

## Direct Selling: Tackling The Challenge Of Women's Inclusion In The Base Of The Pyramid (BOP) Labour Markets

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A major cause of poverty for women in many societies is their exclusion from the labour market. This article discusses the use of "direct selling" as one way of tackling this deficit in developing economies.

Despite constituting half of the world's population, women do not make up half of the world's labour market. According to the [International Labour Organisation](#) (ILO), "the current global labour force participation rate differs by 26 percentage points on average, with some regions facing a gap of more than 50 percentage points" ([explore gender gap by country here](#)). While men on average have a participation rate of 75%, less than half of women (49%) do so. Women empowerment has been one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals on the [United Nations 2030 Agenda](#).

Handy and Rowlands defines women empowerment as: "A process whereby women become able to organise themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination" ([Handy & Rowlands, 2014, p. 104](#)). As such, empowering women will not only improve household welfare but will also positively impact the social and fiscal health of nations through better education, poverty reduction, and decreased violence ([Crittenden, Crittenden, & Ajjan, 2019](#)). Similarly, [McKinsey Global Institute](#) states that advancing gender equality could enable millions of women to pursue their career aspirations and become financially independent (adding \$12 trillion to the global economy by 2025).

To address the United Nations' sustainable development goals in terms of alleviating poverty and women's empowerment, diversity and inclusion are becoming a priority for organisations in developed countries. Specifically, the inclusion of women's workforce from the base of the pyramid (BOP) population will help in fulfilling their sustainable development goals and gaining competitive advantages. The challenges that organisations face in integrating BOP women's workforce, however, might prevent them from achieving their inclusion objectives. Further, empowering women has also become a major area of research interest within the context of BOP markets ([Chatterjee, Gupta, & Upadhyay, 2018](#)).

The persistent set of socio-economic barriers such as gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, lack of affordable care, cultural barriers continue to hold women back from participation in workplaces and trap them in the cycle of poverty. [Prior research](#) indicates that these socio-economic barriers form a global threat to the progression of gender equality. For example, one of the accepted gender norms in most of the countries (both [developed](#) and [emerging economies](#)), is that *men are breadwinners and women are homemakers*. This often results in women being relegated to either unpaid or non-compensated work.

Based on [a study by the ILO and Gallup](#), most women around the globe prefer to work in paid jobs (see a country-by-country breakdown [here](#)). Another persisting challenge of women participating in paid work in developing and emerging countries is the lack of safe and accessible transportation to work. In addition, women often discuss the risk of sexual harassment and sexual assault within the workplaces or on their daily commute. According to an [ILO report](#) (p. 49), sexual harassment – which disproportionately affects women at work – is a serious form of discrimination that involves fundamental power dynamics. Not only does it jeopardise the working life and well-being of women, but it can also have serious financial and non-financial costs for organisations. Further, in some emerging countries, [it has been reported](#) that husbands or immediate family members do not permit women to work outside of the home, and this is often exacerbated by government legislations of those countries.

Therefore, one solution to bridging the gap and tackling these occupational segregations and discriminations is to create job opportunities for women in BOP markets while providing a safe work environment and with limited resources.

Addressing poverty by adopting the producer-oriented perspective and including actors from the base of the pyramid (BOP) markets at relevant stages of supply chains has attracted [research interest](#) in recent years as it is viewed as a viable way to resolve the issue. To this end, we propose that direct selling (which has become an [inevitable distribution strategy across many supply chains](#)) should be considered as an effective business model for integrating the BOP populations, especially women, in [value-generating supply chain activities](#). Direct selling allows us to eliminate the barriers of female workforce participation in BOP markets through the provision of better job opportunities for women and facilitating the women empowerment.

[Direct selling](#) is a type of retailing in which independent salespeople market and/or sell the products or services directly to customers. With low investment requirements and entry barriers, direct selling offers a low-risk opportunity for unemployed or under-employed individuals to become [micro-entrepreneurs](#). In 2019, direct selling contributed to \$181 billion USD to the world economy, with over 120 million independent salespersons (Direct Selling Association 2019). [Prior research](#) argues that direct selling is a solution for the base-of-the-pyramid (BOP) populations, especially women. For example, [in India, more than half](#) of the salesforces of the direct selling companies such as Amway, Oriflame, and Tupperware are women. Specially, due to the increased adoption of digital communications since the start of COVID-19 pandemic, [the average income of the women engaged in direct selling rose 20% in March this year compared to last year](#).

The ability to establish a fully digitalised process for direct selling provides work from home opportunities for women in BOP markets and addresses most of the risks and barriers previously mentioned.

For example, [this video about a businesswoman in Palestine \(Abeer Abu Ghaith\)](#) shows how technology has facilitated her to work virtually and gave her the opportunity to avoid the difficult circumstances of working in an occupied territory. Abeer had successfully pursued further education and started a new business despite her father's strictness (one of the cultural barriers toward gender equality in some emerging economies). Thus, working virtually provided Abeer the assurance of safe working conditions despite the challenges of the daily cycle of violence in her context (Palestine in this case) as well as any other political social and cultural barriers that may have prevented her from doing so otherwise.

Further, the [flexibility of hours and conditions](#) of direct selling jobs which allows participants to balance their family and work life offers a more realistic alternative for women at the bottom of the BOP Pyramid. Lastly, this also [enables them to gain self-esteem](#) and contribute to their household's earnings, as direct selling helps women who are struggling to secure a formal employment.

Just like the often-quoted saying "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime", encouraging women in the BOP to engage with direct selling not only empowers women and provides them with an income, but more importantly enables them to gain invaluable skills and experience which will last a lifetime.



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Maryam has over 15 years' experience as a Business Analyst and Management Consultant, and over nine years' experience as a Lecturer and Researcher. Maryam has successfully completed several business consulting projects, and assisted companies in aligning their operations with their business strategies, and bridging the gap between strategy and execution.



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