Building Inclusive Clean Cooking Markets

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in the 'Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Clean Cooking' Programme

SEE - Clean Cooking

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The publication is part of a series on gender and social inclusion in clean cooking developed by ENERGIA for the *Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Clean Cooking* (SEE Clean Cooking) programme. The programme promotes affordable, sustainable and modern cooking solutions through a holistic, private-sector market development approach in eight countries across Africa and Asia. The programme focuses on clean cooking solutions such as biodigesters and higher-tier cookstoves.

The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) coordinates the programme, co-financed by the European Commission, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Danish International Development Agency. ENERGIA supports the integration of gender and social inclusion across all programme activities.

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Executive Summary

Women and other socially excluded groups are essential actors in clean cooking markets - as consumers, entrepreneurs, employees, sales agents, technicians, innovators, and decision-makers. Yet social norms, unequal access to skills and finance, mobility constraints, limited representation in decision-making, and institutional barriers continue to restrict their participation. These barriers are not only matters of equity; they also limit market growth, innovation, and the sustainability of the clean cooking transition.

The *Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Clean Cooking* (SEE Clean Cooking) programme therefore sought to systematically integrate gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) across its market development interventions in eight countries across Africa and Asia. Rather than treating GESI as a standalone activity, the programme embedded it within programme governance, design, implementation, monitoring, and learning. The ENERGIA International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy provided technical support through capacity strengthening, technical assistance, mentoring, quality assurance, and support to implementing partners to conduct GESI analyses and develop Gender Action Plans (GAPs).

The experience generated a practical and transferable framework for mainstreaming GESI within market systems programmes. The approach began by establishing institutional ownership and accountability, building organisational capacity, and generating context-specific evidence on the barriers and opportunities affecting different groups. These findings were translated into GAPs and used to redesign core market interventions. Rather than creating parallel mechanisms for women, the programme adapted key interventions to make them more inclusive.

Four areas of market intervention were particularly important:

- **Business development services:** enterprise diagnostics, eligibility criteria, coaching and delivery mechanisms were adapted to reflect the different realities of women-led and smaller enterprises. Mentoring and role models also created pathways for women to enter and progress within traditionally male-dominated areas.
- **Finance:** Results-Based Financing and Innovation Challenge Funds were redesigned through simplified procedures, more flexible eligibility requirements, targeted outreach, and application support. Consumer financing mechanisms were also adapted to improve affordability and access.
- **Consumer outreach:** Market actors diversified communication channels, using community demonstrations, women sales agents, peer networks, savings groups, local organisations, and digital communication to reach consumers who might otherwise be underserved.
- **Enabling environment:** Programme partners worked with governments, sector associations, financial institutions, and other market actors to strengthen institutional capacity, integrate GESI into policies and coordination mechanisms, and increase women's participation in sector governance.

Emerging results suggest that these changes contributed to more inclusive organisations, enterprises, financing mechanisms, and markets. Enterprises introduced more inclusive recruitment and workplace practices and increasingly recognised women as valuable employees, customers, and business leaders. Women expanded their participation in sales, retail, manufacturing, technical and supervisory roles. At the institutional level, GESI became increasingly integrated into sector policies, coordination mechanisms, and organisational practices.

At the same time, the programme demonstrated that GESI mainstreaming is an adaptive organisational and market transformation process, not a one-off intervention. Deeply rooted gender norms, unequal access to productive resources, and women's underrepresentation in technical and leadership positions cannot be overcome within a single programme cycle. Sustained leadership, adequate resources, continuous learning, context-specific implementation, and partnerships with organisations that have trusted relationships with excluded groups are essential.

The central lesson is therefore that GESI is not a trade-off with market development. It is a means of improving how markets function - by expanding participation, removing barriers to entrepreneurship and innovation, strengthening enterprise performance, and enabling a wider range of actors to contribute to market growth. The framework and lessons presented in this publication are intended to support practitioners seeking to institutionalise GESI not only in clean cooking, but in market systems development more broadly.

1. Introduction

Building inclusive market systems is essential to accelerating access to higher-tier cooking solutions. While women and marginalised groups bear a disproportionate share of the health, economic, and time burdens associated with traditional cooking methods, they are also among the most influential drivers of clean cooking adoption and sustained use. Evidence shows that when women have greater decision-making power and participate in clean cooking value chains with access to training, finance, and market opportunities, adoption and sustained use of clean cooking technologies increase significantly. Embedding gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) into clean cooking market development programmes from the outset therefore strengthens both impact and long-term sustainability.

The SEE Clean Cooking programme aimed to systematically integrate GESI considerations across all programme interventions.

The *Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Clean Cooking (SEE Clean Cooking)* programme supports the development of sustainable markets for biodigesters and higher-tier clean cooking solutions across Africa and Asia. Recognising that gender inequalities and social exclusion constrain both market development and equitable outcomes, the programme systematically integrated GESI across its core interventions: i) business development services (BDS) for clean cooking enterprises, ii) improving access to finance, and iii) strengthening the enabling policy and institutional environment.

Rather than treating gender and social inclusion as a standalone activity, GESI considerations were embedded throughout programme design, implementation, monitoring, and learning. The ENERGIA International Network on Gender and Sustainability provided technical support through capacity building, technical assistance, and quality assurance, supporting implementing partners to conduct gender analyses, develop Gender Action Plans (GAPs), strengthen sex-disaggregated monitoring systems, and integrate GESI into business development, financing mechanisms, and policy engagement to reduce GESI gaps and expand women's participation and benefits in clean cooking markets.

This publication distils the programme's experience of mainstreaming GESI within a complex, multi-country clean cooking market development programme. It documents the approaches adopted, the institutional arrangements established, the interventions implemented, and the emerging results achieved across the programme countries. Most importantly, it highlights the practical lessons generated through implementation, demonstrating how GESI-responsive market development can strengthen both social inclusion and market performance.

The publication offers a practical framework for integrating GESI across the core interventions of a market systems development programme. The framework is illustrated through implementation experiences across eight countries and is intended to support practitioners seeking to institutionalise GESI within clean cooking and broader market systems development programmes.

2. Building Inclusive Clean Cooking Markets

Clean cooking remains one of the most urgent energy access challenges, yet it continues to receive insufficient attention and investment. Around 2.1 billion people, nearly a quarter of the global population, still rely on open fires or basic stoves to cook, exposing them to harmful smoke. This contributes to an estimated 3.7 million premature deaths annually, disproportionately affecting women and children. With current trends, by 2030, 896 million women could still lack access to clean cooking solutions, including 523 million in sub-Saharan Africa.

At the same time, women are essential actors in clean cooking markets, and their participation directly contributes to market growth, innovation, and long-term sustainability. Clean cooking markets in the global South are unlikely to scale without women's participation across value chains.

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2.1 Women as drivers of clean cooking markets

Women are important market actors who shape demand, strengthen value chains, improve enterprise performance, and influence the long-term sustainability of clean cooking markets:

Women drive demand and technology adoption

As primary users of household cooking technologies, women possess detailed knowledge of cooking practices, fuel preferences, household needs, and the practical constraints associated with different technologies. This knowledge makes them influential decision-makers in the adoption and sustained use of clean cooking solutions. Research consistently shows that households are more likely to adopt cleaner cooking technologies when women participate in household decision-making. Additionally, technologies are more likely to meet consumer needs when women contribute to product design and market feedback. Their involvement helps ensure that products respond to practical considerations such as cooking speed, fuel availability, ease of use, safety, maintenance requirements, and compatibility with local cooking practices.

Women strengthen clean cooking value chains

Women's participation extends well beyond household use. As entrepreneurs, retailers, sales agents, technicians, and distributors, women help expand market reach and strengthen customer relationships, especially when supported by training that builds business skills and personal agency. Their close understanding of household cooking practices enables them to communicate product benefits in ways that resonate with potential customers, build trust, and address concerns regarding affordability, safety, and performance. Evidence from multiple countries demonstrates that women entrepreneurs are particularly effective in reaching other women consumers, especially in rural communities where trust and peer influence strongly shape purchasing decisions.

Women improve enterprise performance

Inclusive enterprises tend to perform better. Greater gender and social diversity within clean cooking businesses contributes to improved customer engagement, product innovation, workforce retention, and productivity. Gender diversity and social inclusion in leadership and non-traditional roles in companies can also improve access to capital. Increasingly, investors and development finance institutions also consider gender performance when making investment decisions, creating additional incentives for enterprises to strengthen gender equality within their operations. Supporting women's participation throughout clean cooking value chains therefore contributes to social inclusion and to stronger, more competitive businesses.

Embedding gender equality and social inclusion within market development programmes is not only a matter of equity, but also a prerequisite for building more effective, resilient, and sustainable clean cooking markets.

2.2 Barriers to women's participation in clean cooking markets

Despite their important contributions, women remain underrepresented throughout clean cooking value chains. Across the SEE Clean Cooking programme countries, women and other socially excluded groups such as youth, people with disabilities, and people in remote areas face a combination of structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers that limit their participation in clean cooking markets as entrepreneurs, employees, and consumers. These constraints are common across contexts, though their severity and specific forms vary by setting:

Social norms and mobility constraints

In many contexts, women continue to carry the primary responsibility for unpaid household and care work, leaving less time for business activities, networking, and professional development. Restrictions on women's mobility, particularly in parts of the Sahel and Bangladesh, further limit their ability to travel, attend training, visit suppliers, or supervise technical work. Traditional perceptions that technical occupations are "men's work" also discourage women from entering higher-value positions within clean cooking value chains, including manufacturing, installation, and repair services. These social norms also influence women's confidence, agency, and willingness to take entrepreneurial risks. Many women have fewer opportunities to develop professional networks, negotiate with financial institutions, or assume leadership positions within businesses and sector organisations.

Limited access to skills development and market information

Women entrepreneurs often have less access to business development services, technical training, mentoring, and market information than their male counterparts. Where such services are available, they are frequently designed without considering the practical constraints women face, including limited mobility, household responsibilities, lower levels of business formalisation, and differing educational backgrounds. Women-led enterprises – as well as youth-led enterprises, and enterprises in rural areas and those owned or led by socially excluded groups – are therefore less likely to benefit from the support needed to improve business management, adopt new technologies, strengthen marketing strategies, or prepare for investment.

Limited access to finance

Women entrepreneurs frequently lack ownership of assets that can be used as collateral, lack credit histories, and face more restrictive lending conditions than men. Although microfinance is widely available across many programme countries, loan sizes are usually insufficient for business expansion and interest rates can be prohibitively high. Even where formal financial services are accessible, women often continue to rely on informal savings mechanisms and community-based financing arrangements because these are more compatible with their financial circumstances.

Underrepresentation in decision-making

Women are less likely to hold senior management positions within enterprises, serve on the boards of sector associations, participate in industry platforms, or be represented in policy dialogue and technical working groups. As a result, women's perspectives and priorities are insufficiently reflected in business decisions, sector coordination, technology development, and policy processes. Limited representation also reduces women's visibility as leaders and role models, reinforcing perceptions that technical and leadership positions are primarily the domain of men.

Weak enabling environment for GESI

Institutional arrangements and policy environments can unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities. Sector policies, financing mechanisms, and industry platforms often fail to consider the different circumstances of women entrepreneurs and other socially excluded groups. As a result, opportunities to participate in clean cooking markets are not equally accessible.

These barriers represent both social inequalities and market inefficiencies. When women face obstacles to entering or expanding businesses, markets lose potential entrepreneurs, skilled workers, innovators, and customers. Excluding women, and other disadvantaged groups, therefore constrains market growth and limits the scale and sustainability of clean cooking transitions.

The breadth and interconnected nature of these barriers demonstrate why isolated gender activities rarely achieve lasting change. Addressing one constraint such as access to finance while ignoring others – including access to skills development, social norms, market information, or institutional practices – is unlikely to transform participation at scale. Consequently, the SEE Clean Cooking programme integrated GESI across all market systems development interventions, addressing barriers systematically rather than in isolation. The programme sought to address constraints at multiple levels – from individual capabilities and enterprise practices to financing mechanisms, institutional capacity, and the wider enabling environment.

3. Building a programme-wide GESI system

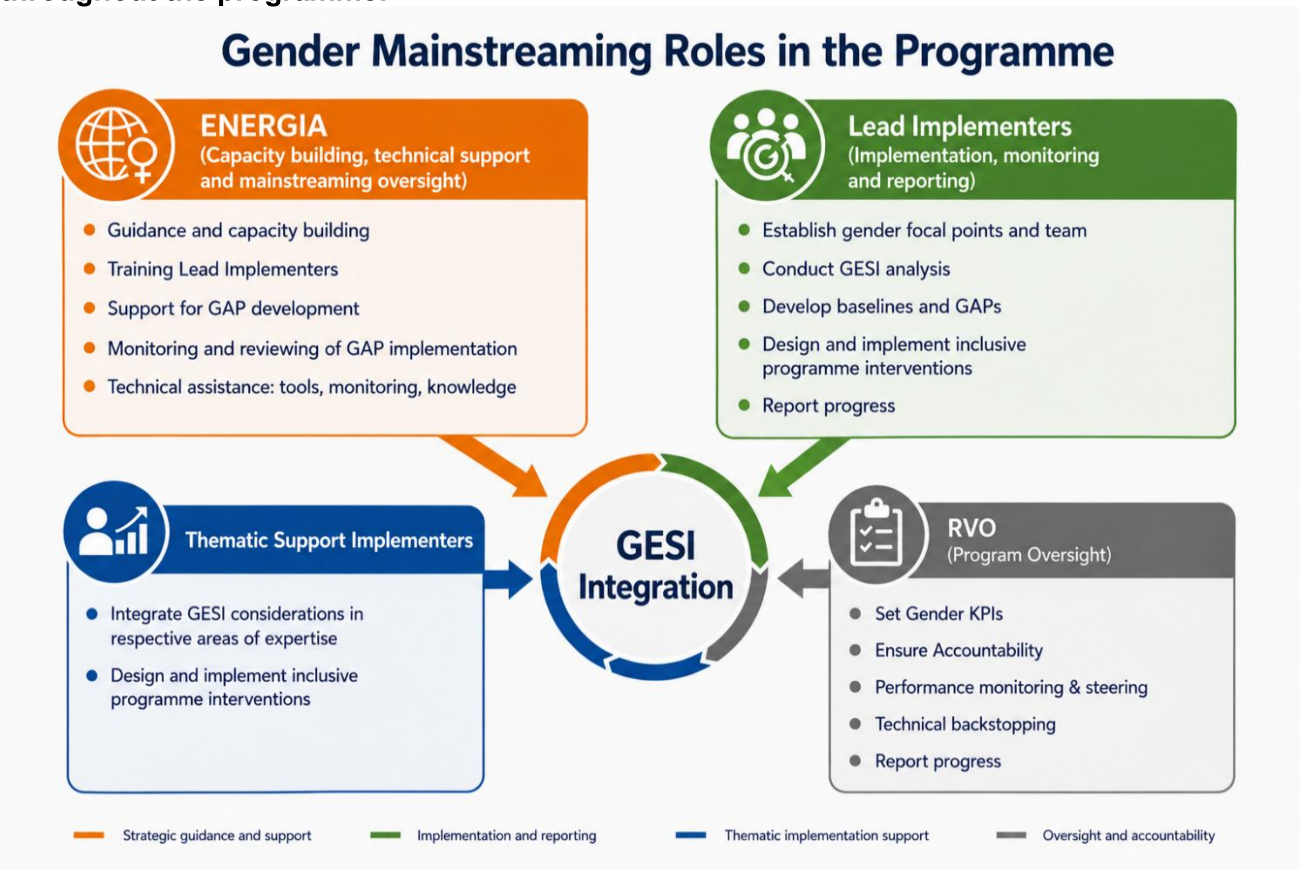
The interconnected nature of barriers to women's participation in clean cooking markets is why the SEE Clean Cooking programme systematically embedded context-specific GESI strategies across all components – from design through delivery mechanisms to partnerships.

GESI mainstreaming is not about adding gender activities – it is about changing the way organisations design, implement, and continuously improve market development programmes.

Embedding gender equality and social inclusion within a market development programme requires more than introducing gender-responsive activities. It demands organisational change. GESI must become part of how programme teams analyse markets, make decisions, allocate resources, implement interventions, monitor progress, and learn from experience. Without these institutional foundations, gender considerations risk remaining isolated activities rather than becoming an integral part of programme delivery.

Rather than positioning GESI as the responsibility of individual gender specialists, the programme sought to build institutional ownership, strengthen organisational capacity, establish accountability mechanisms, and generate the evidence needed to inform programme design. Together, these elements created the conditions for integrating GESI across the programme's key interventions: business development support, access to finance, and the enabling environment. Building this capacity became the core focus of ENERGIA's contribution to the programme.

Figure 1 illustrates the institutional architecture that supported GESI mainstreaming throughout the programme:



3.1 Creating institutional ownership and accountability

Institutional ownership was established through governance structures, dedicated responsibilities, reporting requirements, and technical support.

A critical first step was ensuring that responsibility for GESI was shared across the programme rather than resting solely with gender specialists. Institutional ownership was therefore embedded within programme governance, implementation arrangements, and reporting systems.

At the programme coordination level, the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) established the overall framework for GESI integration by incorporating gender-related expectations into programme design, reporting requirements, and key performance indicators. This created clear accountability for implementing partners while signalling that GESI was a core programme objective, not an optional cross-cutting theme.

At country level, Lead Implementers translated these programme-wide commitments into operational practice. They established internal governance arrangements, including the appointment of GESI focal points and, where appropriate, dedicated GESI teams to coordinate implementation across programme activities. These structures provided an important foundation for integrating GESI considerations into day-to-day programme management. However, experience showed that formal arrangements alone were not sufficient to ensure consistent implementation. Progress often depended on the commitment and capacity of individual GESI focal points and, critically, on active backing from project managers and programme leadership.

ENERGIA provided technical support throughout the process, supporting implementing partners with technical advice, quality assurance, capacity strengthening, and continuous mentoring. ENERGIA helped build the capacity of programme partners to integrate GESI within their own institutions, systems, and interventions. This approach strengthened ownership and increased the likelihood that GESI practices would continue beyond the programme itself.

The programme's Thematic Support Implementers similarly integrated GESI considerations within their respective areas of expertise. This ensured that specialised technical support – including business development services, financing mechanisms, and enabling environment development – was delivered through a gender-responsive lens.

Together, these complementary roles created a governance structure for the programme in which strategic oversight, technical support, and implementation responsibilities reinforced one another, so that GESI did not remain a standalone activity.

3.2 Building organisational capacity

Institutions cannot implement GESI if staff do not understand what it means in practice.

Institutional commitment alone is insufficient if programme teams lack the knowledge and skills to translate GESI ambitions into practice. Building organisational capacity therefore became a central component of the programme's mainstreaming strategy.

The process began with assessing existing GESI capacities among Lead Implementers and Thematic Support Implementers. These assessments identified gaps in knowledge, systems, and organisational practices, allowing capacity development activities to be tailored to each country's specific context and needs.

ENERGIA subsequently delivered contextualised trainings covering key GESI concepts. Rather than delivering standardised training across all countries, learning materials were adapted to reflect local market conditions and implementation challenges. For example, in Cambodia, capacity development focused on strengthening the collection and analysis of household- and enterprise-level GESI data. Meanwhile, in the Sahel countries, training emphasised women's participation in biodigester value chains and strategies for addressing deeply rooted gender norms.

Importantly, capacity development extended beyond formal training events. Ongoing mentoring, technical advice, and regular exchanges between ENERGIA and implementing partners created continuous learning opportunities throughout implementation. This reinforced the notion that mainstreaming GESI is an iterative process requiring sustained support rather than a one-off training intervention.

Although resource constraints limited the participation of external stakeholders in some countries, several Lead Implementers expanded training opportunities beyond their own teams. In Kenya and Uganda, for example, implementing partners allocated additional resources to include clean cooking entrepreneurs and sector organisations in GESI trainings. Similar approaches were adopted in the Sahel countries to strengthen the capacities of biodigester companies and women entrepreneurs operating within the sector.

3.3 Using evidence to inform program design

Rather than assuming that gender and social inclusion constraints were similar across programme countries, country-specific analyses were conducted to understand how GESI shaped the functioning of local clean cooking markets. These analyses informed the interventions' design to respond to context-specific barriers and opportunities rather than to generic assumptions.

The scope and methodology of the analyses varied according to country contexts, existing evidence, and implementing partner capacities. Some countries conducted comprehensive primary research, while others combined secondary data reviews with stakeholder consultations or integrated GESI questions into broader market assessments. In Uganda, analyses were initially undertaken internally by the implementing partner and later on by a specialised GESI consultant, whereas Bangladesh and Kenya engaged external consultants. In Cambodia, GESI considerations were incorporated into a broader landscape assessment conducted during the inception phase, ensuring that gender perspectives informed programme design from the outset. In the Sahel countries, the SNV Gender Scan methodology was applied to assess the extent to which biodigester enterprises had integrated GESI within their workforce, management practices, customer engagement, and organisational systems.

The analyses generated far more than descriptive information about women's participation. They identified the structural constraints affecting enterprise development, access to finance, workforce participation, consumer behaviour, and policy engagement across different market systems.

ENERGIA supported this process by co-designing or reviewing research methodologies, strengthening data collection tools, advising implementing partners during fieldwork, supporting data analysis, and providing quality assurance for final reports.

The analyses generated far more than descriptive information about women's participation. They identified the structural constraints affecting enterprise development, access to finance, workforce participation, consumer behaviour, and policy engagement across different market systems.

For example, the analyses revealed that women were consistently underrepresented in technical and leadership roles across clean cooking value chains, particularly in biodigester construction in the Sahel. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, women were more active as retailers of electric cooking technologies. They also identified that women entrepreneurs were often excluded from Results-Based Financing due to limited awareness, low literacy levels, or complex application procedures. In Ethiopia, banks sometimes required male co-signatories even when women were sole business owners. In Uganda, the analyses showed that women relied more on community networks and savings groups for information, while men accessed a wider range of communication channels. These learnings informed the design of our outreach strategies. At the institutional level, the analyses in several countries highlighted opportunities to strengthen gender integration within national clean cooking policies, sector coordination mechanisms, and partnerships with organisations promoting women's economic empowerment.

These findings directly shaped the priorities across the programme's main intervention areas and adjustments to programme design and interventions. They were consolidated in Gender Action Plans (GAPs), as detailed in the next section.

3.4 Translating evidence into action

Evidence only contributes to change when it informs decision-making. The programme therefore translated the findings of the country GESI analyses into GAPs. These plans became the principal management tool for operationalising GESI across implementation.

> The GESI analyses were valuable because they changed programme design.

The GAPs integrated GESI objectives directly into programme delivery. Each GAP identified the priority gender and social inclusion challenges to be addressed, defined objectives and activities, assigned responsibilities, established indicators and targets, and identified the resources required for implementation. The plans were developed collaboratively between implementing partners and ENERGIA, and then validated to ensure both technical quality and institutional ownership.

Importantly, the GAPs also strengthened accountability. Integrating gender objectives into planning and monitoring enabled implementing partners to track progress and adjust course throughout implementation. Annual reviews further ensured that the plans remained responsive to changing market conditions and emerging implementation experience.

One key lesson was that ambitious Gender Action Plans alone are insufficient. Although all implementing partners developed comprehensive plans, many initially lacked dedicated budgets for implementation. While partners succeeded in integrating many GESI activities into broader programme budgets, this experience demonstrated that ring-fenced resources can significantly strengthen implementation and reduce the risk that gender activities become secondary to other priorities.

3.5 GESI mainstreaming as an adaptive process

An important lesson emerging from the SEE Clean Cooking programme is that GESI mainstreaming is not a one-off exercise but an adaptive organisational change process. Building institutional ownership, appointing GESI focal points and teams, strengthening capacities, generating evidence, and developing Gender Action Plans established the foundations for implementation. Yet, these systems continued to evolve throughout the programme.

Effective GESI mainstreaming begins long before activities are implemented. It requires institutional commitment, organisational capacity, evidence-based planning, and clear accountability mechanisms.

Regular monitoring, annual reviews, technical backstopping, and continuous dialogue between RVO, ENERGIA, Lead Implementers, and Thematic Support Implementers further enabled programme partners to refine their approaches as markets evolved and new challenges emerged. The programme treated GESI not as a compliance requirement but as a learning tool, using it to continuously refine management practices and market strategies.

These institutional foundations enabled GESI considerations to be systematically integrated across business development services, financing mechanisms, and enabling environment interventions. The following chapter examines how these foundations were translated into concrete actions across the programme's key intervention areas.

Figure 2 illustrates the adaptive framework that supported GESI mainstreaming throughout the programme.

3.6 Facilitating knowledge exchange and learning

The adaptive learning process generated important lessons on GESI mainstreaming throughout the implementation of the SEE Clean Cooking programme. These lessons were curated in published knowledge products so that they could shape the programme's continuous learning cycle. They were also made accessible for other practitioners seeking to institutionalise GESI within clean cooking and broader market systems development programmes. They include:

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion: Lessons and Good Practices from Clean Cooking Programmes

A publication that collates lessons and good practices from other clean cooking programmes across the globe, aimed at informing the interventions of the SEE Clean Cooking programme from the outset.

Download

Gender-responsive electric cooking: Insights from programmes in Nepal and Cambodia

A technical brief focused on electric cooking programmes in Nepal and Cambodia illustrating their experiences mainstreaming gender and social inclusion in the e-cooking sector.

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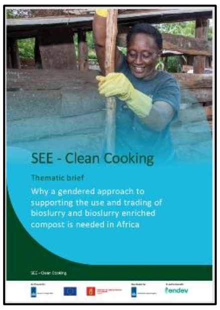

Why a gendered approach to supporting bioslurry market development is needed in Africa

This technical brief explores how a gender and social inclusion approach can enable women to benefit fully from emerging biodigester and bio-fertilizer value chains.

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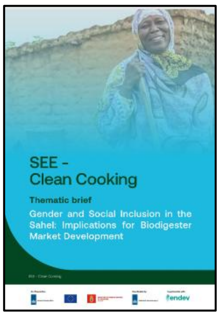


Gender and Social Inclusion in the Sahel: Implications for Biodigester Market Development

This thematic brief offers practical orientations on what development programmes can do to implement gender-responsive approaches in biodigester interventions in the Sahel region.

Download

4. Operationalising GESI in practice: Approaches and Interventions

The institutional foundations described in the previous chapter enabled GESI to be embedded in the programme design. Once organisational ownership, institutional capacity, context-specific evidence, and accountability mechanisms were in place, GESI considerations could be systematically integrated into the market development interventions.

A defining feature of the SEE Clean Cooking programme was that it did not create parallel interventions for women. Instead, it redesigned existing market development mechanisms – including business development services, financing instruments, and enabling environment interventions – to better respond to the realities women and other socially excluded groups face.

A defining feature of the programme was that it did not create parallel interventions for women. Instead, it redesigned existing market development mechanisms to better respond to the realities faced by women.

4.1 Designing inclusive business development services

Business Development Services (BDS) are regularly assumed to be gender neutral. In practice, however, conventional business support reflects the realities of established entrepreneurs who have unrestricted mobility, access to professional networks, sufficient time for training, and the confidence to engage with financial institutions and business support organisations. These assumptions disadvantage many women entrepreneurs.

A core lesson from the programme was that conventional Business Development Services often fail to recognise the specific constraints and opportunities shaping women's participation in clean cooking markets.

The programme delivered BDS through a specialised Energy Enterprise Coach (EEC) model, providing tailored coaching, mentoring, and advisory support to clean cooking SMEs to enable them to evolve into better managed and investment-ready enterprises. Recognising the different challenges that women and men face as business owners and leaders, this BDS package – including the training and coaching processes, tools, training content and market facilitation activities – was reviewed through a GESI lens. Integrating GESI into this delivery mechanism ensured that business support responded to the different realities faced by women- and men-led enterprises, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

The first step involved strengthening enterprise diagnostics. Business assessments were expanded beyond financial and technical performance to identify gender-related barriers affecting business growth. The assessments looked at mobility constraints, unpaid care responsibilities, limited business networks, lower levels of digital literacy, reduced access to market information, and differences in business maturity. This approach enabled coaches to tailor support to individual enterprises.

The eligibility criteria used to determine which enterprises received business support were also reviewed. Minimum turnover requirements, business maturity classifications, and product categories were adjusted to ensure that smaller enterprises, including many women-led businesses, were not unintentionally excluded from support. These adjustments created a more realistic assessment of business potential across different technologies and enterprise types.

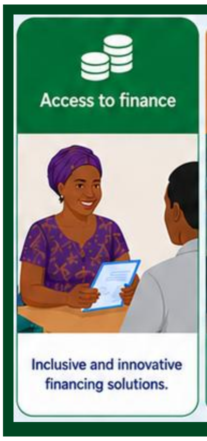
The EEC also adapted business support delivery. Training schedules and coaching approaches became more flexible to accommodate women's time constraints. Blended learning approaches, including online coaching and peer learning, were introduced where appropriate. At the same time, exposure visits and mentoring created opportunities for entrepreneurs to learn from successful businesses operating in similar contexts. Where feasible, women entrepreneurs were paired with female mentors who could provide technical guidance and act as role models.

Business support also extended to training enterprises specifically on considering GESI in their operations. Participating companies were encouraged to examine their own business practices through a GESI lens, including recruitment strategies, workplace policies, customer engagement, and product development.

Figure 3 summarises the practical design principles that can help make Business Development Services more inclusive:

4.2 Designing inclusive finance mechanisms

Access to finance is one of the principal barriers facing women entrepreneurs. Financing instruments that appear gender neutral often unintentionally favour larger, well-established enterprises with greater administrative capacity, stronger documentation, and easier access to collateral. As a result, women-owned and smaller enterprises can be excluded.



Financing instruments that appear gender neutral often unintentionally favour larger, well-established enterprises and inadvertently exclude women-owned and smaller enterprises.

Rather than creating dedicated financing windows exclusively for women, the SEE Clean Cooking programme redesigned existing financing mechanisms to broaden participation while maintaining transparent and competitive selection procedures. Results-Based Financing (RBF) and Innovation Challenge Funds (ICF) were adapted to reduce administrative barriers through simplified application procedures, flexible documentation requirements, targeted outreach, and additional support during proposal development. Eligibility criteria were reviewed to ensure that smaller enterprises and businesses operating in underserved markets were not unintentionally excluded. The programme also introduced design features that recognised the realities of different market contexts. In several countries, enterprises serving remote or disadvantaged regions received additional incentives and support.

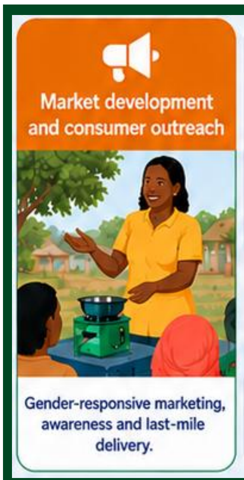
The programme also reviewed its interventions for supporting enterprises to become investment-ready and connect with financial institutions that may offer credit and financial products to grow their businesses, such as enterprise and consumer financing. Through its BDS package, the programme offered dedicated coaching and financier roundtable events for clean cooking enterprises. This is crucial, because improving women's access to enterprise finance also requires strengthening their capacity to prepare investment proposals, manage business finances, and engage confidently with financial institutions.

As consumer financing also plays an important role in expanding markets for clean cooking technologies, the programme engaged with microfinance institutions, and savings- and credit groups, and commercial banks to improve access and affordability for women consumers wishing to adopt clean cooking technologies. In Bangladesh, for example, loans were made available to garment workers – mostly women – to enable them to purchase electric cooking appliances.

Figure 4 summarises the practical design principles for designing more inclusive financing mechanisms:

4.3 Designing inclusive consumer outreach

Successful market development depends on understanding how different consumer groups access information, make purchasing decisions, and adopt new technologies. These processes are rarely gender neutral.



Successful market development depends on understanding how different consumer groups access information, make purchasing decisions, and adopt new technologies. These processes are rarely gender neutral.

The GESI analyses conducted demonstrated important differences in communication channels, purchasing behaviour, and trusted sources of information between women and men. For example, in Uganda, women relied more heavily on community-based networks such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), local events, and WhatsApp groups, while men accessed a broader mix of information channels including radio, television, and transport associations. These insights demonstrated that conventional marketing approaches would not reach all consumer groups equally and highlighted the need for more diversified communication strategies.

Rather than relying solely on mass communication campaigns, implementing partners redesigned market outreach to reflect these differences. Community demonstrations, women sales agents, peer educators, farmer organisations, producer associations, and village savings groups became important channels for reaching women consumers. Communication messages in all countries were tailored to the specific needs and interests of specific social groups identified during GESI analyses. Marketing materials were adapted to local languages, literacy levels, and cultural contexts, while practical demonstrations allowed potential customers to experience clean cooking technologies before making purchasing decisions.

Digital communication complemented face-to-face engagement where connectivity allowed, while also recognising that digital approaches could not fully replace community-based engagement in rural and fragile contexts. In several countries, the companies combined social media and mobile communication with community meetings, demonstrations, radio broadcasts and word-of-mouth promotion to ensure that different consumer groups could access information through channels they trusted.

Figure 5 summarises the practical design principles for designing consumer outreach strategies that respond to the diverse needs and realities of different groups:

4.4 Strengthening the enabling environment

Strengthening the enabling environment is about more than influencing policy documents. It involves reinforcing the institutions, coordination mechanisms, and governance systems that shape how markets function and who benefits from them

Enterprise support, finance mechanisms, and consumer outreach alone are unlikely to produce lasting market transformation if the wider institutional environment remains unchanged. Policies, sector coordination mechanisms, financing institutions, technical standards, and public agencies all influence who can participate in markets and under what conditions.

The SEE Clean Cooking programme therefore implemented interventions to strengthen the enabling environment for gender-responsive market development. The programme sought to integrate GESI into the institutions and governance mechanisms that shape clean cooking markets over the long term to ensure inclusion is embedded in the market, rather than reinforcing inequalities such as the underrepresentation of women, youth and other marginalised groups in policy and planning processes.

Programme partners engaged with governments, sector associations, financial institutions, and other market actors to strengthen institutional capacity, integrate GESI into sector policies and planning processes, and improve women's participation in sector governance. Existing policy processes became opportunities to incorporate gender-responsive approaches into energy and clean cooking strategies, while collaboration with sector associations helped promote more inclusive business practices across the wider market.

Figure 6 summarises the practical design principles for strengthening an enabling environment that supports more inclusive market participation:

4.5 Operationalising GESI in practice: A design philosophy

Across all core market development interventions, the SEE Clean Cooking programme demonstrated that mainstreaming GESI is fundamentally a process of redesigning interventions to make them more inclusive rather than introducing parallel gender activities. Business development services, financing mechanisms, consumer outreach strategies, and enabling environment interventions were all adapted to recognise the diverse realities of entrepreneurs, enterprises, and consumers.

Although the specific interventions differed across programme countries, they shared a common design philosophy: strengthening markets by making them more inclusive. This experience demonstrates that GESI mainstreaming is not a trade-off with market development. On the contrary, it is a means of improving how markets function by expanding participation, removing barriers to innovation and entrepreneurship, and enabling a wider range of actors to contribute to market growth.

GESI mainstreaming is not a trade-off with market development; it is a means of improving how markets function by expanding participation, removing barriers to innovation and entrepreneurship, and enabling a wider range of actors to contribute to market growth.

The next chapter examines the results that emerged from applying these design principles across the SEE Clean Cooking programme.

5. Emerging Outcomes: Results of the GESI Mainstreaming Process

As discussed in the previous chapter, the SEE Clean Cooking programme integrated GESI considerations into the programme's core market development interventions and introduced a range of measures that strengthened the engagement of women and disadvantaged communities across the clean cooking value chain.

Through targeted capacity building, GESI-responsive outreach, improved representation in decision-making spaces, and support for women-led enterprises, the programme helped shift both institutional practices and market behaviours.

Through targeted capacity building, GESI-responsive outreach, improved representation in decision-making spaces, and support for women-led enterprises, the programme helped shift both institutional practices and market behaviours. These efforts not only increased women's visibility and agency within supply chains but also created more inclusive norms and systems that are expected to endure beyond the programme's lifetime. This contributes to a more equitable and resilient clean cooking ecosystem across the SEE Clean Cooking programme countries.

While many of these changes remain emerging and require sustained support beyond the programme period, they demonstrate how systematically integrating GESI can strengthen both market inclusion and market performance.

This chapter presents the principal changes observed across the programme.

5.1 Organisations and enterprises changed how they work

One of the most significant programme outcomes was the gradual institutionalisation of GESI within implementing organisations and participating enterprises.

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At programme level, Lead Implementers moved beyond viewing GESI as a reporting requirement towards integrating it into programme management, planning, monitoring, and decision-making. GESI focal points increasingly became internal advisors and champions who supported colleagues in adapting interventions, interpreting monitoring data, and identifying opportunities for more inclusive programme delivery.

A similar shift occurred within participating enterprises. Rather than perceiving gender equality primarily as a compliance issue, through tailored business development support and GESI training, many businesses began recognising its commercial value. Enterprises increasingly reviewed their recruitment practices, workplace policies, customer engagement strategies, and organisational culture through a GESI lens. Several companies introduced more inclusive human resource policies, strengthened career development opportunities for women, and adopted measures to improve workplace safety and retention.

In Mali, enterprises that initially viewed gender integration as an external donor requirement subsequently committed themselves to revising recruitment criteria and marketing strategies after participating in GESI training. In Uganda, participating SMEs incorporated inclusive workplace policies, anti-harassment mechanisms, and clearer career pathways for women, creating more supportive working environments for women. Companies in Ethiopia increasingly recognised women as valuable employees in sales, customer support, manufacturing, and technical service roles. A company in Ethiopia also engaged in GESI-sensitive product design and marketing by innovating a baking stove that is mobile and height-adjustable to accommodate individuals who cannot easily move or stand for long hours, such as the elderly and people with disabilities, addressing specific needs within the community.

These examples suggest that institutionalising GESI can influence organisational behaviour well beyond individual programme activities. Rather than simply increasing women's participation in programme activities, the programme helped organisations and enterprises change the way they recruit staff, develop businesses, design products, engage customers, and measure success.

Perhaps the most important change was not the number of women reached, but the way organisations began to operate. When GESI becomes embedded in business strategies, human resource policies, and performance monitoring, inclusion shifts from being programme-driven to becoming part of how organisations conduct their day-to-day business. That institutional change is likely to have effects that extend beyond the lifetime of the programme.

Emerging evidence

- Implementing organisations embedded GESI into planning, monitoring, and programme management.
- Several enterprises shifted from viewing GESI as a compliance requirement to recognising it as a business opportunity.
- Enterprises increasingly integrated GESI into recruitment, human resource management, workplace policies, product design, customer engagement, and marketing.

5.2 Businesses became more inclusive and women's participation expanded

Across programme countries, the redesigned market development interventions created new opportunities for women to participate throughout clean cooking value chains.

Rather than concentrating exclusively on women's entrepreneurship, programme partners broadened participation across multiple functions including retail, sales, customer support, manufacturing, technical services, repair, and enterprise management. This shows that expanding women's participation requires creating multiple entry points into the sector.

Across programme countries, the redesigned market development interventions created new opportunities for women to participate throughout clean cooking value chains.

Several enterprises began recruiting women into positions traditionally occupied by men, particularly within electric cooking businesses. In Ethiopia, women were recruited as sales agents, repair technicians, and manufacturing staff, with some progressing into supervisory positions. Uganda supported women and youth through production and sales activities linked to innovative stove manufacturing, while Kenya substantially increased women's participation in sales and marketing functions within biodigester value chains.

Importantly, enterprises also began recognising women as an important customer segment. Marketing approaches increasingly reflected women's information needs, purchasing behaviour, and decision-making roles within households.

Although women's participation in highly technical occupations remains limited in some contexts – particularly within biodigester construction in the Sahel – the programme demonstrated that gradual change is possible when enterprises receive practical support to rethink recruitment, workforce development, and customer engagement.

Emerging evidence

- Women account for 47% of jobs supported by the programme in Uganda's higher-tier clean cooking sector.
- Women represent 36% of the workforce in the biodigester enterprises supported by the programme in Kenya, exceeding programme targets.
- In Kenya, female-owned enterprises report a 36% increase in turnover in their clean cooking portfolio, outperforming male-owned enterprises at 24% growth.
- Women-led enterprises demonstrated better sales performance than men-led enterprises in Cambodia, where women-led SMEs accounted for 65% of sales.
- In Kenya, 100 sales agents received sales and marketing training, with strong female representation (44%). This intervention helped professionalise sales roles and created more accessible entry points for women into the biodigester value chain.
- 17% of BDS participants in Bangladesh were women-led enterprises, which is notable given how few women-led businesses exist in the market overall.
- A female-owned company in Uganda trained over 30 women and youth in production and sales who now work as sales agents and community ambassadors.
- Women increasingly entered technical, supervisory, and manufacturing roles in Ethiopia.

5.3 Financing mechanisms reached more diverse enterprises and consumers

The redesign of RBF and ICF to be more accessible – through simplified application procedures, targeted outreach, flexible eligibility criteria, and tailored support during the application process – contributed to a more diverse portfolio of participating enterprises. Across several countries, women-led businesses, smaller enterprises, and businesses serving underserved markets participated in the financing mechanisms that they would likely have been excluded from under conventional programme designs.

Cambodia provides one of the strongest examples, where two-thirds of participating RBF enterprises were women-led. Relatively modest design changes substantially broadened participation. Implementing

Across several countries, women-led businesses, smaller enterprises, and businesses serving underserved markets participated in the financing mechanisms that they would likely have been excluded from under conventional programme designs.

partners combined online announcements with intensive local outreach through district authorities and programme staff, who visited enterprises individually, organised local orientation workshops, and provided application support directly to retailers, including businesses operating in remote areas. Information materials were simplified and translated into local languages, reducing barriers for smaller enterprises with limited administrative capacity. Ethiopia similarly achieved strong participation by women-owned enterprises within both RBF and ICFs. Kenya directed approximately 43% of its result-based financing to women-owned enterprises, a strong share relative to their market presence.

By redesigning its financing interventions, the programme expanded access to a wider variety of enterprises and consumers. In Bangladesh, a GESI assessment highlighted that many women employed in the garment sector had stable incomes but lacked access to financing for clean cooking technologies. In response, loans were made available specifically for garment workers, enabling many women to purchase electric cooking appliances for the first time. The BDS package that offered dedicated coaching and financier roundtables connected women-led enterprises in several countries to potential funders. These opportunities increased their visibility and strengthened their confidence in engaging financiers.

In fragile contexts, financing models also needed to respond to market realities. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, instability and low purchasing power made conventional consumer financing difficult. The programme therefore introduced a pay-as-you-go model for biodigesters, allowing households to repay installations over time using income generated through biodigester co-products such as bioslurry. Enterprises received pre-financing in the programme to maintain cash flow while customers repaid in instalments, creating a financing model that worked for both businesses and consumers operating in challenging environments.

These results demonstrate that relatively modest adjustments to the design of financing mechanisms can substantially broaden participation without reducing transparency or competitiveness.

Emerging evidence

- 66% of Cambodia's participating RBF enterprises were women-led.
- 50% of Ethiopia's RBF-receiving enterprises were women-led, and 71% of Ethiopia's Innovation Challenge Fund enterprises were women-owned or women-led.
- Notably, the RBF in Ethiopia significantly exceeded expectations, achieving 209% of target, with 41,805 sold cooking devices.
- Kenya directed approximately 43% of RBF funds to women-owned enterprises, a strong share relative to their market presence.
- In several countries, women-led enterprises connected to financiers and strengthened their position to access enterprise finance.
- In Bangladesh, 14% of ICF recipients were women-led enterprises, and 10% of ICF disbursements were made to women-led enterprises.

5.4 Markets became more accessible to diverse consumers

Another important outcome was that enterprises could better reach consumer groups that had been underserved.

Programme partners adopted communication strategies that reflected differences in how women

> Another important outcome was the increasing ability of enterprises to reach consumer groups that had previously been underserved.

and men access information and make purchasing decisions. Community demonstrations, women sales agents, village savings groups, farmer organisations, and peer educators proved particularly effective in reaching women consumers, while communication materials were adapted to local languages, literacy levels, and cultural contexts.

In Cambodia, enterprises travelled to more than 150 villages with electric cooking appliances, banners and demonstration equipment, allowing households to test appliances, compare cooking costs, and learn about warranties, financing options and after-sales services. The programme also supported the recruitment and training of around 90 local sales agents. Most of them were women who became trusted community-based promoters and provided basic maintenance support after installation. The approach proved particularly effective in reaching rural women, who often had limited opportunities to visit appliance retailers.

In Ethiopia, supported enterprises adopted a similar approach. For one company, the women sales agents offer parts for repairs and repair services, and support customers – mostly women – with troubleshooting their products. This is in addition to promoting and selling their electric stoves. This setup supports sustained use in rural markets where trained technicians are few, reducing the need for women to travel to major towns for repairs.

The programme also demonstrated the value of working through trusted community networks. In Bangladesh, enterprises established TechSoi and Tech Sathi teams, training women to promote electric cooking technologies within their own communities. These women became trusted sources of advice, demonstrating how electric cooking could be integrated into traditional cooking practices and address concerns raised by prospective customers. Similarly, in Niger, an all-women peanut-processing cooperative became a demonstration site for biodigesters, using its own experience to showcase the economic and practical benefits of biodigester technology to other women entrepreneurs. These approaches recognised that women are often more likely to trust information provided by peers who understand their daily realities.

The concept of inclusion was also broadened by ensuring that outreach strategies reached groups frequently overlooked in clean cooking programmes. In Uganda, demonstration events and exposure visits were organised within refugee settlements while partnerships with humanitarian organisations and local stakeholders helped adapt outreach to refugee communities. In Kenya and Ethiopia, campaign materials explicitly included people with disabilities, while Ethiopia also trained enterprises to target female-headed households and households participating in the government's Productive Safety Net Programme.

These activities did more than build awareness; they transformed market demand by bringing previously excluded consumers into clean cooking markets.

Emerging evidence

- Community-based marketing consistently proved more effective than conventional mass communication in reaching women consumers.
- Women sales agents strengthened trust and product adoption across several programme countries.
- 44% of the e-cooking appliance customers in Ethiopia were female-headed households, which is significant given the higher poverty rates among female-headed households there.

- 74 women were recruited and trained by an enterprise in Bangladesh to promote e-cooking.
- Refugee communities, people with disabilities, and low-income households increasingly benefited from tailored market development approaches.

5.5 The enabling environment became more GESI-responsive

Throughout the SEE Clean Cooking programme, governments, sector associations, financial institutions, and other market actors increasingly incorporated gender equality and social inclusion into policies, coordination mechanisms, and sector governance. Women's participation within sector governance gradually increased, while several institutions strengthened their own capacity to analyse and address gender inequalities within clean cooking markets.

National sector associations realised notable benefits from the GESI training: it strengthened their capacity to apply inclusive leadership, promote equitable representation, and ensure the active involvement of marginalised groups in decision-making.

In Uganda, programme partners worked with government institutions to strengthen the integration of GESI into sector governance. The programme helped establish a Gender Technical Working Group and strengthened the implementation of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development's Gender Strategy (2022–2027). This improved women's representation and participation within the clean cooking sector. Gender analyses also informed reviews of sector policies and standards, including the Uganda National Organic Agriculture Policy, identifying opportunities to better recognise women's roles in biodigester value chains. In Ethiopia, the programme advocated for and contributed to the integration of GESI principles in the Ethiopia Clean Cooking Roadmap.

In Kenya and Uganda, training programmes targeted women entrepreneurs to raise their awareness of the benefits of joining sector associations and business networks. Sector associations, in turn, were supported to develop gender policies for their membership, institutionalising GESI principles at sector association level. The training strengthened the associations' capacity to apply inclusive leadership approaches, promote equitable representation, and ensure the active involvement of women, youth, and marginalised groups in decision-making processes, reinforcing their ability to advocate for inclusive clean cooking policies, and ensuring balanced participation in governance forums.

In Ethiopia, the programme highlighted that although government structures included Women's Affairs Units, these were rarely engaged in energy sector programmes despite their mandate to promote gender equality. This finding prompted closer collaboration between clean cooking stakeholders and government institutions, and contributed to discussions on strengthening the gender responsiveness of national clean cooking policies and implementation mechanisms.

The programme also strengthened cross-sector collaboration. In Kenya, implementing partners worked closely with the National Gender and Equality Commission, county governments, civil society organisations, research institutions, and private sector actors to improve coordination around inclusive biodigester market development. This collaboration helped position GESI as a shared responsibility across the sector rather than the mandate of individual programmes.

At the sub-national level, existing governance structures also became important partners. In Cambodia, implementing partners collaborated with Commune Committees for Women and

Children to strengthen awareness of gender equality within clean cooking promotion and identify opportunities to better support women entrepreneurs.

Collectively, these experiences demonstrate that sustainable market transformation requires strengthening the institutions that govern markets as well as the enterprises operating within them. By embedding GESI into policies, sector coordination mechanisms, and institutional practices, the programme helped create enabling conditions that are likely to continue influencing market development after programme support has ended.

Emerging evidence

- GESI considerations were increasingly incorporated in national policy discussions and sector coordination mechanisms.
- Government institutions strengthened their understanding of gender-responsive market development.
- Sector organisations became more equitable and ensured active involvement of marginalised groups, increasing their ability to advocate for inclusive sector policies.

5.6 From emerging outcomes to lasting transformation

The experience of the SEE Clean Cooking programme demonstrates that systematically embedding GESI within market systems can generate significant changes. Enterprises adapted their business practices, financing mechanisms became more accessible, institutions strengthened their capacity to integrate GESI, and market development approaches became more responsive to diverse entrepreneurs and consumers.

At the same time, the programme also highlighted the limits of short-term interventions. Women's participation in technical occupations remains constrained in several contexts, access to finance continues to present challenges, and deeply rooted gender norms require sustained engagement over longer periods. These findings reinforce the importance of viewing GESI mainstreaming as an ongoing process of market and institutional transformation rather than a set of discrete programme activities.

The final chapter reflects on the principal lessons emerging from the experiences of the SEE Clean Cooking programme and considers how they can inform future market systems programmes seeking to institutionalise GESI.

6. Reflections and Lessons Learned

The SEE Clean Cooking programme demonstrates that integrating GESI into clean cooking market development is both feasible and valuable. Across diverse country contexts, the programme showed that systematic GESI mainstreaming can strengthen enterprise development, broaden access to finance, improve market outreach, and foster a more enabling policy and institutional environment.

At the same time, implementation highlighted several important lessons for future programmes seeking to promote more inclusive markets:

- **Institutionalising GESI requires sustained organisational change**
  Building awareness of GESI is only the first step. While training and technical support substantially increased understanding of GESI concepts among implementing partners, translating this awareness into organisational practice proved a longer-term process. The strongest results were achieved when GESI was embedded in programme planning and operations, decision-making, and monitoring systems, instead of remaining the responsibility of individual staff members or standalone activities. This required sustained leadership, clearly assigned responsibilities through GESI focal points, continuous mentoring, and opportunities for learning throughout implementation.

- **Inclusive market development requires strengthening the entire value chain**
  Increasing women's participation cannot rely solely on opening opportunities in those parts of the value chain where women are traditionally underrepresented. While expanding women's participation in technical occupations and leadership positions remains essential, equally important is strengthening the market segments where women are already active – including retail, sales, customer engagement, after-sales services, and community-based distribution. In several countries, broadening programme support to include retailers and sales agents generated immediate opportunities for women while creating pathways for their progression into higher-value technical and managerial roles. This combination of short-term inclusion and longer-term transformation proved more effective than focusing exclusively on the most challenging barriers.

- **Inclusive design strengthens core market interventions**
  A central finding emerging from the programme is that GESI mainstreaming does not require separate activities or financing mechanisms for women. Instead, redesigning the core market development interventions – including business development services, financing mechanisms, consumer outreach, and policy engagement – enabled a broader range of entrepreneurs and consumers to participate while maintaining transparent, competitive, and commercially oriented approaches. Simplified financing procedures, targeted outreach, adapted communication strategies, and more inclusive eligibility criteria did not lower standards. Rather, they reduced unintended barriers that had previously limited participation by women-led enterprises and underserved market actors.

- **Implementation must remain context-specific**
  Although the GESI mainstreaming framework proved applicable across all programme countries, implementation clearly demonstrated that interventions must be adapted to local market conditions, institutional capacities, and social norms. In Cambodia, where

women already played an important role in retail, interventions focused on strengthening women's businesses and expanding consumer outreach. In contrast, biodigester markets in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger required greater emphasis on addressing restrictive gender norms, supporting women's entry into male-dominated value chains, and adapting interventions to fragile and insecure operating environments. These experiences demonstrate that while the overall framework is transferable, the specific interventions required to operationalise it will differ according to context.

- **Leverage partnerships to broaden inclusion**
  Programmes cannot always reach excluded groups effectively on their own. Strategic partnerships with women's networks, NGOs, grassroots organisations, and other actors with established links to marginalised communities can provide valuable knowledge, trusted entry points, and effective channels for outreach. The experience of the programme demonstrated that collaborating with organisations working with groups such as refugees, people with disabilities, and remote rural communities can help interventions better reflect their specific needs and constraints. Inclusive market development is therefore not only about adapting programme interventions, but also about recognising when partnerships can extend a programme's reach, knowledge and capacity to engage groups it may otherwise struggle to reach.

- **Transforming social norms requires long-term engagement**
  Many of the barriers identified through the GESI analyses – including restrictive gender norms, unequal decision-making power, mobility constraints, unpaid care responsibilities, and women's limited representation in technical occupations – are deeply embedded within society. As a result, they cannot be addressed within a single programme cycle. While the programme achieved important progress in changing practices and expanding women's opportunities, shifting underlying social and institutional norms requires more than individual programmes—it demands sustained commitment from governments, institutions, the private sector, financial services, and communities.

- **Resources and ambition must be aligned**
  Implementing partners proved that GESI can be integrated across activities within existing budgets. However, accelerating impact requires dedicated funding for deeper work – capacity development, behaviour change, mentoring, and extended market actor support. Redesigning programmes to embed GESI from the outset, with matched resources and dedicated staff, is therefore essential.

- **GESI mainstreaming is an adaptive learning process**
  Finally, the programme demonstrated that GESI mainstreaming is not a fixed methodology but an adaptive learning process. The most effective interventions emerged through an iterative cycle of context-specific analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring, and adaptation. Gender analyses informed the development of Gender Action Plans, monitoring generated new evidence, and programme teams continuously refined interventions as markets evolved. This ability to learn and adapt proved more valuable than attempting to implement a predetermined set of gender activities. GESI must be embedded in adaptive management systems that allow programmes to adjust strategies as market dynamics shift.

7. Conclusion

The transition to universal access to clean cooking requires markets that enable women and men to participate equally as entrepreneurs, employees, consumers, innovators, and decision-makers. Yet, market systems are rarely gender neutral. Long-standing social norms, unequal access to productive resources, limited representation in decision-making, and institutional barriers continue to shape who benefits from market opportunities and who remains excluded.

The experience of the SEE Clean Cooking programme demonstrates that these barriers can be addressed through a systematic and integrated approach to gender equality and social inclusion. Rather than treating GESI as a standalone programme component or a compliance requirement, the programme embedded it within its core market development interventions. Institutional ownership, context-specific evidence, adaptive management, and the redesign of its main interventions together created a practical framework for making clean cooking markets more inclusive.

GESI mainstreaming is fundamentally about improving the way markets function. The programme did not establish parallel support mechanisms for women. Instead, it strengthened its interventions in business development services, financing mechanisms, consumer outreach, and creating an enabling environment so the women entrepreneurs could become more responsive to the diverse market realities. This not only expanded opportunities for them and consumers, but also strengthened enterprise performance, broadened market reach, and contributed to more resilient market systems.

The most significant outcomes were observed when organisations adopted more inclusive business practices, financial mechanisms became accessible to a broader range of enterprises and consumers, communication strategies reached previously underserved groups, and public institutions strengthened their capacity to integrate GESI into policies and sector governance. These are systemic changes that have the potential to outlast the programme and continue shaping market development over time.

The programme also demonstrates that transforming market systems is a gradual process. Deeply rooted social norms, unequal access to productive assets, and institutional constraints cannot be overcome within a single programme cycle. Sustained progress requires long-term partnerships, adaptive management, continuous learning, and the commitment of governments, private sector actors, financial institutions, civil society, and development partners.

Although this publication is grounded in the experience of the SEE Clean Cooking programme, its relevance extends beyond the programme. The framework presented here – combining institutional ownership, context-specific analysis, inclusive intervention design, adaptive implementation, and continuous learning – offers practical guidance for integrating GESI into market systems development more broadly. Whether applied in renewable energy, agriculture, climate adaptation, or other sectors, the underlying principle remains the same: markets perform better when they are designed to enable the participation of all.

Ultimately, the experience of the SEE Clean Cooking programme demonstrates that gender equality and social inclusion are not only development objectives in their own right. They are fundamental drivers of stronger, more innovative, and more sustainable markets. Embedding GESI into the design and functioning of market systems is more than ensuring that no one is left behind; it is an investment in building markets that are more effective, resilient, and capable of delivering lasting development outcomes.