marketing & distribution and as consumers

- ‘By women for women’ is a smart business proposition as in many cultures women, rather than men, are better able to reach female customers, they understand their needs and interests and are able to discuss sensitive issues such as sanitary pads or the use of tractors with potential customers;
- Close contact and trust between sales agents and customers enables better awareness and information exchange, strengthens customer loyalty and provides information on required design adaptations;
- Female salespersons can break gender boundaries and reach out to male customers or to male family members who influence buying decisions;
- Women often are good or even better salespersons, can secure markets and are more reliable than men as they tend to go for income security, rather than short term income maximization; assumingly because women foremost seek financial stability to meet their basic family needs.
The presented business cases illustrate the advantages of engaging women in marketing and distribution of women-specific products and the preconditions to do so successfully:

- The products offered to female customers are either culturally sensitive (sanitary pads or tractors) and/or have a high social benefit (wellbeing, convenience), but are not readily available in rural settings or affordable for low income consumers. In most cases, additional services such as awareness raising, demonstration or access to finance are key elements of the value proposition;
- An appropriate selection process for women to become part of the sales-force is crucial: e.g. entrepreneurial women who are socially embedded. A thorough training of women in business skills, sales, financial management or thematic knowledge is essential, on times and locations that are convenient for them. Training on the job and coaching are frequently used methodologies;
- Cooperation with NGOs pays off: Partnering with local NGOs can facilitate the identification of local entrepreneurial women or potential distributors (e.g. members of a local Self Help Group, SHG) or can provide a client base. This reduces transaction costs and risks;

Women at the BoP as micro-retailers

Several cases reveal that including women as distributors is highly beneficial for the business. JITA for instance, trains local women to offer last mile distribution for a wide range of non-competing products that are not easily available for rural women in Bangladesh. The female sales agents are well positioned for doorstep-social marketing among their peers and various brands opt to join the channel.

New markets and reliability

For marketing and distribution several businesses prefer to work with female sales ladies. GrameenPhone works for example with ‘phone ladies’ to gain access to a new client base in 55,000 villages in Bangladesh. They experienced that women customers prefer to take services from female phone ladies as they are perceived as more reliable.

Dealing with sensitive issues

Women are better able to discuss sensitive issues. In the case of TGT Enterprise the sensitive aspect refers to the fact that in many cultures, women farmers are traditionally not supposed to plough. Female operators who can train other women in the use of tractors are therefore important role models.

Click here for all good practices