



WHAT WORKS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT (WEE)

Oxfam's **CREATING SPACES (CS)** and **AMPLIFY CHANGE (AC)** projects aimed to reduce violence against women and girls¹ (VAWG), foster women's economic empowerment, and shift social norms to promote women's and girls' rights². Following the socio-ecological model on violence prevention³, both projects applied a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder approach, at the individual, household, community, and societal/institutional levels. Local partner organizations, with support from Oxfam country offices and Oxfam Canada, implemented both projects.

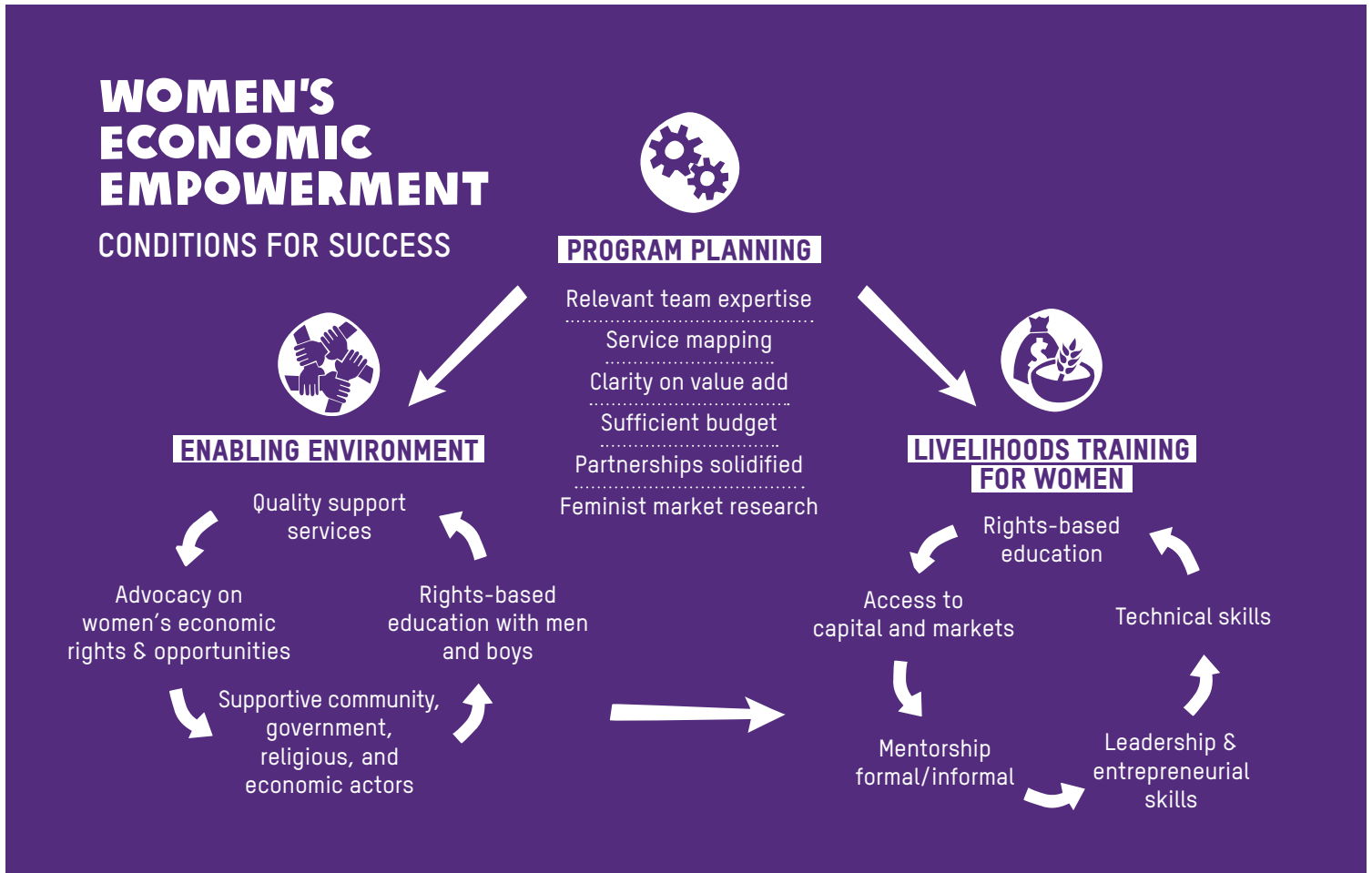
Women and girls experiencing intimate partner and family violence are often financially dependent on their abusers, and thus disempowered to change their circumstance. The devastating economic impacts and lockdowns associated with COVID-19 have only exacerbated matters, leading to a significant global rise in VAWG cases and unpaid care burden on women and girls. Global evidence⁴ affirms that strengthening women's economic autonomy is fundamental to breaking these cycles of violence. However, these efforts can be futile and even increase harms to women if the structural barriers and fundamental norms that drive gender inequalities and violence at the household, community, and workplace remain intact.



Women's vegetable cultivation in Dangabahal Village, Odisha, India. Credit: Oxfam India

- 1 The Creating Spaces to End Violence Against Women and Girls ("Creating Spaces") project was designed in 2016 to primarily address violence against cis gender women and girls. Oxfam Canada acknowledges that gender-based violence also has a disproportionate impact on trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people; the institution is working to expand programming to be inclusive to gender non-conforming people.
- 2 Creating Spaces was a multi-country project in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Amplify Change was implemented in Afghanistan.
- 3 The socio-ecological model on violence prevention is a best practice theory of change utilized by practitioners to consider four interrelated levels of intervention that are instrumental in combating gender-based violence – individual, relationship, community, and societal. For more information (pg. 13): https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/ending-violence-against-women-oxfam-guide-nov2012_2.pdf
- 4 Kerr-Wilson, A.; Gibbs, A.; McAslan Fraser E.; Ramssoomar, L.; Parke, A.; Khuwaja, HMA.; and Jewkes, R. (2020). A rigorous global evidence review of interventions to prevent violence against women and girls. What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls Global Programme, Pretoria, South Africa | Georgia, T. (2015) DFID Guidance Note on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Through DFID's Economic Development and Women's Economic Empowerment Programmes – Part A, London: VAWG Helpdesk. | Fulu et al (2014). What works to prevent violence against women and girls? Evidence Review of interventions to prevent violence against women and girls: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337615/evidence-review-interventions-F.pdf

This brief highlights many lessons learned from the CS and AC projects on advancing women's economic empowerment, including program design considerations, essential livelihood training elements, and building community support for women's shifting economic roles. These learnings reinforce and build on global best practice in WEE programming towards gender equality.



SECTION 1: PROGRAM PLANNING

IDENTIFY THE KEY DRIVERS OF VAWG AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

To support program design, CS and AC partners identified the distinct social norms and other barriers in each project district that were most influential in driving economic inequalities and gender-based violence. Oxfam's feminist [Social Norms Diagnostic Tool](#) provides community-based, innovative methods to engage with a range of stakeholders to dissect and examine social norms. These analyses are instrumental to designing more locally relevant and targeted interventions with households, community and religious leaders (see Sustainability section below).

ESTABLISH A PROJECT TEAM WITH A RELEVANT TECHNICAL BACKGROUND IN LIVELIHOODS DEVELOPMENT

Oxfam and partners learned that having internal expertise on small business and entrepreneurial development was instrumental in designing successful WEE opportunities with strong revenue potential. Having gender-related expertise was essential but not sufficient for WEE interventions. Planning and implementing livelihoods projects requires market-related knowledge, familiarity with key market actors, and early connections with other public, private, and non-governmental agencies and programs that support new small businesses, particularly women-led ones.

KNOW YOUR ROLE

CS and AC partners learned the value of conducting a comprehensive and gender-responsive needs assessment to provide greater clarity on where to focus WEE programming and resource allocation in a particular district or region. This assessment can include:

- Consultations with relevant stakeholders (e.g.: Civil Society Organizations and Women's Rights Organizations, women, and employers);
- A mapping of all organizations and government bodies providing WEE services in the project districts, to identify key gaps in existing programs; and
- A market assessment to identify the most promising industries for women-led enterprises and economic participation.

Undertaking this type of formative, feminist-oriented research will ensure that WEE programs are adapted to the local context. For instance, some CS partners acted primarily as 'connectors' by facilitating linkages to existing livelihood programs for survivors, while others implemented vocational trainings in project districts with gaps in WEE services.

ALLOCATE SUFFICIENT PROGRAM RESOURCES TOWARDS WEE

Oxfam, along with the CS and AC partners, learned that implementing WEE interventions is resource-intensive and required greater budget than initially allocated. Planning requires market assessments and access to technical and vocational education specialists. Trainings require skilled facilitators and the proper equipment and space to foster learning. Women graduates require access to capital, resource inputs, and ongoing supports to succeed. Finally, the internal human resources required to operate WEE projects and establish partnerships are extensive. Organizations must consider all of these budgetary needs from project inception to ensure quality programming and supports for women.

PLAN EARLY TO SOLIDIFY LINKAGES AND PARTNERSHIPS

For several CS partners with a more limited background in economic development, it was a lengthy process to identify and secure relevant WEE partnerships across civil society and the public and private sectors. Oxfam recommends seeking out and building these partnerships in the early stages of the project, to ensure that women's enterprises will be adequately supported right from inception.

DESIGN CONTEXT-SPECIFIC, ASSET-BASED PROGRAMS

Livelihoods programs are exponentially more effective and sustainable when approached through a feminist lens that centres women's voices, practical needs, and assets to inform decision-making, and seek to break down traditional views of where women fit in the economy. It is important to strike a balance between ensuring women's safety in the workplace as a primary consideration, and pushing the envelope beyond female-dominated industries. In addition, economic activities that are sensitive to cultural contexts enable women to thrive economically, while fulfilling other family and community responsibilities. In Jharkhand, India, after consulting directly with women on viable livelihood options, project partners provided training on grass mat weaving to local women in project districts.

INTEGRATE LITERACY AND NUMERACY INTO LIVELIHOODS TRAININGS

In **AFGHANISTAN**, after extensive consultation with women from Herat and Balkh provinces, the project partners incorporated literacy and numeracy into the vocational training program. Learning to read and write was life changing for many women, and built their confidence to pursue economic opportunities. In areas with low educational attainment, WEE projects should consider and integrate these fundamental life skills.

SECTION 2: TRAINING DESIGN

EMPOWER WOMEN THROUGH RIGHTS-BASED AND SOCIAL NORMS EDUCATION

As a precursor to livelihoods services, it is fundamental that projects incorporate rights-based programming at the community-level that educates women on their basic human rights, such as the right to live free of violence, and the harmful social norms that drive gender discrimination and inequality in their communities. Coupling this education with leadership training builds survivors' agency to self-advocate and pursue changes in their lives, including financial independence. As women are empowered to pursue income-generating activities, they will be renegotiating traditional gender roles within their households and community, most importantly their freedom of mobility, decision-making power, control

over income, and the **redistribution of care work**,⁵ which is systematically undervalued, unpaid or underpaid, and limits women’s economic potential. **The care burden was the greatest barrier for many women in pursuing economic opportunities. It is paramount that project partners provide ongoing support to women throughout this renegotiation process, whilst engaging directly with household members over the long term to create an enabling environment for WEE.**

As women gain financial independence, they are further emboldened to self-advocate to uphold their rights, a positive feedback loop seen across the CS countries. In the Rautahat, Banke and Dailekh districts of **NEPAL**, women engaged in right-based education and life skills trainings through the **Community Discussion Centres** gained confidence to take the issue of gender unequal pay to their local government employers. They successfully challenged the employer’s practices and are now earning what men do for work of equal value.

“ We were paid way less than the men even when we were putting in equal efforts and skills for labor. Since we started voicing our opinions, we are now paid equally.”

—Woman Participant, Aathbis Municipality, Dailekh, Nepal

MENTORSHIP

Where feasible, building mentorship opportunities into livelihood services is highly recommended to help bridge women into the specific trade and/or industry they are pursuing. Mentors can help to refine technical skills; provide “insider” knowledge, particularly for women navigating male-dominated industries; facilitate connections to employers and other key players; and provide strategic considerations when seeking market access.



Shampa started her own business making local snacks with support from CS partner, Pollisree in Bangladesh. She is now able to support herself and her family, which has helped stop the violence in her household: “Now that I earn money, I participate in making changes for my family. If I say something to my husband now, he listens to it carefully.”

Credit: Photo: Abir Abdullah/Oxfam

⁵ Care work refers to household and domestic chores, such as cooking and cleaning, and caregiving duties with children and elders. Women and girls carry a disproportionate burden for care responsibilities. Learn more at <https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/35449/>



Husband and wife working together in their kitchen after counselling on VAWG. Credit: Oxfam Nepal

Informal skill sharing amongst women within the CS and AC projects also provided opportunities for women to build skills and confidence to pursue income-generating activities. This was especially valuable when formal mentorship programs were unavailable. When women saw their peers successfully engaged in income-generating activities, they were inspired to follow in their footsteps. For example, in **BANGLADESH** and **NEPAL**, women who had left abusive partners, graduated from CS-offered livelihoods trainings, established their own enterprises, and subsequently began to mentor other women in similar situations to follow in their footsteps and build their financial independence.

“We have seen that with improved livelihood opportunities and economic advantage, women become bolder and more confident. This work on their leadership skills... will enable them to address their personal life situations much better.”

—Subhadra Mallik, NAWO, Odisha, India, CS Partner

FACILITATE LINKAGES TO CAPITAL, RESOURCES, AND MARKETS

A key aspect of livelihood services is to facilitate access to markets and market knowledge for women who have been traditionally excluded from the economy. Women are set up for success when they have access to safe spaces and opportunities where they can work and run their businesses. When CS partners facilitated these linkages to employers or key market actors, women tended to secure work and/or generate sales more successfully. Building these partnerships with private sector influencers will take time and is encouraged from project inception. Vocational trainings should also embed associated skills and network building into the curriculum so that women are empowered to independently explore opportunities. Women also require adequate access to capital and equipment to be able to start their businesses. For instance, AC partners in **AFGHANISTAN** provided women who completed the eight-month vocational training with a start-up kit including essential tailoring equipment and supplies. Building in these capital needs into livelihood services is key, whether they are offered by the project and/or by government and other institutions supporting small women-led businesses.

SAFIA BECOMES A PROFESSIONAL TAILOR

“I came to consultation center to obtain some information about women’s legal rights, and there I saw that women and girls are provided with vocational trainings. I decided to participate as my family is really poor and eligible for such support. I learned tailoring skills, and reading and writing which was my dream. After 8 months of training, AWEC supported us with start-up tool kits and we were provided with tailoring package. Since I was eager to learn tailoring from my childhood, my interest and the training helped me become a professional tailor. Now, I work from home as a tailor for women and children, and thank God now I receive a good income that has helped me and my family to a great extent.”

— Guzara district, Herat, Afghanistan

SECTION 3: SUSTAINABILITY

SHIFT SOCIAL NORMS TO ENABLE WEE

Shifting traditional attitudes, behaviours and norms at the household and community level is a central aspect of WEE programming, that helps to ensure that women are safe and supported when they pursue income-generating activities. Failing to take this holistic approach risks disempowering women, preventing their economic progress, and increasing their vulnerability to gender-based violence, discrimination, and economic abuse. Promoting alternative norms, most importantly women's freedom of mobility, redistributed care duties, shared household decision-making, and joint control over income, creates an environment in which women can exercise their rights and thrive. In **BANGLADESH**, CS partners conducted three trainings with 60 couples to discuss strategies to redistribute care work to encourage women's economic empowerment and ultimately reduce VAWG.

Gaining the support of key influencers who will champion women's rights is pivotal to supporting WEE in the long term. For example, in the AC project in **AFGHANISTAN**, men, boys, community and religious leaders attended multi-day trainings on women's and girls' legal and economic rights according to Afghan, Islamic, and international laws. They took place both prior to and during the vocational training programs offered to women. Women who completed the vocational trainings credited these awareness-raising efforts for de-stigmatizing and enabling women's economic participation. Even still, some men experienced scrutiny from other community members when supporting women, a form of backlash that is commonly seen as social norms begin to shift and there is disharmony in normative practices within a community. To counter these incidences, project interventions with men and boys should be ongoing, and engage diverse actors within the community including employers and market actors, especially as women start their businesses and enter workplaces.

CONNECT SURVIVORS TO SUPPORT SERVICES

Economic empowerment programs that integrate and/or provide referrals to other survivor-centered [support services](#)⁶ (e.g. legal, health, shelter) are far more beneficial for women and girls experiencing violence and considering their options. These wrap-around services along with increased economic agency can provide survivors with the necessary tools, resources, professional aid, and security they require to end abusive relationships. In **AFGHANISTAN**, project partners established Consultation Centers in underserved communities to connect survivors to individual and family counselling with trained practitioners, and to provide referrals to other services. The Centres also offered vocational training programs in house, which created an environment for women to build their skills while also receiving psychosocial supports. The AC partners worked tirelessly to gain community acceptance and support for the Consultations Centers through direct engagements with religious leaders, elders, and households.

FORM WOMEN-LED COLLECTIVES TO SUPPORT WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SUCCESS

In many instances, women who participated in vocational trainings formed collective enterprises in order to support one another, group their resources, and increase their potential to scale up their income generating activities. Women felt more empowered and motivated when working in collaboration with other women from their community with complementary skill sets and levels of technical and market experience. In most cases, CS partners formed women's groups in advance of offering WEE opportunities, to foster peer-to-peer support against VAWG. Through these spaces, women developed trusting relationships with one another, and were subsequently motivated to start businesses together. For example, in Odisha, **INDIA**, 35 women collective members worked together to start seven mushroom cultivation units across five villages. With a secured market linkage now in place, the women aim to expand their enterprise and supply 500 kg of mushrooms daily.

6 See Learning Brief #4 on Survivor-Centered Response Services at <https://42kgab3z3i7s3rm1xf48rq44-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Creating-Spaces-Learning-Brief-Survivor-Centred-Response.pdf>.

“Mushroom cultivation has not only empowered me and other women, it has helped us to survive the COVID impact of loss of livelihood.”

— Basanti Patra, CS collective member, Dullen village, Odisha



Mushroom cultivation by women's collectives in India. Credit: Oxfam India

MAKE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INCLUSION A GOVERNMENT PRIORITY

Advocacy efforts are needed to address legislative, policy, and regulatory gaps that put women at risk of harm in the work place, prevent their economic participation, and perpetuate VAWG. In some contexts, gender-responsive instruments may already exist but are inadequately implemented or enforced, in which case civil society groups play an instrumental role in advocating for accountability mechanisms that will protect women. In CS and AC, Oxfam and partners used their influencing power to advocate for women's economic rights and challenge financial and granting schemes that were gender-biased. After repeated engagement with duty bearers, several CS partners secured greater commitments to foster WEE across multiple districts. By linking women to government-supported livelihoods development initiatives, they accessed vocational trainings, supplies and equipment for their businesses, microfinance opportunities, and in some cases seed capital. These are promising outcomes that will contribute to the sustainability of CS women's enterprises and their pathway to economic autonomy.

In **INDIA**, CS partners held several district-level meetings with village leaders in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand regarding women's economic rights, care work burden, lack of access to family resources, and livelihood opportunities. These

meetings led to distinct outcomes in each state. In Odisha, the influencers agreed to secure space in village market complexes where women collectives can sell their products. In Jharkhand, leaders agreed to spend untied funds on promoting women's livelihoods. In Chhattisgarh, CS partners' advocacy resulted in district funding schemes providing 47 women with resource input for vegetable cultivation and an additional 62 women with seed money to help set up their enterprises.

In the **PHILIPPINES**, advocacy to amplify government support on WEE activities led to two key positive outcomes: the Ministry of Social Services and Development supported women and girls' participation in its sustainable livelihoods programs, and the Technical Education and Skills Development Agency provided skills development trainings to 92 women and girls.

“This is the program's greatest achievement: that the municipality recognized the work we're doing to advocate and lift up the lives of rural women... as an example they will try to follow.”

— Mina Thapa, CS Project Coordinator in Dailekh, Nepal



SUCCESS STORIES:

Women Involved in Community Discussion Centers in Nepal

Women involved in Community Discussion Centers (CDCs)⁷ in **NEPAL** participated in the Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) program where they accessed vocational training, strengthened financial management skills, learned how to research and access markets, and how to identify business opportunities. CS partners directly engaged government agencies on income-earning opportunities, successfully proposing collaborations to advance women’s economic participation. As a result, women’s businesses benefitted from seed funding towards animal husbandry and agriculture-based enterprises, while others received equipment to start tailoring enterprises. They also received support to legally register their enterprises. After completing SIYB training, participants shared their newly acquired skills with other members of their local CDCs.

Aside from the positive economic outcomes for SIYB participants, women reported increased confidence and enhanced leadership skills that they utilize in every facet of their lives. They felt empowered to negotiate more equitable household decision-making and credited the initiative with contributing to lowered incidences of VAWG, including CEFM, within their communities.



Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) training, at women-led Community Discussion Centres in Nepal. Credit: Oxfam Nepal

7 Community Discussion Centers (CDCs) are a women-led social mobilization initiative closely affiliated with Creating Spaces in Nepal. CDCs focus on empowering women to know their rights, EAWG, advance social inclusion, and developing life skills to advance gender equality.

For more information on the Creating Spaces project and other learning briefs, visit: <https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/creating-spaces-impact/>

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