Mission

Nearly one billion women worldwide do not have bank accounts. Although financial inclusion is on the rise, men are 9% more likely to be financially included across developing economies, and this gender gap has remained unchanged since 2011.

This means women do not have access to funds for predictable life events, like sending a child to school, much less emergencies, like when a child gets sick. Research, however, shows that poor women want to save, are able to save and do save. Unfortunately, the informal mechanisms they use (storing money at home, joining savings clubs, purchasing livestock, etc.) are frequently risky, inflexible, expensive, and/or illiquid. In fact, a study in Uganda found that poor households lost, on average, about 20% of their money when saving only through risky, expensive informal means.

WomenSave aims to transform the lives of poor, rural women by addressing their personal unmet financial needs. With the inequity and behavioral science in mind, **WomenSave expands financial services to underserved women in developing economies with commitment savings plans**, a financial product through which clients regularly set aside small amounts of money in a safe place until the target amount/date is met. These savings plans empower poor, rural women to plan for predictable life events, gain self-worth and for the first time, give them a real voice and a risk-free tool to make their financial goals a reality.
What We Do

WomenSave offers clients financial literacy training, financial advisory services, commitment savings plans, regular reminders to make contributions to them and access to mobile money to safely keep their money until financial goals are met. Building on existing social bonds, WomenSave suggests clients join small groups to provide encouragement and moral support. However, financial advisory services and commitment savings plans are offered on an individual basis, something that distinguishes WomenSave from most other actors working with this demographic. Savings plan categories may include but are not limited to agriculture, business, consumer goods, education, health, housing, life events and livestock. At the same time, clients have access to flexible savings accounts and/or small group welfare funds to which they make regular contributions and have easy access in case of emergency.

Why not loans? WomenSave believes that a savings plan is a more effective financial tool, particularly for unprofitable purposes. It is less risky for poor women scared of the formal financial system because it does not leave them unnecessarily indebted. Moreover, recent research shows that:

“commitment savings accounts... help users overcome behavioral and social barriers that prevent many... from reaching their savings targets and making desired investments in the future.”

Finally, while a growing number of financial service providers offer standard loans to poor women, we are not aware of ones that focus on individualized savings products and services. WomenSave’s innovative program empowers women to gain the confidence and skills to set and reach their personal financial goals through savings. Ultimately, WomenSave does aim to bring clients into the formal financial system to access other products and services they need.

Target Market

As stated above, nearly one billion women worldwide lack access to bank accounts. WomenSave targets poor (< $2 a day) women in underserved areas of developing economies. The formal financial sector traditionally has not met the needs of this demographic for both demand- and supply-side reasons. Market research in Uganda, where nearly 5 million women lack access to bank accounts, confirmed an unmet demand for personalized savings plans. The next step for WomenSave is to conduct a pilot project in the western districts of Kanungu and Rukungiri. We will reach 1,000 clients, and extend some training to men, who market research revealed are important to engage early in the effort to economically empower women in Uganda.
Operations

WomenSave initially will operate as a program within Global Partners for Development, an international non-profit dedicated to community-led development in East Africa. It will be led by Marie Mintalucci, a financial inclusion expert with degrees in international affairs and economic development and over ten years of experience in microfinance. In Uganda, WomenSave will hire a team of Savings Officers, women with accounting, business and finance skills, to train and work directly with clients. WomenSave also will pay a monthly stipend to a part-time staff person, for administrative and other support.

Savings Officers will teach clients to use MoKash, a mobile money platform available throughout Uganda. This will enable clients to keep money safe and secure, away from personal temptation as well as family and friends. And importantly, MoKash will allow WomenSave staff to avoid touching clients’ money. After Savings Officers establish the commitment savings plans with clients, they will send them regular reminders via SMS to make contributions and alert them when their target amount/date is met. At the same time, they will encourage clients to meet in person on a regular basis with their small groups to share their challenges and success, and generally support each other.

As mentioned above, WomenSave does want to link clients whose needs for financial products surpass WomenSave and commitment savings plans with banks and/or Microfinance Institutions. Partnering with WomenSave should be particularly attractive to banks, which will gain access to capital and creditworthy clients.

Objectives & Importance

The goal of WomenSave is to expand financial services to poor women, empower them to meet their own financial goals, and bring them into the formal financial system. Metrics of success will include:

- # Women Trained in Financial Literacy
- # Savings Plan Created
- # Personal Financial Goals Met
- Increase in Women in Formal Financial System
- Improved Quality of Life for Women
There are many reasons to invest in financial inclusion, savings in particular, for women.

1. Women are disproportionately affected by poverty and discrimination, and savings help lift people out of poverty.
2. Access to mobile savings accounts is especially important for women as it increases privacy and control over funds, has been shown to increase their happiness and optimism, and can strengthen self-efficacy and self-worth.
3. Women tend to invest savings in education, healthcare, nutritious food and other household expenditures. Therefore, giving women options and tools to better manage their money can be transformational for their own lives and also for those of their families.

The goals of the pilot project include: finalizing the financial literacy curriculum, understanding client preferences (regarding popularity of different savings goals, deposit frequency and willingness to pay) and exploring developing a smart phone app.

As stated above, WomenSave will reach **1,000 clients in Uganda** during the pilot project. If successful, we hope to expand in Uganda in subsequent years, and eventually to other Sub-Saharan African countries. Other future goals include partnerships with governments and foundations to match certain savings plans, like child immunization.

**Financial Plan**

WomenSave is seeking **$90,000** to fund the pilot project in Uganda. The average cost per client will be **$90** but over time as the program grows there will be economies of scale that reduce the average cost per client dramatically.

We expect that with the current swell of interest in female financial inclusion among governments (for example, the Government of Uganda has a five-year National Financial Inclusion Strategy) and interest in promoting savings among large foundations there will be serious interest in funding a program like WomenSave.

---