

Challenging stereotypes in Armenia



In Armenia, Raising Her Voice has triggered dialogue between women, local authorities, and public service providers, and has challenged the stereotypes which prevent women from taking part in public life. As a result, women's participation in local elections has increased by ten per cent in some areas, and community groups have successfully lobbied for increased resources.

Background

Poverty remains widespread in Armenia, particularly in isolated rural areas. Women are largely absent from public forums, are poorly represented by leadership, and have little influence in public decision-making. By excluding women, governing institutions fail to be responsive or accountable to most of their citizens, exacerbating inequality.



Raising Her Voice is empowering women in remote, rural communities to participate in public decision-making. It aims to ensure gender equality in social service provision, social protection and budget allocation. The project's activities at community level reinforce its policy and advocacy work at national level.

“A lot of things have changed as a result of this project. Before, women did not approach local authorities with their problems and requests. Now they are actively involved in the social and political life of their community.”

Lusine Avetyan, Head of Community, Qarahunch village

Objectives

Oxfam is working with local partner 'Bridge of Hope' to promote poor women's leadership and networking in four communities in Tavush Province, and in the capital, Yerevan. The project particularly aims to help women and girls with disabilities, mothers of children with disabilities, refugee women, and single mothers raising children in poverty. Its primary objectives are to:

- Create more opportunities for women to be involved in politics and decision-making.
- Highlight inequality and discrimination, and promote discussion between women in communities, service providers and local authorities.
- Establish advocacy groups for women and young people to enable active participation in local politics.
- Raise public awareness of the importance of women's participation in public and political life.

Achievements

Increased women's contribution to local politics

Raising Her Voice has established women's self-advocacy groups in each of the four communities, involving a core of 60 women activists. These groups have actively participated in the development of four-year strategic plans for their communities – directly influencing the allocation of budgets to take into account the needs of local women. They have also influenced local authorities to subsidise university and college education for marginalised students.

Improved implementation of social protection policies

More than 1,000 women have participated in a range of awareness-raising workshops and meetings on issues such as social protection, health care and education. The women's self-advocacy groups carry out regular training sessions on advocacy and policy-influencing for women leaders. As a result, women are better informed of their rights and know how to lobby local and national decision-makers. Around 750 women-headed households have benefited from the

improved implementation of social protection policies which resulted from negotiations with the Armenian government.

Women empowered by digital communications

The project acts as a platform for 'e-advocacy' and online campaigning, bringing together the voices of women and young people to put pressure on the government to uphold its responsibilities to citizens. An internet campaign initiated by the project groups prevented cuts to maternity pay which would have affected thousands of women (see box).

Positive media coverage

Regular television and newspaper coverage of the project's activities, achievements and objectives have raised public awareness of the problems that women and vulnerable people face in the community, and challenged damaging stereotypes. The project is supported by *Community Voice*, a television programme with around 25,000 viewers. The newspaper *Women in Politics* is distributed on a regular basis to more than 20,000 people, and covers the country's major gender issues.



Engagement of children and young people

Youth advocacy groups are an integral part of the project and promote leadership, dialogue, and participation through discussion clubs, competitions and events. These have involved more than 10,000 participants, encouraging debate and fostering understanding of gender issues, and challenging negative media stereotypes about gender and disability.

Campaign success

In December 2010, the government introduced a new law which significantly cut social benefits to women during maternity leave. An online petition against the law quickly collected more than 1,600 signatures. Letters were sent to Members of Parliament, and posts placed on the Prime Minister's blog demanding that the law be revised. People came together in an online hub to say NO to gender discrimination. Ahead of International Women's Day in March 2011, project participants joined hundreds of other women to march through the streets demanding that the government back down.

Just three months after the Bill was introduced, calls for change were heard. The law is currently being redrafted, and the government has promised to uphold women's rights.

Lessons

- The involvement of well-known women in the project has been very successful in raising awareness and gaining support from both the community and local authorities.
- Oxfam's long-term partner, Bridge of Hope, is known for its work on disability rights; while this partnership has helped in terms of the project's reach and reputation, its particular focus on disability issues has sometimes eclipsed the specific gender equality focus of Raising Her Voice.
- More collaboration and sharing of learning are needed between the target communities; international exchange activities could also improve project effectiveness.
- The project is not yet in a position to scale up for more widespread coverage. As Oxfam and Bridge of Hope have limited capacity, it will only be possible to do this, and to influence decision makers at national level, through close cooperation with other civil society organisations.

"Women can and should be actively involved in social activities because they are closer to social issues and can see the ways of their settlement more clearly."

Nelli Goginyan, member of the Noyemberyan community council.

Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.

