# Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Market Systems Development

## "Looking Back"

The Global GESI in MSD Conversation Series brings together practitioners and funders from around the world to reflect on how gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) has evolved within market systems development (MSD). Designed as a space for candid, practitioner-led learning, the series explores both the technical shifts and operational realities shaping GESI integration in MSD programs.

The first session, held in two parts (sunrise and sunset) on May 28th, focused on the period from 2012 to 2020 and "looked back" at what has been learned and the progress made. Through scene-setting reflections and facilitated breakout discussions, the session surfaced key lessons across four core learning themes. This brief summarizes those insights and offers a foundation for the next two sessions, which will examine the present and future of GESI in MSD.

## Synthesis

The first session of the Global GESI in MSD Conversation Series highlighted how far the field has come and the persistent challenges shaping practice. A consistent theme was the need to embed GESI at the heart of market systems programming, not as a peripheral concern, but through strategy, structure, resourcing, and relationships. As one scene-setting speaker reflected, *"It's not just about giving access. It's about creating meaningful participation. GESI isn't an add-on, it's an opportunity to do things better."* This shift from inclusion-as-compliance to inclusion-as-opportunity was echoed across all learning themes.

Participants stressed that technical fixes alone are insufficient. Effective GESI integration requires confronting informal rules, social norms, and power dynamics that drive exclusion. *"If you're not willing to address existing social norms and power brokers, systems snap back,"* warned one speaker. *"It's not about adding GESI on. It's that you must address inclusion if you want market systems to be competitive and resilient over time."* Examples of what worked included building a strong business case for inclusion, tailoring messages to private sector and community realities, and embedding GESI into partner selection, MEL frameworks, and staff responsibilities.

Speakers also highlighted the importance of robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems for accountability and adaptation. Good data, especially on norms, power relations, and agency, was seen as essential for both making the case and tracking change.

The session underscored how early decisions around design, budgeting, staffing, and messaging can either enable or undermine inclusive systems change. As one facilitator noted, *"Logframes often drive budgets… if GESI isn't in the indicators or learning moments, it won't be in the budget later."* While participants called for flexible programming, some emphasized that well-designed compliance mechanisms can be powerful enablers. *"We all talk about flexibility in funding,"* said one, *"but sometimes regulations that require GESI analysis are what allow us to do the work."*

Finally, the importance of connection and credibility in communication came through strongly. *"It's not just what you say, it's who says it and how,"* noted a facilitator. Peer-to-peer storytelling often outperformed toolkits. Whether influencing businesses, shifting norms, or building internal buy-in, the ability to speak to audience values and use trusted messengers was seen as critical to success.

# Learning agenda deep-dives

The Global GESI in MSD Conversation Series is grounded in a shared learning agenda that seeks to unpack how the operationalization of GESI strategies have evolved within MSD. The agenda is organized around four core themes: tactics, resources, competing priorities, and messaging. These themes serve as entry points to explore what has worked, where persistent challenges remain, and how the field can continue to adapt. Together, they provide a framework for structured reflection across the three-part series.

**Tactics**

This theme explores the practical approaches, strategies, and tools that programs have used in the past to integrate GESI into MSD, examining which tactics have proven most (and least) effective, under what conditions, and why.

> **"What tactics were most (and least) effective for advancing GESI in MSD in the past?"**

Effective tactics included:

- Building a strong business case aligned with private sector incentives
- Embedding GESI in tools, training, partner selection, and staff roles
- Using peer influence and storytelling to shift mindsets

Participants stressed the importance of speaking the private sector's language and avoiding development jargon. Programs using these approaches saw stronger ownership and sustained impact. Moreover, the group emphasized the need for clear sequencing, consistent engagement, and regular power analysis. GESI efforts must be intentional, well-resourced, and embedded, not reactive or performative

Tactics that didn't work included:

- Tackling too many inclusion issues at once without depth
- Ignoring key influencers like husbands or religious leaders
- Prioritizing quick wins over long-term change

**Key takeaways:**

- **Meaningful change requires moving beyond technical fixes to engage with informal rules, power dynamics, and norm holders.** Tactics that create space for dialogue, experimentation, and learning such as peer exchanges or norm-focused diagnostics were seen as essential.
- **Embedding GESI across tools, roles, and routines is more effective than relying solely on individual champions.** Programs that built GESI into procurement, partnership selection, and performance reviews saw greater traction.
- **Framing matters.** Using business language and aligning inclusion goals with commercial or operational incentives helps secure buy-in.
- **Inclusion must be treated as foundational to MSD**, **not as a parallel stream**, because systems that exclude are ultimately less resilient, equitable, and effective.

**Resources**

The resources breakout group looked at how funding, staffing, and institutional arrangements influenced GESI outcomes.

Successful approaches included:

- Dedicated GESI advisors or focal points
- Flexible funding for adaptation
- Investing in MEL systems that track power and behavior change
- Allocating time and resources for staff learning and technical support

Resourcing went beyond budgets to include leadership support and a shared sense of responsibility across teams.

Where things fell short:

- Locked budgets and logframes with no space to adapt
- Absence of GESI from performance expectations or strategy
- Over-reliance on short-term consultants or siloed roles
- Lack of leadership commitment and organization-wide ownership

**Key takeaways:**

- **Need to embed GESI into core program infrastructure from the outset.** This includes integrating it into design, budgeting, staffing, and MEL, not as an add-on, but as a central driver of program quality and impact.
- **Accountability systems matter.** Resourcing isn't only about having a budget line, but also about having the right people, incentives, and structures to drive change.
- **Programs must build both the hard (financial, human) and soft (leadership, culture) infrastructure for inclusion.**
- **Funders and implementers play dual roles.** While donor requirements can help institutionalize GESI, implementing partners must also lead with vision and conviction, using their own policies and practices to mainstream inclusion from within.

**Competing Priorities**

This group explored the tensions that arise when inclusion goals compete with other program demands. Several contributors emphasized the importance of reframing GESI as integral to economic transformation, not a secondary agenda.

Effective responses included:

- Selecting sectors with visible inequities
- Partnering with specialized GESI organizations
- Embedding inclusion in the theory of change from the outset
- Linking GESI to wider themes like resilience, productivity, or green growth

Participants also shared examples of when GESI was deprioritized, diluted, or sidelined often due to pressure for quick wins, scale, or shifting donor preferences. In some cases, inclusion was framed as a "tick box" exercise rather than a transformational agenda. The group discussed how language can reinforce resistance, with heavy use of acronyms or unfamiliar terms alienating program teams or private sector partners. Without clear articulation of *why* inclusion matters, teams struggled to maintain coherence or influence. Splitting inclusion agendas (e.g., focusing on gender but not disability or youth) also led to fragmentation.

> **Key takeaways:**
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> - **Inclusion must be treated as central, not competing with other goals.**
> - **Programs with a clear internal understanding of *why* GESI matters are better equipped to innovate around *how* to implement it.**
> - **Who delivers the message also matters**. Peer voices and local champions are often more persuasive than external advocates.
> - **Inclusive systems are ultimately more sustainable and capable of delivering impact at scale.**

### Messaging

This group discussed how programs communicated GESI to various audiences, from private sector actors to communities and funders. Participants emphasized that effective communication starts with understanding core issues and audience pain points, then aligning messages accordingly. Messaging must be tailored not only to the priorities and language of the audience but also to their local context including regional dialects, lived experiences, and values.

> **"What narratives and communication strategies helped advance GESI and which ones fell flat?"**

Who delivers the message is equally important. Peer voices, local champions, and trusted community figures often have greater influence than external actors. Participants also noted the importance of clear, affirmative communication with women about managing risks, including GBV ensuring women are empowered to make informed decisions and retain agency over risk mitigation strategies.

Effective messages:

- Were grounded in audience realities and delivered in plain, relatable language
- Framed inclusion in terms of business benefit (e.g., productivity, risk reduction)
- Shared real stories of impact and used trusted messengers
- Aligned with values like dignity, family well-being, or aspiration
- Were customized to reflect local identities, languages, and priorities

Less effective messages:

- Relied on jargon, moralistic tones ("you should…"), or one-size-fits-all language
- Defaulted to technical development terms, alienating private sector partners
- Solely focused on risks of exclusion, without highlighting the opportunities inclusion creates

A noted challenge was with programs ability to connect with senior government audiences, especially when disaggregated data on women was limited or absent.

**Key takeaways:**

- **Messaging should be integrated across program activities,** not just outreach campaigns, and grounded in robust diagnostics of who the message is for and what they care about.
- **The most powerful messages build on shared values and mutual benefits**, positioning inclusion as essential to stronger, more resilient systems.
- **Peer storytelling and visual tools worked better than generic materials**, sparking connection and curiosity more effectively than top-down communications.
- **Programs must also account for the challenges of engaging senior stakeholders such as ministries** especially when gender-disaggregated evidence is lacking and proactively work to build both the data and the narrative foundation for change.

## What's next

The next two discussions will build on these insights, focusing on where we are now and what it will take to shape more inclusive, resilient market systems. In preparation for the next session, which will explore the period from 2020 to 2025, we invite participants to reflect on the following questions:

1. How has your technical approach to GESI evolved since 2020? What changes, big or small, have you seen?

2. Are you seeing shifts in how GESI is resourced, measured, or communicated across your program or organization? What internal or external forces are driving these changes, and what is the (expected) impact?

3. How are today's competing priorities (e.g. sustainability, climate resilience) shaping your GESI efforts? How do these differ from earlier challenges?