



Social Norms

Biases that Center Men as Financial Customers

Financial systems, products, and services are largely designed around men’s economic roles, behaviors, and life patterns, reflecting norms that position men as the default financial customer. Although often described as “gender-neutral,” these systems embed assumptions about income, asset ownership, mobility, and decision-making that do not align with many women’s realities.

Why is this barrier important?

Financial systems shape who is recognized as a legitimate economic actor. When products, requirements, and delivery models are designed around men’s economic roles and behaviors, women must adapt to systems that do not reflect their realities. This can limit not only access, but also effective use - particularly for women with lower incomes, informal livelihoods, or constrained mobility. As a result, financial inclusion efforts that do not address these design biases risk expanding access without improving meaningful participation.

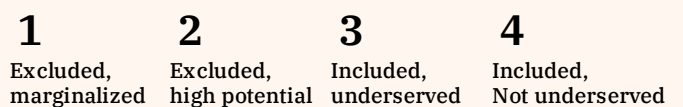
Connected Barriers



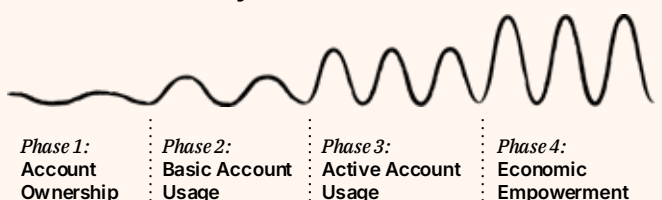
All Other Barriers

Social norms barriers influence and are connected to all other barriers

Most Relevant Segments



Customer Journey Relevance





Key evidence relevant to this barrier

Building safe and meaningful financial inclusion for women will mean shifting mindsets and systems from making women [“bankable” to making the banking system “woman-able”](#). Evidence shows that financial systems are not neutral, but reflect assumptions about income, assets, and financial behavior that align more closely with men’s economic lives. Requirements such as collateral, credit histories, and formal identification systems often mirror existing gender inequalities, while product design and delivery channels frequently overlook women’s needs and constraints. As a result, women are less likely to be recognized as target customers, limiting both the reach and effectiveness of financial services.

Financial systems reflect the roles established within the household, where men are assumed to be financial decision-makers and women are expected to manage care and domestic responsibilities. These roles shape early exposure to financial knowledge, control over assets, and authority in financial decisions. Because women are not expected to act as primary financial actors, they are less likely to be positioned - or position themselves - as independent users of financial services, limiting their engagement with financial systems from the outset.

- Gender norms embedded in family dynamics assign financial roles based on gender from a young age. Men are positioned as primary financial decision-makers, and fathers are more likely to pass financial knowledge to sons rather than daughters. This limits women’s early exposure to financial decision-making and undermines their ability to build financial capability over time. ([CGAP 2024](#))
- Women lose control over assets after a spouse’s death as inheritance flows to male relatives, reinforcing men as default financial decision-makers and limiting women’s ability to access and use financial services. ([UN Women, n.d.](#))
- Loan approvals for women are influenced by male family members, particularly for larger or collateral-based loans.

This reflects a system that recognizes men - not women - as the default financial decision-makers and customers. ([World Bank, 2022](#); [CGAP, 2017](#))

Biases in product design and rules

Financial products and rules are built around assumptions that align with men’s roles as income earners, asset holders, and independent decision-makers. Eligibility criteria such as collateral, credit history, and formal employment reflect these assumptions, making it difficult for women to qualify or fully use financial services. As a result, systems described as “gender-neutral” are implicitly designed for male users, requiring women to adapt to products that do not reflect their economic realities.

- Structural inequalities in asset ownership, income, and market participation systematically disadvantage women within financial systems. Requirements such as collateral, credit history, and formal employment reflect these inequalities and disproportionately exclude women, reinforcing gaps in access and use. ([IFPRI 2019](#))
- Traditional financial product design - often labeled “gender-neutral” - fails to meet women’s needs because it is built without understanding their financial behaviors, constraints, and goals. When financial institutions adopt women-centered design approaches, incorporating women’s experiences into product development, both uptake and performance improve. ([Women’s World Banking 2023](#))
- Women-led enterprises receive smaller loans, higher interest rates, and stricter terms due to assumptions about lower creditworthiness, reflecting male-centered definitions of risk. ([World Bank, 2023](#); [CEPR, 2025](#)).



Key evidence relevant to this barrier

- Women are directed toward smaller, group-based loans when they cannot meet collateral requirements designed around asset ownership patterns more common among men. ([IMF, 2024](#))
- Lending decisions for women-led businesses are influenced by male family members, limiting women's recognition as independent financial customers. ([CGAP 2022](#))

Biases in policies and regulation

Policies and financial inclusion strategies often rely on assumptions about households, markets, and economic participation that center men as the primary financial actors. Even when formally neutral, these frameworks do not account for how gender roles shape access to assets, decision-making power, and service use. Without addressing these underlying assumptions, policies risk reinforcing existing roles rather than expanding women's participation in financial systems.

- Financial inclusion efforts often focus on expanding access without addressing whether systems are designed to work for women. Gender inequalities embedded in markets, institutions, and social norms shape how financial services are structured and delivered, limiting their effectiveness. ([IDRC 2018](#))
- Financial systems are built on assumptions about assets, markets, and financial behavior that reflect existing gender inequalities—particularly women's limited access to land, collateral, and formal markets. As a result, expanding access alone is insufficient; systems must be redesigned to account for these underlying constraints rather than expecting women to adapt. ([IFPRI/Cigar 2019](#))
- Women are underrepresented in product design and data, leading to services that reflect male usage patterns and result in lower adoption among women. ([CFI 2023](#))

- Models trained on historically male-dominated financial data replicate gender biases in lending and product targeting, embedding male defaults into automated systems. ([CFI 2023](#))
- Women are less likely to independently use digital financial services due to lower confidence and lack of relevant use cases, reflecting systems not designed around their needs. ([MSC 2024](#))

Projects that Addressed This Barrier:

- In Pakistan, a business training program improved business knowledge for both men and women, but did not translate into improved outcomes for women. One explanation is that approximately 40% of sampled women entrepreneurs reported that their husbands make all business decisions, indicating limited agency to apply newly gained knowledge. Other studies similarly show that women entrepreneurs often redirect capital intended for their business to male-owned enterprises within the household, further constraining their economic returns. ([World Bank, 2022](#); [CGAP, 2017](#))
- Investing in customer insights and the ability to analyze customer data can help financial service providers better understand women's needs and, in turn, develop more customer-centric products. In Bangladesh, GPAY (Grameenphone's utility bill and mobile top-up app) simplified their user interface which made it easier for less digitally literate women (a common barrier) to use the payment solution. ([CGAP, 2022](#)).