

Participatory Research, Gender and Market Chains

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Abstract

This review paper examines the recent evolution and emerging connections between market chains and a gender perspective. One of the most important points of connection between these two streams of work has been the use of participatory methods and tools to identify analyze and act upon critical areas in market chains to achieve a specific outcome. A market chain approach can provide a useful analytical and action oriented framework which, when combined with the direct participation of the diverse actors that comprise the chain, can promote greater inclusion, transparency and increased voice for weaker actors in the system. Nonetheless, the vast majority of market chain research and development interventions tend to focus on describing the situation of the system rather than devising innovative and sustainable ways to drive inclusive change in favor of poor women and men.

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing tendency to deepen market chain analysis using different lenses. These include topics such as chain governance and decision-making structures, “pro-poor” or social equity / inclusion, rural competitiveness and a growing body of work on gender within the context of market chains. In many but not all cases, these topics have been accompanied by the increasing use of a variety of participatory methods and approaches. Given the significant level of overlap between these lines of enquiry, this paper incorporates elements from several of these topics while focusing specifically on the issues of gender and social equity or inclusion in the context of participatory research on market chains.

Why, therefore, is a participatory focus on gender and social equity emphasis important in the context of market chains? First and foremost, previous work on market chains has often overlooked the issue of gender and, as a result, underreported or ignored entirely the diverse roles of women and men along the chain. Redressing this oversight is critical to improving the understanding of how a market chain works currently, and more importantly, how it might work better for poor women and men. Second, through a more nuanced understanding of gender roles along the chain, it is feasible to design differentiated intervention and support strategies for particular members of the market chain. A clearer focus helps increase the poverty-reduction impact of a given intervention. Finally, the through the application of a participatory and gender responsive perspective, new opportunities emerge which can increase the overall competitiveness of the chain and, at the same time, open new leadership and decision-making roles to poor women and men. In sum, the use of a participatory and gender responsive perspective allows for a better understanding of the market chain, improved targeting of resources in favor of the poor and facilitates the emergence of new opportunities to upgrade the role of poor in the overall system.

The paper concludes with a review of additional research areas raised by the use of participatory and gender responsive perspective. These include: (a) an increased focus on how to develop the economic leadership roles of women in the context of market chains; (b) questions of how intra-household resource management decisions shift as market chains become successful and what that means for women and men, and; (c) the design of adequate support policies to implement gender equitable market chains.