

Walk a mile in her shoes

Using a behavioral lens to improve program uptake in rural Mexico has provided interesting insights into the complex world women live in, governed by customary rights and traditional role models, stereotypes, and identity.



All governments spend a lot of time and money to design social programs with better outcomes for their citizens in mind.

These programs range widely, from cash transfers for the poorest populations, to skills courses for the unemployed, to social aid for the ageing population, just to name a few. Once these programs launch, one would expect to get a long line of candidates eager to enroll; after all, these programs offer free benefits.

Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Social programs often fail, and to understand why, one has to decipher and analyze all the pieces of the puzzle, from program uptake to each following phase. Many times, the problem lies with

the program's design. For instance, the target population – with low literacy rates – may be required to fill out 30-page long forms in order to enroll. These design flaws most often affect women.

Moreover, from the beneficiary's perspective, there are also behavioral barriers that often discourage the person from following through on their initial intention to participate in the program. It is with this behavioral lens that we analyzed ways to foster women's participation in natural resource management programs.

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01. The Project

Natural resource management programs aim at incentivizing sustainable management practices, conservation and improved governance. These programs, when well designed, do much more than giving benefits away for free. They establish the base for sustainable resource management, they protect countries' most important natural assets, and they create jobs and income opportunities for the poorest and most marginalized.

Although women's knowledge, skills, and experience are key to strengthening activities that reduce forest loss and degradation, they currently constitute only around 25% of forest program beneficiaries; their actual active participation is even lower.

The World Bank, with the support of the Mexican government, conducted a qualitative analysis in rural areas of Mexico in 2018 to understand better women's underlying socio-cultural barriers, as well as map their decision-making process, motivations, influencing agents, and

other factors that can affect their decisions to participate in programs. While the purpose of the study was to identify barriers to women's participation in forest landscape activities, it became clear that the barriers women face are similar to those in any other government program.

For this research, three field work methods were used: women's and men's focus groups to learn about points of view, bias, perception, and norms; in-depth interviews with women and men – including influencers and community leaders – that allowed us to build case studies from different perspectives; and field observations to better understand context and behaviors.

The analysis, using a behavioral lens, confirmed known barriers and found new ones that had not previously been discussed in Mexico. This approach is the basis for proposing new and innovative solutions for program entities, both governmental and non-governmental, that, if implemented, could have an important impact on enhancing women's uptake of assistance programs.

02. The Results



Women tend to rely on automatic decision making due to temporal, financial, and aspirational scarcities.

Behavioral science researchers argue that seemingly bad choices people make in poverty scenarios are not the result of low education, living conditions, or demographic variables, but rather the result of a scarcity mindset. A lack of free time, uncertainty around the fulfillment of basic needs, and lack of mid-term and long-term goals all influence automatic decision making. People with a scarcity mindset are narrowly and involuntarily preoccupied with their pressing needs, tending to opt for what often turn out to be short-sighted solutions rather than making short term sacrifice for longer term gain.



Changing the meaning of “good woman.”

Most of the women interviewed acknowledged that their main aspirations are to provide education and food for their children, and to help their husbands in the harvest – in other words, to adhere to their conception of a “good woman.” In rural areas of Mexico, mental models such as stereotypes and traditional gender norms, as well as structural barriers such as the historical exclusion of women from decision-making processes, all affect women’s self-confidence, self-efficacy, and, consequently, their will to get involved in decision-making processes or feel empowered to sign up for programs.



The right thing to do is what everyone else in the community is doing.

As social individuals, breaking the social norms is something that carries a heavy cost. Since only few women participate in the workforce, rural women often believe that not participating is the norm within the communities; subsequently, those who decide to leave the community to work or study may face social judgment. However, there is a correlation between the degree of participation of women in productive activities and the degree of their participation in communal decision making and empowerment (and vice versa).

03. Policy Implications

Especially in the context of rural communities, where incentives are often interpreted through social and cultural norms, behavioral science provides an important lens that can help us demystify the complex world women live in, governed as it is by customary rights and traditional role models, gender bias, stereotypes, self-conceptualization, and status quo.

As our findings show, women need more time, resources, and accessible material to register for productivity programs. Therefore, we recommend:

- **Simplifying choice architecture** to encourage or nudge rural women to sign up for productivity programs.
- **Facilitating registration** in easily accessible spaces where women already go, such as schools or health care centers, or pay for group transport to government offices to encourage enrollment.
- **Make the information about the program clear**, accessible, and understandable for poorly educated women in rural areas. The use of images, infographics, and stories is useful to help women digest information about grants and subsidies.

In order to work around traditional norms, which might hold women back from signing up to programs:

- **Increase the number of female program promoters or technical advisors**, and foster knowledge exchange among women. Such role models can help boost women's aspiration and also act as important social influencers, especially when female promoters are from the same community or localities.
- **Work around existing norms and associate the concept of "good women"** to that of a woman who participates in productive activities and contributes to the households' income. Making the "mother role" of these women salient in message framing could increase programs uptake and empower women.
- **Provide small (in-kind or monetary) incentives or community recognition** for women's participation in beneficiary programs. These small incentives or public recognition can be awarded to promoters of the government programs as well as to men and women of the communities.

Empowering women to actively participate in forest landscapes programs could be a key instrument for sustainable rural development.

As we manage to better understand why and how women make decisions, we can design better programs and policies to engage them.

04. Glossary

Behavioral science:

a field based on insights from psychology, cognitive science, anthropology, and economics to better define, understand, and predict human behavior.

Choice architecture:

influences decision making by simplifying the presentation of options, by automatically evoking associations, or by making one option more salient or easier to choose than the alternatives.

Mental models:

beliefs, concepts, and frames that individuals use to interpret the world around them.

Salience:

novelty, prominence, or attention-grabbing state.

Self-efficacy:

a person's belief about their ability to succeed or perform certain tasks.

Social norms:

informal rules of behavior that are considered acceptable in a group, community, or society.

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