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## *Features*

### **Partnering With Women at the Grassroots Level**

By Marissa Wesely & Dina Dublon

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# Partnering With Women at the Grassroots Level

INITIATIVES TO DEVELOP THE ECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF WOMEN ARE BECOMING A STAPLE OF CORPORATE ACTIVITY. BUT COMPANIES OFTEN OVERLOOK AN IMPORTANT SET OF WOULD-BE PARTNERS—LOCALLY ROOTED ORGANIZATIONS THAT PROMOTE A MULTI-FACETED APPROACH TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT.

✿ BY MARISSA WESELY & DINA DUBLON

**I**n 2006, the *Economist* proclaimed that women are “the world’s most underutilised resource.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, a growing body of research has reinforced the idea that the economic empowerment of women can significantly boost productivity, reduce employee turnover, and promote the sustainable development of consumer markets.

A Booz & Company study published in 2012 estimated that raising female employment to male levels could increase GDP by 34 percent in Egypt, 12 percent in the United Arab Emirates, 10 percent in South Africa, and 9 percent in Japan.<sup>2</sup> The UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization has projected that giving women the same access as men to resources such as fertilizer and farm equipment could increase their productivity by 20 percent to 30 percent and, in turn, boost agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 percent to 4 percent.<sup>3</sup> Findings of this kind have spurred an increasing number of global corporations to create programs designed to empower women economically. Through such programs, corporate leaders aim to improve the quality of their supply chains, enhance their access to talent, and increase the productivity of their workforce.

Economic empowerment is a crucial aspect of any effort to make women equal participants in their communities. Strengthening the economic role of women is also critical to reducing poverty, improving health and education outcomes, and achieving other broad development goals.<sup>4</sup> And the programs created by corporations to support this kind of empowerment—ones that provide women with skills, mentoring, access to networks and markets, and financial resources—have had a meaningful impact around the world.

Yet there is a growing recognition among development experts of the need to link economic empowerment to programs

that address women’s empowerment in a more fundamental way.<sup>5</sup> “Overcoming gender inequality will not result from specific isolated programs, but from a comprehensive approach that involves multiple sectors and stakeholders,” write the authors of “Gender at Work,” a report issued in 2014 by the World Bank.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, a recent report commissioned by the Oak Foundation recommends an “integrated approach” to confronting “the underlying human rights issues that prevent women from realizing their full potential as economic agents.” Such an approach, according to the report, requires the development of eight “building blocks”—sources of empowerment that include not only “access to equitable and safe employment,” but also “voice in society and policy influence,” “access to and control over reproductive health and family formation,” and “social protection and childcare.”<sup>7</sup>

These insights should prompt corporate leaders to consider a vitally important question: How can they most effectively deploy the millions of dollars that they are spending to broaden opportunities for women? If their goal is to enable sustainable and transformative change in women’s lives, they cannot focus exclusively on economic empowerment. Instead, they must adopt approaches that take into account the

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social, cultural, legal, and political barriers to full gender equality—approaches that have the potential to shift gender norms in ways that extend beyond the world of work and business. One way that they can do so, we believe, is to work with a group of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that corporations often overlook: grassroots women's organizations (GWOs).

The term “grassroots women's organizations” encompasses locally based and (in most cases) women-led NGOs that have a mission to empower women and advance women's rights on multiple fronts. In our use of the term, GWOs are distinct from international NGOs (INGOs)—most of them based in the Global North—that work in fields such as economic development and human rights. Some INGOs have local offices in developing countries and play a critical role in addressing issues of women's empowerment, but they often lack the deep local knowledge and the experience with a wide array of gender issues that characterize GWOs.

Most GWOs operate in a single country or in a single region of a country, and their work typically involves one or more of the following activities: education about legal rights and political participation; skills training for economic empowerment; education about, and access to, reproductive and maternal health care; access to collective savings and credit programs; and advocacy with regard to issues such as sexual violence and property rights.

Recognizing the interconnectedness of issues related to gender equality, some corporations are now partnering with GWOs to extend the scope and enhance the impact of their economic empowerment programs. Although GWOs can vary dramatically in size, those that are suitable partners for corporations tend to be relatively large and relatively well established. By looking at a sample of successful corporate-GWO collaborations and by considering lessons that have emerged from those collaborations, we intend in this article to chart a path that corporate leaders and their NGO counterparts can follow to develop mutually beneficial partnerships.

#### GENDER EQUALITY AND SHARED VALUE

**T**oday, much of the corporate funding for women's empowerment work comes from corporate foundations. As a result, that work tends to reflect a donor-recipient relationship that limits its effectiveness. By contrast, through partnerships with GWOs, companies can move their women's empowerment programs beyond corporate philanthropy and embed those programs in their core business. They can initiate a strategy of “shared value,” in other words—a strategy of “creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges,” as Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer explain in the 2011 *Harvard Business Review* article that introduced that concept.<sup>8</sup> In a shared value partnership, each party brings different skills and resources to bear on developing programs that are more powerful than any program that either partner could develop alone.

To date, corporations have tended to pursue shared value strategies in the context of environmental sustainability. But some

companies, such as Unilever, have begun to see the empowerment of women as an equally important element of a sustainable business model. When Unilever launched its Sustainable Living Plan in 2010, the initial focus of the initiative was on reducing the environmental impact of its operations. But starting in 2014, the company added several targets related to increasing opportunities for women to the plan. That shift built partly on the model of Project Shakti, an initiative of Hindustan Unilever that engages women in the company's sales force in rural India.<sup>9</sup>

Company leaders, meanwhile, are learning that GWOs offer many advantages as partners in shared value initiatives.

**Trusted community members** | GWOs have developed broad and deep networks in the communities where they operate and a high degree of trust among members of those communities.

**Strategic, culturally grounded players** | GWOs understand the cultural, social, political, and religious obstacles to creating change, and in many cases they have been working for years on strategies to lower those barriers.

**Experienced navigators** | GWOs have extensive experience in steering their way through local and national politics and in securing the support of those who wield power.

**Ancillary program providers** | GWOs have a deep appreciation of the multi-faceted issues that can affect the ability of women and girls to become full participants in society, and they often offer programs that address those issues—programs that cover skills development, violence prevention, education about legal rights, and access to maternal and reproductive health care, among other topics.

**Cost-efficient partners** | GWOs are highly efficient service providers, especially in comparison with most American and European INGOs. They operate within the cost structure of their home country, and they often effectively use local volunteers to supplement the work of paid staff members.

#### MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES AND LOCAL PARTNERS

**B**y partnering with GWOs in programs designed to create shared value, corporations increase the likelihood that their programs will be not only financially and operationally sustainable, but also transformative for women. Through their work with GWO partners, corporate leaders are learning the value of *listening* to women in the communities where they operate. Inspired by what they hear, many corporations are expanding their women's empowerment programs in ways that go beyond an exclusive focus on economic issues. As the following examples illustrate, such corporate-GWO partnerships can take a wide range of forms.

**Nestlé in the Ivory Coast** | The Nestlé Cocoa Plan, launched in 2009, is part of an effort by Nestlé to create shared value in its cocoa supply chain. The goal is to improve the lives of cocoa farmers while also improving the quality of Nestlé's products. In 2010, the company began working with COPAZ, a women-run cocoa cooperative in the Ivory Coast that has about 600 members.



Agathe Vanier, the head of COPAZ, had led a campaign to demonstrate that the inclusion of women in cocoa farming could have a positive impact on their families and on the country as a whole. COPAZ impressed Nestlé executives, who undertook a partnership that involves providing the cooperative with high-yield, disease-tolerant cocoa seedlings and a truck to facilitate cocoa deliveries, along with technical assistance and financial advice.<sup>10</sup>

In early 2014, Nestlé announced that it would expand its investment in women's empowerment in the Ivory Coast. That move came in response to a survey by the Fair Labor Association of Ivory

STAR program reached more than 15,000 Filipino women in its first three years of implementation.<sup>13</sup>

**Avon Products in Brazil** | Avon Products and its foundation have long been active in addressing two issues of particular interest to the women who make up most of its customer base and most of its sales force: women's health and domestic violence. A partnership between Avon and Fundo ELAS, a Brazilian women's fund, is an example of confronting the second of those issues. In the partnership, ELAS runs a competitive process for selecting projects designed by GWOs, and Avon then finances those projects. To

date, the partners have awarded grants to 31 GWOs. One project aims to create income-generating opportunities for women by professionalizing activities (raising poultry, for example) that they already perform. As a supplement to this economic empowerment work, the project

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Coast women who work in Nestlé's cocoa supply chain. As part of this new effort, the company intends to pursue an impressive range of activities. These activities include training on gender issues at all cooperatives that take part in the Nestlé Cocoa Plan, promoting local women's associations that are affiliated with the Nestlé supply chain, registering the wives of male cocoa farmers as members of cocoa cooperatives, and helping women to produce more food crops both for their families and for sale.<sup>11</sup>

**Coca-Cola in the Philippines** | In 2010, Coca-Cola launched 5by20, an effort to support the economic empowerment of 5 million women entrepreneurs who are part of the company's global value chain. The Sari-Sari Store Training and Access to Resources program (STAR) in the Philippines, implemented as part of this initiative, is a multiyear partnership between Coca-Cola Philippines; Coca-Cola FEMSA, its local bottling partner; and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), a Philippine government agency. Also involved in the program are women's NGOs, microfinance institutions, and local government entities—more than 20 partners in all.

Filipino women have a strong presence in the small-scale retail outlets, known as sari-sari stores, that make up one of Coca-Cola's main sales channels in that country. In recognition of that presence, the STAR program offers three years of support to women who operate such outlets. Local NGO partners provide much of that support, and it has three basic components: training in both business skills and life skills, access to resources such as microfinance and merchandising, and peer mentoring to help the women develop skills and build confidence. Those NGO partners include GWOs such as the Negros Women for Tomorrow Foundation, a women-led organization that delivers microfinance and insurance products, along with health and education services, to its predominantly female clients.<sup>12</sup> According to Coca-Cola, the

also includes workshops on how to reduce gender violence.

Through ELAS, Avon is also helping to fund capacity building at grantee organizations. Last year, for example, ELAS organized a National Dialogue on Domestic Violence, a three-day meeting of representatives from each of the 31 GWO grantees that Avon has funded. The meeting focused on communication training and institutional development, and it featured conversations with journalists, experts on violence prevention, and leaders from donor organizations. At the end of the meeting, the grantees jointly developed a strategy to use during 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, a global campaign that took place in late 2014.<sup>14</sup>

## FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNER

**H**ow can a corporation develop effective partnerships with GWOs? Company leaders who seek to create programs that will empower women in an integrated way face three essential tasks: locating organizations with which to collaborate, building a framework for collaboration, and assessing the results of that effort.

The first challenge for a corporation is to identify one or more GWOs with which it can partner. In many instances, the key to success involves finding the right intermediary to help identify those GWO partners. The right intermediary will be one that has strong connections to GWOs that have credibility with women in the communities that a corporation wishes to reach. Although INGOs can sometimes serve as connectors to GWOs, there are limits to how effective they can be in that role. Women's funds make up one important group of potential intermediaries. The long-standing collaboration between Johnson & Johnson and the Global Fund for Women (GFW), a US-based nonprofit that has funded GWOs for more than 25 years, offers a notable example of such a relationship. For the past seven years, this partnership has focused on helping

mothers to survive childbirth and to have healthy newborns. “We choose to work with GFW because of its ability to connect to hard-to-reach women through their network of GWOs and community-based programs,” says Chunmei Li, senior manager for worldwide corporate contributions at Johnson & Johnson. In the past four years this collaboration has enabled J&J to support 12 GWOs that in turn have trained nearly 4,000 traditional birth attendants in eight countries with high maternal mortality rates. Through that effort, J&J and its GWO partners have directly reached more than 35,000 women.<sup>15</sup>

Organizations such as GFW are able both to identify local women’s groups and to vouch for them. They typically conduct extensive due diligence on their grantees, and they often have many years of experience in working with certain GWOs. For that reason, they are in an ideal position to assess the capacity of those GWOs to engage in work with a corporate partner. Other women’s funds that support GWOs include Mama Cash, based in the Netherlands, and regional women’s funds such as the African Women’s Development Fund, Semillas (based in Mexico), and the South Asia Women’s Fund. The latter groups, like Fundo ELAS, function both as GWOs in their own right and as connectors to GWOs in their country or region.

Sometimes, multilateral agencies can play an intermediary role, as UN Women did in connecting Avon and Fundo ELAS. In other cases, a government partner may prove to be a valuable connector to GWOs. In Coca-Cola’s 5by20 program, for example, the Philippine government agency TESDA has helped link Coca-Cola with local women’s NGOs and microfinance organizations. TESDA also jointly manages the program with Coca-Cola Philippines and contributes training services, meeting facilities, and staff time to the effort.

#### BUILDING THE RIGHT STRUCTURE

**T**he framework of an effective corporate-GWO partnership has much in common with the structure of a successful collective impact initiative. In their *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article on such initiatives, John Kania and Mark Kramer posit five conditions for achieving collective impact: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations.<sup>16</sup> The collaboration model that we propose generally does not require a backbone organization, but the first four conditions are critical to the success of a corporate-GWO partnership.

Developing a common agenda is especially important—and by no means easy. The partners must develop a nuanced understanding of program goals, and they must establish an approach to communication and implementation that draws fully on each partner’s skills and talents. According to Kania and Kramer, a collective impact

structure works “by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.”<sup>17</sup> To reach that point, partners need to develop mutual trust and respect, and that process may take a considerable amount of time to unfold.

Kania and Kramer note that the lack of a common vocabulary can hinder the development of a common agenda—a problem that may be particularly salient in a corporate-GWO collaboration. A “women’s rights” vocabulary, and the associated emphasis on changing gender norms, may be unfamiliar to corporate leaders who see building women’s income-generating capacity as an end in itself. Ongoing collaboration with intermediaries such as GFW,

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Fundo ELAS, and other women’s funds can help to bridge that gap. External assessments may also help corporations and their GWO partners to frame issues and strategies at an early stage in a way that resonates with both parties. In undertaking the Nestlé Cocoa Plan, for instance, Nestlé asked the Fair Labor Association to assess women’s role in its cocoa supply chain.

How corporations compensate their GWO partners for services is another matter on which both parties must agree in advance. In Coca-Cola’s STAR program, for example, the company’s Filipino NGO partners received training, mentoring, and access to microfinance services, but did not receive a fee for their work in facilitating the program. With other programs in the 5by20 Initiative, however, Coca-Cola used a fee-for-service model. In a recycling program in Brazil, for instance, the company paid its local NGO partner to provide coaching and monitoring services for the recycling collectives that joined the program.<sup>18</sup> As a rule, partnerships with GWOs appear to work best when they involve a fee-for-service arrangement that can provide GWOs both with an income stream and with clear incentives to implement and enhance a program.

#### EVALUATING THE RESULTS

**A**lso critical to the success of a corporate-GWO partnership is upfront agreement on how, and over what time frame, the parties will measure the impact of their efforts. In most cases, the best evaluation method will be one that measures not only the number of women affected by the program, but also changes in attitudes and behavior, as well as how those changes affect women’s personal and professional lives.

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is one group that works to evaluate the impact of programs to



empower women. Consider, for example, ICRW's evaluation of PACE (Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement), a program launched by Gap in 2007. Partners in the PACE effort include the Swasti Health Resource Center—an Indian NGO that provides program content, implementation design, training, and quality assurance—and CARE, which serves as an implementing partner. The program began in India, and it now reaches more than 20,000 female garment workers in seven countries.

PACE is a workplace education program that teaches managerial, organizational, and interpersonal skills to women garment workers. Through PACE, participating workers acquire communication, time management, and decision-making skills, as well as knowledge about topics such as legal rights, financial security, and reproductive health. By including content related both to women's work and to their personal lives, the program addresses the issues that women face in an integrated way. From 2009 to 2013, ICRW conducted evaluations of the program at six Gap-affiliated factory sites in five countries. Its research went beyond simply counting the number of women who participated in PACE, and it focused on answering two questions: How is the program changing women's personal lives? And how is it affecting their ability to contribute to the businesses that are part of Gap's supply chain? The evaluation found that workers' self-esteem and their sense of being able to meet personal goals had both increased significantly since the start of the program. ICRW attributed the success of PACE to three factors: the program is holistic; it is designed to foster collaboration across sectors; and (largely as a result of the first two factors) it is sustainable.<sup>19</sup>

In gauging the results of a corporate-GWO partnership, the structure and sequencing of evaluation can matter a great deal. What is the right baseline to use in measuring what a program has achieved? Which short-term metrics will serve best as indicators of longer-term changes in gender norms and behavior? And no less important, when should evaluators begin their work? There is much truth in the corporate maxim "If you can't measure, you can't manage," but sometimes a carefully staged approach to evaluation is in order.

#### COLLABORATE LOCALLY, EMPOWER GLOBALLY

**A**s companies like Nestle, Coca-Cola, and the Gap are discovering, working with GWOs can be a powerful way to align corporate economic empowerment programs with efforts to advance women's rights at a grassroots level. By working with these organizations, corporations can enhance their ability to work in a holistic way on the challenges that prevent women from realizing their full potential. In taking this approach, moreover, a company can magnify the impact of its women's empowerment programs not only on the lives of women but also on the long-term well-being of their families and their communities.

Moving to a more holistic approach to empowering women globally may not be easy for many corporations. The social and cultural issues that affect women's ability to benefit from economic

empowerment programs may seem to lie outside their core business expertise. In addition, those issues may appear to be too political for a large multinational company to confront. But by listening to the women they seek to empower, many corporate leaders have come to appreciate the relevance of those issues to the goal of economic empowerment—and therefore to the goals of their business.

Programs designed to empower women have enormous potential to help companies increase their access to talent, enhance their productivity, and improve their supply chains. By embedding such programs in local communities through partnerships with GWOs and by approaching women's empowerment in a multi-faceted, integrated way, a company can make an investment in women that has the potential not just to affect individual lives but to have a transformative, long-lasting effect on gender norms. ■

This article is based on "Empowering Women at the Grassroots," an article that first appeared in the spring 2015 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

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