

October 2024

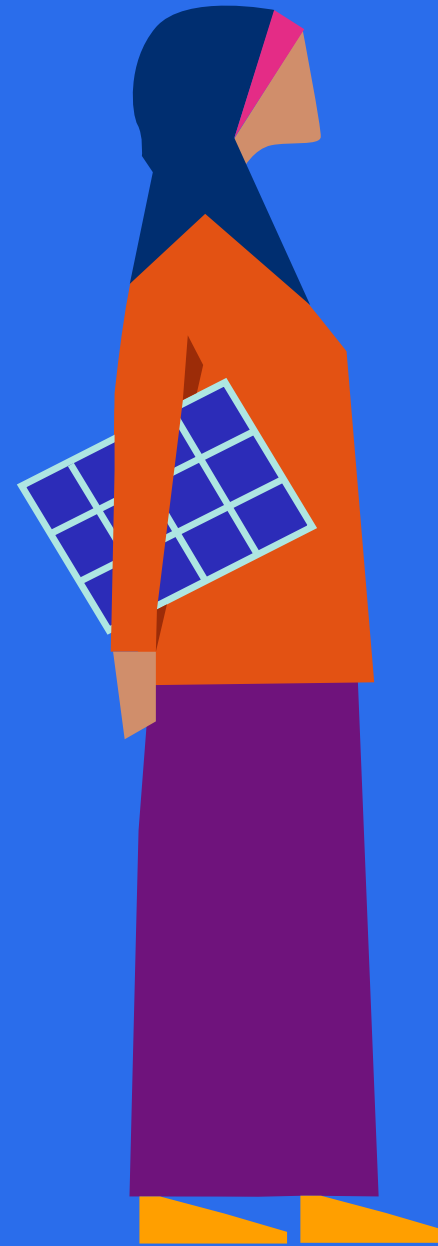
Pathways to Growth

Gender-smart business
actions that work



Pathway 1

Product delivery



Gender Equality

Pathway 6
Workplace Safety



Establish robust systems for addressing sexual harassment

- + Employee satisfaction / retention
- + Attract more diverse talent
- Legal risks

- + Equity in the workplace
- Harmful norms

Pathway 1
Product Delivery




Deliver high-impact products and services to women customers

- + Sales to existing and new customers
- + Customer satisfaction

- + Economic empowerment
- Time poverty

Pathway 2
Agriculture

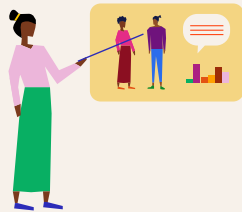


Connect women smallholder farmers to formal supply chains

- + Supply volume and quality
- + Retention of suppliers

- + Income for women farmers
- + Agency for women

Pathway 5
Work Culture



Foster an inclusive work culture in which women can thrive

- + Employee retention and productivity
- Absenteeism

- + Opportunities for working caregivers
- Sexual harassment of women
- Stress and burnout

Pathway 4
Last-mile Sales



Equip women sales agents with the tools to excel

- + Sales through new customers
- Agent turnover

- + Income opportunities for women
- + Access to products in rural areas

Pathway 3
Recruitment



Hire more women by creating quality jobs and inclusive hiring practices

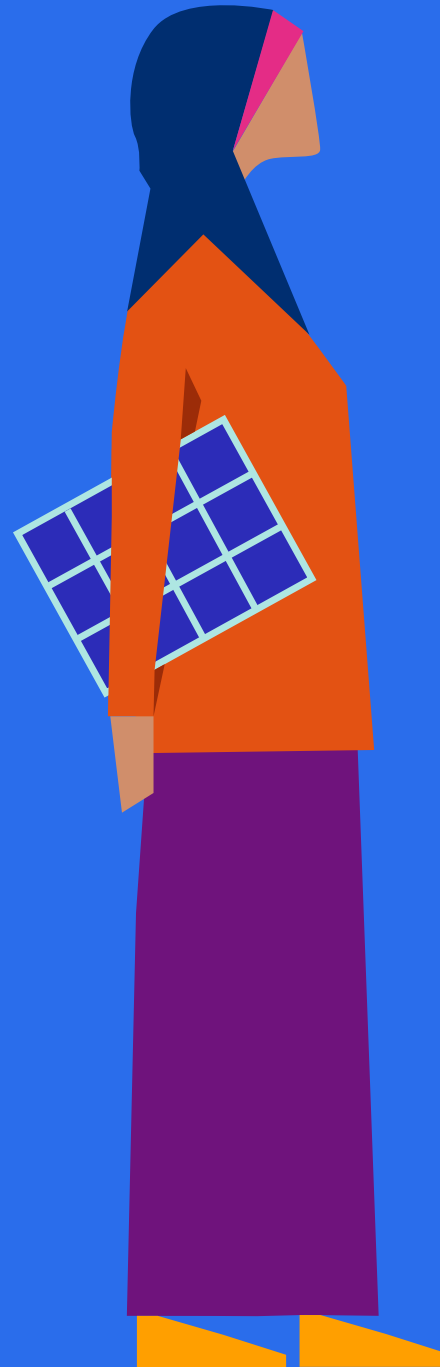
- + Market size and profitability
- Employee turnover

- + Women entering key fields
- + Employee satisfaction
- Gender pay gap

Pathway 1

Product delivery

Expand markets by delivering high-impact products and services to women customers



Companies often deliver products and services to all customers without considering the unique, context-specific preferences and needs of diverse customers in a particular market. Inclusive delivery ensures that products and services reach everyone and that companies don't leave money on the table by inadvertently overlooking diverse customer segments such as women. Part and parcel of this approach is designing these products and services to be high impact. Here we focus on the delivery aspect, as companies can improve delivery channels and mechanisms even when they are resource constrained.

Which enterprises this pathway works for:

Companies selling directly to individual or business customers, including but not limited to the technology, agriculture, energy, and health sectors.

The challenge: Companies may assume that their products and services serve all customers equally without digging deeper. When companies are not intentional in this regard, and do not for example sex-disaggregate their data, they may unintentionally end up excluding women. This causes them to miss out on a significant market opportunity, with women less likely to learn about, uptake, or maximize use of their high-impact products and services.

What businesses can do: Companies have the opportunity to treat women and women-led business (WLB) customer segments as distinct markets and take steps to understand and reach them. Actions to do so can include:

- **Investing in light market research**, such as conducting interviews and focus groups and collecting and analyzing data about its customers. This data should be sex-disaggregated and may be segmented further to reflect subsegments, such as women in different geographic regions. A key next step is discussing the results and then acting on insights to improve reach to women customers.
- **Taking a holistic view of the needs of target women and WLB customers**, beyond the one product or service itself. This can include linking multiple services like education and training to the delivery of one product, making the offering more attractive, and overcoming key barriers to uptake.
- **Tailoring marketing to women**, including using messages that data shows appeal to women in a particular context and distribution channels that women frequently access, or referrals that women trust. Some research and asking around is often needed to identify the best distribution channels to reach a particular women's market.
- **Increasing gender diversity within the company** such that women in all their diversity are part of the team designing these products and modes of delivery.



Designing for diversity

Women are not a monolith. Understanding the women's market requires learning about the characteristics of target women customers in a given market and context. This could mean targeting solutions to women in particular geographies, women in urban/rural areas, women with disabilities, black and indigenous women, and others.

Business outcomes:

- **Increased sales** through both sales to new customers and boost in sales to existing customers.^{25 26}
- **Increased customer base** by targeting new customers.²⁷
- **Improved customer satisfaction** that can improve loyalty and retention.²⁸

Social outcomes:

- Access to tailored financial products and services **enhance women's economic empowerment and reduce women's time poverty.**²⁹
- Access to agricultural products and services can **increase food production and household nutrition, and reduce overall poverty.**^{30,31}
- **Focusing on women's healthcare** can drive growth and present new opportunities. For example, the global femtech market is expected to exceed \$75 billion by 2025.³²
- Access to tailored products and services in education can tackle **education gender gaps.**³³



Koolboks, Kenya. Photo: Peter Iungu

Case study

Husk

Company profile

Husk Power Systems (“Husk”) is a solar mini-grid developer and net-zero energy services provider in rural Asia and Africa. Founded in India in 2008 and today headquartered in the U.S., its mission is to catalyze economic development for entire rural communities, including micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), small factories, households, schools, health clinics, and farmers. At the start of 2023, Husk became the first mini-grid company globally to achieve profitability.

Background

Businesses are high-value customers for mini-grid providers. In India specifically, women-led businesses (WLBs) are an important and rapidly increasing market for mini-grids, as the number of WLBs is rising dramatically and access to reliable electricity is one of the biggest hurdles they face.³⁴

Despite the potential of WLBs as customers and Husk’s corporate motivation for social impact, Husk hadn’t intentionally implemented many gender-inclusive market strategies, and the company realized that its reach among women customers was lagging. Husk estimated that, as of April 2022, only 2% of its customers were women or WLBs.³⁵

Business priority and entry point for the gender work

With the support of Value for Women and Husk’s investor FMO, Husk in India undertook a gender diagnostic to understand its challenges in reaching prospective women and WLB clients. The diagnostic consisted of interviews, data review, and an assessment of organizational policies and processes. It revealed two significant gaps:

- **Husk India didn’t sufficiently understand its WLB customers.** Existing sales data could be segmented by business type, but not by the gender of the business owners. This meant Husk could not identify differences in its sales to women-versus men-led businesses, much less identify gendered differences in usage and preferences.
- **Husk India lacked deliberate strategies to target women customers.** There was no strategy to target women. Additionally, sales agents were men, even though potential women customers were likely to respond more positively to women sales agents.

Actions

Husk's gender work consisted of two main actions:

1. **marketing research to understand women's preferences.**
2. **a sales campaign targeting women based on this research.**

Step 1: Market research

In September and October of 2022, Husk India conducted a telephone survey with 132 existing and 80 potential Husk mini-grid customers, of which 25% were women and 75% were men. The survey asked about needs, challenges, preferences, and barriers, and the analysis focused on the differences between women and men. Husk India saw that two barriers — 1) the lack of awareness of Husk's offerings and 2) affordability concerns — impeded women customers from taking up Husk's offerings.

Step 2: Sales and marketing campaign

Based on these findings, Husk India with Value for Women's support designed a strategy to increase awareness of Husk's offerings and

increase their affordability for WLBs. This was named the "Pragati Ki Aur" ("Towards Growth") campaign and was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and GIZ.³⁶ The campaign consisted of the following:

1. Recruitment of new Husk WLB customers through direct outreach by both Husk agents and Husk WLB customers, leveraging their strong connections and local knowledge of the communities.
2. Provision of marketing materials to these new WLB customers, such as umbrella shades and personalized sign boards with women business owners' photographs. These materials were not only attractive to the WLBs but, because they were Husk-branded, they increased visibility for Husk.
3. Distribution of coupon vouchers to these new WLB customers. These vouchers were for discounts on products and services (e.g., cosmetics, food) at other Husk-customer WLBs. The WLB customers were the ones to distribute them, thereby directing more customers to their own business as well as to other Husk WLB customers. Then, Husk gave each of these WLB customers free electricity for the face value of each voucher redeemed by customers at the WLBs.
4. Training on customer service and bookkeeping for these new WLB customers. To increase the chances that the new

women-led business customers could continue to use (and pay for) power, Husk offered training to increase their business efficiency and performance. Topics included financial record keeping, sales strategies, customer experience, and use and benefits of Husk's products and services.

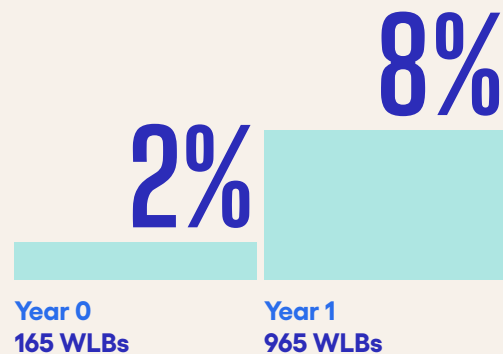
Clean and reliable energy access empowers women to achieve financial independence, providing them with better livelihood opportunities and enhancing their quality of life. We go beyond merely providing reliable power to rural women entrepreneurs— with Pragati ki aur campaign, we offer them the resources and skill training needed to boost productivity, improving socio-economic outcomes for them and their families.

— Marketing Director, Husk India

Results

The deliberate and multi-pronged effort increased the representation of WLBs in Husk India’s customer base and, through improved business performance of these WLBs, also sustainably increased their energy use. Key business results for Husk India included:

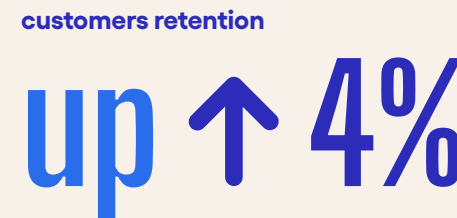
Husk India’s WLB customer base increased from 2% (165 WLBs) to 8% (965 WLBs) in one year. Put another way, one in every five new businesses recruited as customers that year was women-led.



Husk’s monthly revenue from new WLBs during the campaign was eight lakhs in Indian rupees (\$9,600).



Among new WLB customers recruited, Husk India saw 94% retention in the two months after launching the campaign, which exceeded the company's overall 90% customer retention rate. Similarly, the Net Promoter Score among all new WLB customers surveyed was high at 91, with these customers happy with Husk’s offering and committed to continuing to use Husk products.



Ninety-six percent of participating WLBs surveyed reported an increase in the number of customers and the sales and profitability of their business since the campaign launch, with the majority reporting a significant increase in both.



What contributed to Husk's success?

Strong market research

Strong market research ensured the campaign was grounded in the real needs of the target WLB customers.



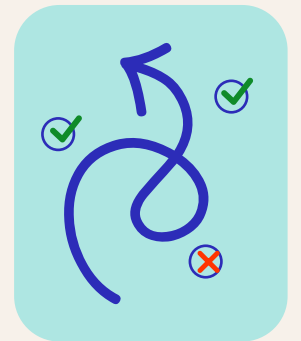
Bundling strategies

The bundling of strategies, namely the marketing combined with training, provided a holistic approach to not only recruit and onboard new women customers but also retain them.



Openness to innovation

Openness to innovation among the leadership incentivized Husk to test new strategies.



Mini case study

Koolboks



Case Study: Koolboks improved service for women customers and approved 80 new women clients



Sector: Renewable energy



Country: Nigeria

Koolboks provides solar-powered refrigerators to micro-entrepreneurs in Nigeria on a pay-as-you-go basis. These refrigerators are designed to reduce entrepreneurs' dependence on unreliable electricity grids, ensure food preservation during power cuts, and thereby increase their incomes.

Challenge

Despite a majority of its credit users being women, Koolboks did not engage women customers as a specific customer segment nor collect information on their needs. When Value for Women spoke with women customers, these customers expressed widespread dissatisfaction with how difficult the customer service team was to approach.

Actions

As part of a broader support package, Value for Women, with funding from Acumen, developed a Koolboks Gender-Smart Credit Process Toolkit to improve the credit process for the company's women clients. One tool

was an "Inclusive Customer Experience Checklist", which Koolboks adopted into its standard operating procedure. This Checklist provides Koolboks' customer-facing team with detailed guidance on how to communicate with customers so they feel comfortable and understand the credit plan.

Additionally, Koolboks started to collect and analyze sex-disaggregated metrics across its credit evaluation process.

Results

95% of Koolbok's customer-facing employees found the Inclusive Customer Experience Checklist useful, applying it to 1,349 women clients in the first three months. Koolboks anticipates this will drive improved customer satisfaction.

By analyzing sex-disaggregated data for the first time, Koolboks identified that certain financial background requirements excluded some women who could actually afford Koolbok's financial products. After making changes, 80 additional new women clients had their credit approved by Koolboks; under the old criteria, these women would not have been considered.

Mini case study

Espoir



Case Study: Espoir achieved 88% of e-learning platform users being women



Sector: Financial services



Country: Ecuador

Espoir is an Ecuadorian microfinance institution (MFI) offering small loans to low-income microentrepreneurs who typically lack access to formal financing to buy supplies and stock for their businesses. Seventy-four percent of Espoir's clients are women. Beyond financial services, Espoir offers a holistic package of services to support the well-being of its clients, including education. Its education offerings are important for cementing customer loyalty and growing Espoir's market share of women.

Challenge

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Espoir had to suspend in-person educational workshops. Instead, Espoir created educational capsules distributed through WhatsApp and developed an e-learning platform. However, Espoir was concerned the online format would be inaccessible to many women borrowers, especially rural group borrowers who, Espoir believed, had limited access to technology.


Actions


With technical assistance from Value for Women and support from the Alphamundi Foundation, Espoir launched a survey to learn about the digital access and preferences of its women borrowers. Contrary to expectations, it found that these borrowers had high interest in digital content and higher-than-expected access to technology. In light of the results, Espoir opened its new e-learning platform to group borrowers too.


Results

As of June 2024, 12,391 clients have completed financial education courses using the e-learning platform. Of them, 88% (10,903) were women clients.



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This pathway contains references from the our report, Pathways to Growth: Gender-smart business actions that work. Please refer to the full report for complete context and to access the referenced footnotes and additional details.