



Advancing Equality and Empowerment in Solar Home Systems Business Models: The critical role of the gender audit

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Introduction

Audit is a term that often evokes apprehension and even fear among the private sector (and development programs). A gender audit even more so. However, a gender audit - which can also be called an “assessment” - can be an empowering exercise. The immediate goal is to understand how the company’s current operations are contributing to - or impeding - gender equality. But, used well, it should also serve to unify management and employees around a shared vision and process towards achieving greater gender equality in the workplace.

What is a Gender Audit?

- Like a financial audit, a gender audit looks across all transactions that take place within a company to see how men and women might be impacted differently
- It aims to find any “gendered bias” in the way a company operates - i.e. whether it is systematically passing over opportunities for either men or women to fulfil certain roles or gain certain benefits
- It should be tailored to the most relevant questions for the sector or company such as the structure and ownership of a company; the composition of its workforce; the way its workforce is recruited, incentivized, and retained; the way its operations are managed and delivered; policies and programs; and allocation of resources and finance.

Women play critical roles across the entire energy sector - from producing to distributing household energy, to employees in large scale electrification, to sales agents in door-to-door distribution of solar home systems (SHSs). Yet, despite the [sound business case](#) for greater inclusion of women at all levels in the sector, their roles as consumers, decision-makers and employees in the energy sector are routinely overlooked. In fact, the policy-focused International Energy Agency ([IEA](#)) showed that globally, women are even more under-represented in energy firms as compared to their prevalence in non-energy companies.

This brief presents the experience and lessons learned from two different market systems development (MSD) programs, [Elan](#) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Women IN Business ([WIN](#)) in Mozambique. These programs implemented gender audits as part of a broader strategy to advance gender equality and women’s economic empowerment with partner renewable energy companies – Altech (DRC) and ENGIE Energy Access Mozambique (formerly Fenix International). It is intended for business managers and development practitioners interested in advancing sustainable, private-sector-led approaches to gender equality, social inclusion, and women’s economic empowerment.

The **WIN program's** objective is to empower Mozambican women through private enterprise. The program partners with companies and organizations to test ways of engaging more women as customers, suppliers or business partners. The idea is always built around a business case that needs to have the potential to improve the company's bottom line as well as increasing opportunities for women.

WIN is a five-year program implemented by TechnoServe and financed by the Embassy of Sweden in Mozambique.

Elan RDC aimed to improve the way markets work in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the benefit of poor women and men in the DRC. The program partnered with and provided expertise to market actors such as businesses, financial institutions and industry associations, to design, introduce and scale-up innovative and sustainable changes in business practices that will build a more efficient and inclusive economy.

Elan was implemented by Adam Smith International and financed by FCDO.

How to conduct a gender audit

Though implemented separately, both WIN and Elan followed a similar approach in applying a gender audit to the solar home energy sector. This can be easily summarized into five steps:



Put the topic on the table using evidence



Secure senior management support and dedicated resources



Conduct the audit/assessment



Share findings and agree upon action plan



Measure and report on progress

Next, we look more in detail about what happens in each step.



Step 1: Put the topic on the table using evidence

A gender audit does not have to be a tricky subject for MSD practitioners to raise with the energy sector. In fact, the business case should speak for itself. Evidence suggests that more gender-inclusive business practices allow energy companies to reach more customers, make more sales, and reduce issues like staff attrition and underperformance. Typically, this means more purposeful targeting of women as customers and business partners, including specifically addressing constraints that women experience. Our experience is that rather than alienating men, this usually results in reaching more women and men through the business.

The Elan program first raised the topic with [Altech](#), a DRC-based company specialized in the sale of affordable solar products for the home. Elan was already partnering with Altech to increase sales to poor people and saw an opportunity to introduce more targeted strategies to more efficiently reach women.

Coming to the meeting prepared with examples of how other renewable energy companies benefited from implementing gender equality and empowerment strategies was a helpful tactic in gaining the interest of the senior management (examples [PEG](#) and [BURN](#)). With these cases and background research on Altech, Elan's gender advisor was able to highlight how the gender audit could help the company improve the performance of their sales ambassador program, among other benefits.

Demonstrating the Business Case

A program conducted by the [Shell Foundation and Value for Women](#) tested 13 different strategies for gender inclusion in clean energy value chains and found:

- A 33% reduction in technical support calls after incorporating gender-specific messaging to customer service calls
- An increase in sales of 85% after training women direct sales agents to sell in strategic locations, overcoming potential mobility constraints
- Twice as many potential customers reached after trialing marketing messaging specifically targeting women, compared with messaging targeting men
- A doubling in sales of women sales agents recruited after implementation of gender-sensitive hiring practices, training and compensation

Demonstrating Benefits to Women

Research conducted by Altai Consulting on nearly 200 businesses and households using SHS in Africa found after 15 months:

- 27% of businesses were able to create jobs, of which 59% were for women
- The main person that benefited from extra employment due to having a SHS was most often (77% of time) a woman
- A majority of household members (58%) who increased time working after buying a SHS were women
- A majority of household members (75%) that were able to get a job after buying a SHS were also women

The impact of energy access on women's economic empowerment is not always straightforward! In the same Altai research, women reported that having access to light allowed them to do more of their home activities after daylight hours. In some instances, this "freed up" daytime hours for working.

Like Elan, WIN was already aware that women play a key role in decision-making on household expenditure in Mozambique. They would be primary users and beneficiaries of the solar home system and therefore it made sense to partner with companies that were already offering household energy solutions.

WIN embeds a gender assessment into its due diligence process – that is, from the moment it starts discussing a potential partnership. The gender assessment is a simple list of 8 areas through which men and women might be impacted differently by a proposed project. This allows the team to think ahead about how to equalize opportunities for both genders to benefit from the business model. On top of this, the WIN team collects basic data about partner companies including gender composition of management, whether they have a gender policy, and what gender programs may already have been implemented. WIN provides training about unconscious bias and support in drafting gender policy as a standard part of its offer to all of its partner organizations.

WIN Gender Assessment Tool (for new projects / interventions)

Participation	How do current business models impact men and women differently along each of these dimensions?	What can be done to increase gender equality along each of these dimensions?
Income and Assets		
Time and Mobility		
Information		
Decision-making		
Beliefs, perceptions and norms		
Satisfaction and confidence		
Security		

*Note that the data collected through a due diligence process like the one described above can serve as the foundation for [gender-sensitive procurement](#).



Step 2: Secure senior management support and dedicated resources

It is enough to find one or two champions within the organization – as long as they have power to drive the cause forward. In the case of WIN, the (male) Managing Director of ENGIE Energy Access Mozambique had a strong personal belief that greater gender inclusion would improve the operations of the company. Moreover, the company’s global management has a good representation of women and a culture of supporting gender inclusion. The MD initially wanted to test a specific idea relating to a single product line, but this led to a discussion about what opportunities lay across ENGIE Energy Access Mozambique’s broader sales and operations to increase gender inclusivity and benefit the company.

In Elan’s case, the program sought out to secure the buy-in of the (also male) National Head of Sales at Altech. This relationship was essential for two reasons. First, he had the relationships with the co-founders and authority within the company to advocate for the gender audit. Second, he was also in a unique position to collect and collate internal sales data from the different provinces since he oversaw the key departments.



Step 3: Conduct the audit/assessment

To conduct the audit, you can draw from resources like the [IFC](#) and [EIGE](#) for gender audit questions and detailed process information.

Adding in questions specific to the renewable energy sector such as the following is also important:

- ✓ **Customers** – how do men and women decide differently on making a purchase of a home energy system? Do they decide together or separately? Who do they consult? What is important to them in making their decision? Do they value being served by male or female sales agents?
- ✓ **Sales agents** – how do men and women perform differently as sales agents? What resources do men and women each need to be successful sales agents? What are the different challenges men and women face in becoming sales agents and retaining their jobs? Do men and women sales agents have biases in the types of households they serve (e.g. single-headed, multiple-headed, larger or smaller families)? Do they outright favor male or female clients? Are questions of mobility important?
- ✓ **Management and operations** – What is the overall gender mix of management and operational staff? How do sales agent supervisors view the performance of their male and female sales agents? Is there any evidence of institutional gendered bias that may affect recruitment and support to sales agents (e.g., always asking male leaders for referrals)? Is there any evidence of institutional gendered bias in how customers are approached and sold to (e.g., routinely approaching men as the head of the household)?
- ✓ **Business culture and policy** – what policies exist to enshrine gender equality at work? Is there a gender policy or a sexual harassment policy (especially relevant when sales agents are at risk of harassment in the field)? Do employees believe that women and men can be equally successful in the organization? How do these beliefs differ between men and women employees?

In addition to spending time formulating the assessment questions, it is important to be specific about the timeframe being assessed and consider the limitations of the company's data collection processes/systems. As noted in the Elan case, the

company did not have a centralized data collection process in place and the program was reliant on one well-placed individual to collect the necessary information.



Step 4: Share findings and agree upon action plan

The assessment is just the beginning. The real value of the exercise comes when you share the findings with the partner and agree upon an action plan. This can also be an opportunity to build social capital by highlighting existing good practices. It can also be an entry point to talk about the company's vision for gender equality and the investment required to achieve it. Depending upon the company's appetite and resources available, it may make sense to encourage a comprehensive approach – tackling all aspects of inequality that surfaced during the assessment. In other cases, especially if you are facing tight time frames and resource limitations, it may be preferable to prioritize and pilot one or two interventions.

Despite working completely independently and only sharing notes after the partnerships were underway, Elan and WIN found similar opportunities with their respective partners.



Elan co-presented the audit findings with the National Head of Sales from Altech to the company's two founders.

Elsa Comé, a sales agent with ENGIE Energy Access Mozambique (formerly Fenix International), speaks to a potential customer

Because of time and resource limitations, Elan and Altech decided to prioritize two areas from the audit findings: sales agent recruitment and readiness. Gender-sensitive marketing was another priority area that surfaced in the audit, but was deprioritized in consideration of the time and investment required.

Business improvements launched as a result of gender audit findings

Areas	Elan DRC / Altech	WIN / ENGIE Energy Access Mozambique
Job descriptions	Introduced new language around equal opportunity in job descriptions to be more attractive to potential women candidates	Changed the language used to describe the requirements of the job, to attract more potential women candidates
Recruitment processes	Launched a gender-responsive recruitment process (minimum number of women included at each stage of recruitment process)	Improved recruitment strategies Tested explicit incentives for sales agent supervisors to recruit women sales agents (e.g. 1. promotions aimed at women customers around the start of school year; 2. women recommending another woman customer got 7 days of free energy instead of the typical 3 days)
Sales agent training	Revised training manual to include more information and resources on customer relationship management	Included customer segmentation module within training of sales agents, considering different needs of men and women customers, among other dimensions
Anti-harassment		Updates to policy including anti-harassment (quick win) Community building - e.g. WhatsApp channel for women sales agents
Gender awareness	Conducted gender awareness raising training with women and men sales agents	Conducted Unconscious Bias and gender training with management teams, to be repeated through the organization



Step 5: Measure and report on progress

Evidence was what got you a proverbial seat at the table and it is what will keep management engaged. Make sure you set yourself up for success. Indicators which speak to business interests like sales, profitability and agent retention are important. However, external factors like shipment delays, which incidentally impacted both Elan and WIN partners, may affect your ability to report on top level sales performance data (especially if you are operating with short timelines).

Due to external challenges in collecting relevant sales and business performance indicators, Elan opted for a qualitative survey conducted by an external researcher. The survey explored the adoption rates and satisfaction levels of the sales agents with the new training content and changes to business operations.

WIN and ENGIE Energy Access Mozambique worked together to measure the results, using the company call center to conduct a survey with customers on the impact of the SHS on their lives. Internal company data was used to analyze the recruitment and performance of male and female sales agents over time.

However you choose to measure the impact of the business changes, remember many initiatives may take time to come to fruition, requiring various tweaks along the way. Incentive systems can lead to behaviors that are not always predictable and gender norms within a company culture can take years to shift, sometimes requiring changes in personnel along the way.

Conclusion and recommendations

A gender audit can be an empowering process – it helps clarify a company’s vision for gender equality while laying out specific areas for attention and the investment required to achieve that vision. This report shows how an audit catalyzed action and experimentation by two SHS companies, Altech and ENGIE Energy Access Mozambique. The gender audits also served as entry points for Elan RDC and WIN to engage these companies in broader discussions around the importance of addressing workplace harassment, developing a gender policy and more. In short, a gender audit can be a powerful tool when working with any sector especially those with high levels of relevance to women such as the solar home energy sector.

Ready to get started? Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) Have you previously discussed with your partner the critical, yet overlooked role of women in the sector?** If not, start by raising their awareness of the potential opportunities to better engage women using the data provided in this brief.
- 2) Do you have a relationship with one or two key decision makers in the business?** If not, identify potential allies and begin by nurturing those relationships.
- 3) Have you tailored the assessment to your business partner’s specific context?** If not, invest time in adjusting ‘off the shelf’ audits to your business local context and business goals.
- 4) Have you anticipated co-developing an action plan with your partner?** If not, spend time building support from the business partner to be an active participant in designing the solution.
- 5) Do you have agreement from the partner on how you will measure and report on progress?** If not, invest time upfront with the partner to determine how and what will be measured and how the information will be used.

About us

[The Canopy Lab](#), a US-based consulting firm, specializes in the practical application of systems thinking. Our team are recognized for their work in adaptive management, monitoring and evaluating systemic change, and advancing approaches to WEE and youth employment in market systems programs. Together, they have over 70 years of experience delivering innovative, high-quality work in 30+ African, Asian, Eastern European and Latin American countries for a diverse range of clients including DFAT, DFID, SDC, World Bank, and USAID. Holly Krueger is one of three Managing Partners at the Canopy Lab and is a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion advisor to three development programs including Elan RDC. She has also written extensively on the topic of [women sales agents in development programs](#) among other subjects related to gender equality, social inclusion and women's economic empowerment.

[TechnoServe](#) helps people lift themselves out of poverty by harnessing the power of the private sector. A leading nonprofit organization operating in almost 30 countries, we work with hardworking women and men in the developing world to build competitive farms, businesses, and industries. By linking people to information, capital, and markets, we have helped millions to create lasting prosperity for their families and communities. Julia Sorensen is the Program Director of Women IN Business, implemented by TechnoServe and financed by the Embassy of Sweden in Mozambique.

[Adam Smith International \(ASI\)](#) is a global advisory company that works locally to transform lives by making economies stronger, societies more stable and governments more effective. ASI implemented the FCDO-funded Elan RDC program from 2014-2021.

Annex: WIN Gender Assessment Tool (prior to implementing new projects / interventions) and its application to SHS sales models

Area	How men and women may be impacted differently	What to do to increase gender equality
Participation	E.g. men may participate more in sales and purchase of technical equipment	E.g. pair women and men sales agents to normalize participation for women
Income and Assets	E.g. land may be more likely to be in man's name	E.g. do not make SHS ownership linked to land title
Time and Mobility	E.g. women customers may stay more often in the home	E.g. sell SHS through foot soldiers who go to homes
Information	E.g. men may have better access to information about sales agent opportunities	E.g. use local networks and word of mouth to more easily spread information about opportunities to women
Decision-making	E.g. women may be more likely to consult husbands on SHS purchase than vice versa	E.g. create easy marketing material that can make it easy for couples to share information and decide together on purchase
Beliefs, perceptions and norms	E.g. it is not considered acceptable for a male sales agent to enter a household where a woman customer is alone	E.g. create guidelines for roaming sales agents to avoid unintended negative consequences - for either men or women
Satisfaction and confidence	E.g. women may be less confident understanding SHS due to lower literacy levels	E.g. consider spending extra time explaining the system to customers who don't feel confident
Security	E.g. women sales agents may feel scared to walk alone	E.g. create safe visible ways for women to travel if selling on foot