



Product & Market Design

Poor understanding of women’s financial needs

This barrier refers to the **failure of financial service providers to invest in understanding women’s distinct financial realities**, including their lifecycle needs, income patterns, caregiving responsibilities, and constraints around mobility and asset ownership.

Why is this barrier important?

When FSPs overlook women’s realities, standardized offerings leave women underserved, excluded, or reliant on informal alternatives that better fit their lives—and FSPs miss both a social imperative and a business opportunity. Women make up half the potential customer base, yet many remain excluded from formal financial systems or rely on products that do not fit their circumstances. This is not a demand problem, it is a supply problem: tailored solutions, such as flexible repayment schedules, low-collateral loans, savings products linked to life goals, or bundled financial and non-financial services, can help women build resilience, grow businesses, and achieve financial health. The evidence also makes a clear business case: institutions that invest in understanding women’s financial lives see measurable gains in uptake, retention, and revenue.

Connected Barriers



Consumer Protection
Overcharging



Product & Market Design
Low utilization of gender-disaggregated data (GDD)
Complex onboarding process
Inflexible product terms



Entry & Capability Barriers
High cost of using DFS (incl. transaction costs)
Low data footprint among women
Low digital financial capability



Women's Participation in the Workforce
Complex business registration requirements



Digital & Physical Infrastructure
Distance from financial services points



Policy & Regulation
Lack of proportional & tiered KYC requirements

Most Relevant Segments

1

Excluded, marginalized

2

Excluded, high potential

3

Included, underserved

4

Included, Not underserved

Customer Journey Relevance



Phase 1:
Account Ownership

Phase 2:
Basic Account Usage

Phase 3:
Active Account Usage

Phase 4:
Economic Empowerment



Key evidence relevant to this barrier

Women's financial needs are diverse, lifecycle-driven, and consistently underestimated.

- Financial diaries of low-income women show that while men typically manage large household investments (land, housing), women are primarily responsible for daily expenses and risk management — including informal methods of scraping together emergency funds. Despite high demand for savings tools, a meta-analysis of 24 savings interventions across Sub-Saharan Africa found a persistent gap between that demand and the actual provision of reliable, safe, and accessible savings products. ([Zollman and Sanford, 2016](#); [Steinert et al., 2018](#))
- Women's financial needs shift not only by life stage but by the role cash plays at each phase — from school loans and remittance products in early adulthood, to social protection transfers and enterprise insurance in working years, to disability coverage and low-cost savings in later life. Generic DFS products rarely map onto this progression. ([Gammage et al., 2017](#))
- Women's financial lives are shaped by career breaks for caregiving, earlier retirement, longer life expectancy, and higher healthcare costs. Traditional wealth and retirement planning, which assumes steady income growth, often fails to account for these realities, making it ill-suited to women. ([Oliver Wyman, 2019](#))
- DFS providers tend to offer generic products ill-suited to women's needs. Credit products with rigid repayment schedules, for example, fail to accommodate the cash-flow irregularities that characterize many women's economic lives. ([World Bank, 2025](#))

Most FSPs invest little in understanding women's needs, and data gaps compound the problem.

- A survey of public development banks (PDBs) found that 77% of respondents reported a limited understanding of women's financial needs and difficulty reaching women entrepreneurs in remote or underserved areas, while 81% cited low awareness or demand for financial services among women as a major barrier to financing women-led MSMEs. ([Inter-American Development Bank, 2023](#))
- A 2025 survey of financial service providers (FSPs) found that only 35% of senior executives reported engaging directly with women customers as or more frequently than on a monthly basis (Women's World Banking, 2025)
- AFI's findings from 30 interviews with policymakers and financial sector leaders found that biases against female customers are common among loan officers, and bank branches are often not a welcoming environment for women — with limited opening hours and customer outreach that does not account for women's needs. Women report feeling uncomfortable and as though they do not belong. ([AFI, 2016](#))
- In the Philippines, women entrepreneurs report preferring pawn shops to banks because they can access loans almost instantly with minimal paperwork — and because pawn shops accept moveable assets as collateral, which banks typically do not. This is a direct consequence of formal product design failing to account for women's asset profiles and time constraints ([Council on Foreign Relations, 2016](#))



Key evidence relevant to this barrier

- Women's World Banking's research with Bank of Baroda in India found that many women Jan Dhan account holders do not view the bank as a place to save — they believe their 'small amounts' of savings would not be valued, discouraging use of formal accounts. To address this, Women's World Banking applied design principles aimed at making women feel welcome and confident regardless of the size of their deposits. ([Dimova, 2023](#))
- In Kenya, KCB Bank revisited its women-focused strategy after initial products saw low uptake. Market research revealed that while women owned 40% of active businesses, only 9% were borrowing. By improving customer relationship management, adapting credit methodologies, and offering non-financial support, KCB increased borrowing among women MSMEs to 26% and achieved strong Net Promoter Scores. ([Data2X, 2020](#))
- Research reveals that for a small, tier 3 bank in Kenya, cost constraints limit the institution's ability to design tailored financial products for women. Instead, their current strategy focuses on understanding women's business needs and identifying revenue-generating opportunities within women customer segments. (Women's World Banking, 2025)
- Several financial institutions in India and Nigeria that received advisory services support from Women's World Banking highlighted the value of women-centered design in product development, emphasizing the importance of dedicated efforts and intentional strategies to create financial solutions that truly meet women's needs. (Women's World Banking, 2025)

Addressing this barrier requires FSPs to move from assumption-based to evidence-driven product design. The recommendations below outline how institutions can systematically build understanding of women's financial needs, from segmentation and research through to co-design, data systems, and delivery.

- **Conduct market segmentation to acknowledge different needs between different types of men and women**, and disaggregate their customer base by gender, age, location, income level, and occupation, in addition to various markets, such as micro-entrepreneurs, salaried workers, farmers, and students. This helps FSPs identify unique financial behaviors, product usage patterns, and pain points, ensuring products and services are not based on a “one-size-fits-all” approach.
- **Conduct qualitative and quantitative research on the women's market segment, using insights to inform product development.** This combination allows FSPs to understand not just how women currently use financial services, but why they make certain choices and what barriers they face. Insights should feed directly into the design cycle--informing product features, pricing strategies, distribution channels, and customer support. Involving women in prototype testing or pilot programs further ensures that products resonate with their needs before scaling.
- **Develop systematic processes to capture, analyze, and act on gender-disaggregated data (GDD)** alongside direct customer feedback. Embedding these loops into product design and performance tracking helps FSPs continuously refine offerings and ensure women's needs are being met.



Product and Market Design

Key evidence relevant to this barrier

- **Create dedicated spaces within institutions** to test and co-design new products with women customers. These “labs” can pilot tailored solutions, experiment with flexible features, and gather real-time insights before scaling. Apply the five phases of the women-centered design process of product development, from ideation to scaling, so that products truly address women's needs while delivering commercial viability.
- **Prioritize women's financial realities at the center of product design.** Financial services providers can achieve this by simplifying requirements, eliminating hidden fees, and delivering services through trusted agents who meet women where they are. Pairing these product features with clear information and stronger female representation among agents can further build trust, boost uptake, and close persistent gender gaps.