



RHV Nepal Community Discussion Class participant making her point. Photo: Oxfam

Raising Her Voice: The power to persuade

How women's voice and influence is strengthening governance and challenging inequalities



OXFAM

INTRODUCTION

From 2008-2013, Oxfam's Raising Her Voice (RHV) programme worked to create more effective governance systems by ensuring that women's voices influence decisions about services, investments, policies and legal frameworks, from community, through to national and regional levels.

To date, over one million marginalised women in 17 countries are estimated to have benefited from increased activism, leading to increased voice and influence, more effective engagement with targeted decision makers and greater institutional accountability.

The programme's impact is wide ranging and impressive in both scale and depth. Together, 45 local partners, 141 community activist groups, and over 1,005 coalition members have contributed to ten new laws to prevent and protect against gender-based violence, and supported the passing of nine laws to promote a wider spectrum of women's rights globally. This includes new domestic and sexual violence legislation in Uganda, Nigeria, Mozambique and Pakistan, and a law aimed at preventing political violence against women candidates and voters in Bolivia.

RHV projects supported tens of thousands of women activists and leaders who have successfully advocated for more public money that is better spent and for improved local services. For example, local government co-financing for community-led infrastructure projects in three regions of rural Albania and in Pakistan, where 70 per cent of the women leaders supported by RHV, secured district level investment for development schemes in their communities.

Crucially, RHV partners have sought to understand how power works, where it lies and how to influence it. They have used a range of strategies to change the 'rules of the game' where they exclude women.

'Our engagement in the political sphere has resulted in judges agreeing to cite the [African Women's Rights] Protocol in their decisions, the Ministry coming on board to push for an anti-Gender Based Violence Bill...and Parliamentarians understanding and referring to the Protocol in a more informed and open manner. This, in turn, has enabled the project and women's rights organisations within Tanzania to engage with the Constitutional review process within a supportive and open atmosphere.'¹



These achievements are particularly remarkable in light of the programme's limited funds. The total fund divided among the 17 country projects² averaged out at just over £50,000 per project, per year, although our analysis shows that RHV's most effective projects operated on £120,000 per annum.

This summary draws on findings from the 2013 independent final evaluation³ of the RHV programme, and from Oxfam's own final reporting,⁴ as well as current debates around effective 'pathways to change' in relation to women's political leadership. It gives just a flavour of our numerous combined achievements and impacts, and shares highlights from our learning about core principles and strategies for supporting cost-effective, transformative governance work.⁵



TAKING ONE STEP AT A TIME...

One of the external evaluation's most valuable reflections about the programme's effectiveness was the important reminder that, '...given that increases in women's voice and influence will happen over the long-term and the entrenched

nature of the barriers and challenges, the work must be understood in long-term and collaborative terms... truly effective strategies need to be designed in cognisance of the fact that RHV partners control only their part of something bigger, more complex and longer term.'

As well as recognising that, in most countries, RHV's achievements built on the strong foundations of previous individual and collective activism, this reminds us that future projects seeking to strengthen decision-making processes and institutions must be conceived as stepping stones towards a longer-term process of change.

Although global RHV programme funding formally ended in March 2013, the community activism and coalitions it supported in many countries remain very much alive and well – another important step along the path to future change. The RHV journey continues: in the work of Oxfam's 'Amal' ('Hope') programme in North Africa and the Middle East; in the development of new regional programmes in Southern Africa and Asia; and in Oxfam's continued support for existing RHV projects in Honduras, Nepal, Pakistan and Uganda.

EQUALITY AND EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE VIA WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

In 17 country projects, each of them designed in response to very different contexts, RHV has supported a wide range of strategies to lift women out of poverty and isolation.

The world over, RHV experience and evidence shows that when governance structures include more women – and these women are better prepared and better connected – there are **practical benefits** and **strategic gains**, not only for women, but for the wider community.

EVIDENCE: FIVE REASONS TO DO MORE TO INCLUDE WOMEN

1. More public money that is better spent – and improved local services

In Nepal, some 89,000 people benefited from £42,524 additional funding,⁶ because in villages where RHV worked with women leaders, an impressive 42 per cent were able to positively influence village and district development committees, compared to just two per cent in non-RHV villages.

‘A few years back when I visited their villages, these women used to hide their faces when I asked them to say something. Now within a year or two, things have changed completely. Now I have to be well prepared before I go to hold a discussion session with them.’

Mr Mohan Lamsal, Village Development Committee Secretary, Nepal

2. More women in decision-making spaces – creating greater transparency and improved accountability

Greater representation for women, individually and as members of coalitions, contributes to tackling discrimination, inequality and injustice at all levels of society.

By the end of the project in Papua, Indonesia in 2011, village development planning meetings were not only held publicly, but nearly half of participants were women, compared with five years ago when only men could take part. The experience in Honduras shows the value that women add when they are able to participate in such forums:

‘The women’s audit committee on public budgetary transparency and expenditure gradually gained the trust of the men. They saw that the women, even though their level of literacy was limited, were actually asking good questions about the budget and following the money like bloodhounds. The women were gaining real power and influence.’⁷

3. When women get together great things are possible – and they’re harder to ignore

Twenty years of research in 70 countries confirms that the number one strategy for combating violence against women is the power of a strong feminist movement.⁸

RHV has invested heavily in the growth and strengthening of women’s collective action at all levels – often across deeply embedded political, social and ethnic barriers. Our partners have established and supported 141 community activist groups and the coordination of 1,005 diverse coalition members.

In Chile, for example, a cross-party women’s network broke individual women candidates’ isolation. ‘...The *‘Mas Mujeres al Poder’*⁹ campaign allowed us to work on the issues collectively and with generosity. Most of us were not coming from the same political parties or the same geographical area.’¹⁰

RHV projects have also addressed women’s marginalisation within their own communities and organisations, to ensure that local political activism and national coalitions are as *inclusive and representative* as possible.

In Pakistan for example, RHV deliberately invested in work with 30 Women Leaders Groups, to build inclusive relationships between their 1,500 members and thousands of less educated or less well-connected members of local Community Action Committees. In this way, women leaders and community activists were able to bring the experiences and demands of Pakistan’s most invisible women directly to those with decision-making power at local, sub-national and national level.



4. Changing the rules of the game – tackling structural barriers to gender equality

Creating a level playing field, through changes to policies, laws and practices has been most successful where RHV projects have simultaneously promoted grassroots and national advocacy.

RHV projects have carved out *new models of cooperation* between citizens and state, creating more opportunities for the inclusion of women and other minorities in decision making.

In Chile, RHV partner Corporación Humanas tracked a 20 per cent increase in support for a gender quota amongst senators as a result of their long-term lobbying for increased representation. In Armenia, the evaluation noted that ‘a very important effect of the project is the new model of cooperation between women and local government, and consequently different formal and informal ways of women’s inclusion in social and political decision making at community level.’

5. Gains in tackling violence against women and girls and gender-based violence

Gender-based violence and violence against women and girls (VAWG) is responsible for more deaths and injuries in the world of women aged between 15 and 44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined.¹¹

Violence – and the fear of violence – is a significant barrier to women’s participation in decision-making spaces.¹² Similarly, women leaders and activists risk violence from those fearful of their efforts to challenge the status quo.



Self confidence and self awareness, precursors to a call for respect, Liberia. Photo: Oxfam

Between them, RHV partners and coalitions have contributed to a range of work to address VAWG, from community through to national level. As well as an impressive contribution to the passing of 10 new VAWG laws and seven draft laws with RHV support, the tradition of ‘honour killing’ has been banned by traditional leaders in one village in Pakistan, femicide is now classified as a crime in Honduras, Bolivia and Chile, and VAWG courts have been created under the new Judicial Body Law in Bolivia.

LESSONS LEARNED: A GUIDE FOR GOVERNANCE AND GENDER JUSTICE PRACTITIONERS

Starting Out – The RHV Theory of Change Model

The RHV ‘theory of change’ model (See page 7) shows three broad spheres influencing women’s opportunities to participate in decision-making spaces and processes: personal, social and political. It endeavours to capture the complexity and the ‘interconnectedness of all things’ in women’s lives and was used by many RHV staff and partners to review and develop projects by ‘*providing a simple front end to a complex process*’ of how change happens in women’s lives.

The evaluation confirmed that *RHV projects have been most effective where all three spheres are clearly addressed* – usually in partnership with others – and where complementary work was carried out to link pressure for change at local, district, and national and international levels.

Work on **PERSONAL** empowerment is the bedrock for all change processes, recognising the importance of women’s **knowledge** and **confidence** in their ability to influence power relations and decision making.

- **For women’s participation and leadership to be meaningful** investment is required to ‘grow’ the political confidence and influencing capacities of women activists, including power mapping, social audits and mentoring, as much as increasing the number of women in decision-making spaces.

‘We need political education. Otherwise, once we manage to have dialogue and they start talking to us about things like municipal budgets, it’s like jumping out of a plane with no parachute. If they are talking about infrastructure, I have to know about infrastructure. If they are talking about territorial rights, I have to know about territorial rights.’

Bertha Zapeta, RHV Guatemala

- **This core of activists and leaders needs long-term support** to be effective as leaders, change agents and role models. A scatter gun approach of ad hoc interventions targeting large numbers of women does not lead to sustainable benefits.
- **Explicit attention must be given to developing a wide range of strategies to reduce the risk of violence** for women and provide them with protection and support. Not only because the threat of violence negatively impacts on women’s participation, but because successful governance programming, which challenges the status quo, can provoke *backlash*.

In the **SOCIAL** sphere ‘changes, especially in relation to networking and solidarity, are the glue enabling greater changes in the other two’.¹³

- **Collective action and voice** is critical for women’s safety, for demands to be made unapologetically and for them to be taken seriously by those in power. The RHV evaluation found some of the strongest and most sustainable impact was where projects contributed meaningfully to the strengthening, collaboration, and organisation of civil society organisations working for women’s rights.

‘It was a huge challenge to acknowledge each other and stop labelling. Women do not necessarily trust each other, so you need to build bridges to strengthen the demands of all women without discrimination.’

RHV Bolivia

- **Greatest leverage is achieved through building broad-based and creative alliances** which, although time consuming, are essential for strengthening the collective action needed to shift the structural and attitudinal barriers to effective governance.

In South Africa, explicit attention to the development of a multi-sectoral approach to the way in which women experience HIV and AIDS, VAWG and poverty, has changed the way that RHV partner POWA and coalition members, many with little experience of addressing these interconnected issues in their full complexity, now work.

- **Signing up the powerful** by forging constructive relationships from the outset with influential male opinion leaders and shapers was crucial for supporting these far-reaching change processes.

RHV Nepal rewarded male champions through media coverage of visits to, and support for, community initiatives benefiting women. In Nigeria, targeted influential individuals in the media joined project steering groups and acted as core campaign partners. More strategic political and media partnerships have helped to bring key opinion shapers on board to challenge gender stereotypes and promote positive, balanced voices on important gender equality issues.

Changes in the **POLITICAL** sphere – in legal frameworks, power structures and accessibility of decision-making – are essential steps towards increasing women’s participation and influence, but progress is slow and multifaceted.

- **The power of evidence-based advocacy** is clear from the experience of numerous RHV country projects that used social audits to evidence underinvestment in, or poor quality of, local services and map (non)compliance with commitments to women’s rights.

Examples include analysis of political party manifestos relating to female genital mutilation in The Gambia and audits of nine health centres and three hospitals in Guatemala. In Chile, annual public surveys were used to shape influential campaigns on women’s participation, with both strong political legitimacy and high levels of public support – so that ‘*the voice on the street and in the countryside is backed by the voice of academic authority.*’¹⁴



RHV Nepal, Tika Darlarmi no longer hides her face and has the power of persuasion when it comes to defending the development needs of her community. Photo: Aubrey Wade

- **Linking community activism with sub-national and national calls for change** to address the ‘missing middle’ of governance processes.

In Pakistan, Women Leader Groups have worked at community, district and national level to bring invisible women’s voices directly and strategically to those with decision-making power. Strategies included the first National Women’s Manifesto, developed in 2012 through widespread consultation to provide political parties with an unapologetic list of demands for ‘fairer’ rules of political engagement for women. The Manifesto included the call for elections to be declared null and void in constituencies where fewer than 10 per cent of registered voters were women.

In the run-up to the May 2013 elections, ‘in KP and FATA regions... where ANP party workers were found to have stopped their women from voting, the Women Leaders Group and Community Action Committee raised it with [party] leadership who consequently took action against those party leaders/workers who had stopped women from casting votes.’¹⁵

- **Unashamedly political** – RHV partners have shown a stronger understanding over the five years of **how power works, where it lies and how to influence it.**

In Nigeria, successful advocacy for the passing of the 2013 Violence Against Persons Prohibition Bill, led by RHV partner WRAPA, included hiring a former legislator to navigate the

corridors of power, text message barraging of Ministers and highly publicised mock tribunals. Pre-election campaigns in Nigeria, Mozambique and Pakistan used ‘Vote for the Domestic Violence Bill or We Won’t Vote for You!’ slogans to push for legal reform in the face of continued impunity for rights violations.

Many projects engaged directly with *political parties*, recognising that these are critical spaces for long-term policy influencing. In South Africa and Honduras, RHV women’s networks signed agreements with newly elected councillors to ensure that representatives deliver on a list of clearly articulated commitments made on priority issues.

RHV partners and activists have also taken advantage of *decentralisation* and *constitutional review* processes, and used public interest litigation to further prise open spaces to advance women’s rights.

BUILDING ON OUR SUCCESS

RHV is fundamentally a political programme. However

The omission of the *economic* sphere from the RHV theory of change was a deliberate move to complement Oxfam’s traditionally strong focus on a livelihoods and markets systems approach to women’s empowerment. RHV experience confirms that the *political and the economic are mutually reinforcing* and not exclusive. By supporting the development of women’s confidence, skills, voice and influence, RHV projects have helped to unlock significant economic advantages for marginalised women.



RHV Bolivia, indigenous and urban women calling with one voice for changes to the rules of political engagement. Photo: Oxfam

The RHV theory of change



'The Community Discussion Class gave me the vision and confidence and developed my capacity which has enabled me to earn the respect and trust of the society. This (is) something which no wealth can buy.'

Nepal Community Discussion Class member

The evaluation also found that RHV's explicit attention to women's personal, social and political worlds *'was highly valued by numerous RHV staff and partners'*, for example in Uganda, where Oxfam's gender justice lead also *"used this in the development of the VAWG project and influenced incorporation in our social rights programme."*

Women's *care responsibilities* and lack of financial autonomy impact heavily upon their ability to participate sustainably in project activities, and in their ability to take up positions of community or political leadership. The costs involved, for community groups and national coalitions alike, in convening meetings, running activities and supporting women's participation and attendance also impact heavily on the likelihood of these spaces continuing to function once funding comes to an end.

Future governance projects seeking to strengthen decision making processes and institutions must therefore explicitly address the significance of changes in the economic sphere on women's lives – and its intersections with changes in each of the other three – to maximise sustainability of the activism supported. The RHV theory of change (above) has been revised to demonstrate more clearly how the four spheres intersect.

MONITORING AND EVALUATING PARTICIPATION, VOICE AND INFLUENCE

With its focus on long-term and collaborative processes of social transformation, evidencing the gains of programmes like RHV is notoriously challenging. For this reason, understanding, articulating, monitoring and documenting the changes we have supported across 17 countries has been hard to do in a systematic way. The three-sphere model, though introduced half-way through the programme's evolution, has helped us hugely to overcome the original lack of a common understanding of how change happens.

Despite the challenges, several country evaluations have found creative ways of understanding and demonstrating their impact and particular contribution to the changes

sought. For example, the evaluation of RHV Nepal used a comparator group to show the dramatic changes in capacities, confidence and community support witnessed in RHV villages compared to those where the project had not been active. RHV partners in Guatemala developed formal accountability reports for the women they worked with and for local authorities, as a way of modelling the type of transparency that they themselves were calling for.

'When you work for women's interests, it's two steps forward - and at least one step back. And those steps back are... often evidence of your effectiveness; they represent the threat you have posed to the power structure, and its attempt to push you back.'

Sheela Patel, SPARC¹⁶

The RHV evaluation report provides useful reflections for the monitoring of future governance projects - including the importance of allowing sufficient time for the development of individual and collective frameworks that find context-specific ways of identifying and articulating the changes sought.

At a global level, the RHV team were committed to documenting learning about both the processes and the strategies used by RHV activists, partners and coalitions to support women's ability to influence the decisions that affect their everyday lives. Case studies, thematic reflection papers, and blogs and videos from the women involved are available on the RHV community site: www.raisinghervoice.ning.com.

RAISING HER VOICE'S LEGACY

The external evaluation and internal review created a wealth of analysis of the strategies and processes used to support more effective political participation, leadership and influence.

The conclusions feed into the following recommendations for future governance and gender justice programming:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The systems and processes used to design, manage, and deliver services, local and national investment, and policy and legal frameworks will not be truly effective unless women's voices are an integral part of the way decisions are made;
- RHV projects have been strongest where all three spheres - the personal, social and political - are addressed and where complementary and coordinated work is carried out at local, national, and international levels. Future programming should also be more explicit about the inter-relation between the personal, social and political spheres with the economic sphere;
- Future investments in women's empowerment programming should explicitly support change in the personal sphere. As RHV experience shows, this does not require immense levels of funding. Partners and coalitions have demonstrated impressive immediate and also long-term strategic gains for women with relatively low levels of project investment;
- Future programmes should consider the critical importance of women's organisations, coalitions and networks for nurturing, protecting and sustaining individual activism - and their powerful and catalytic potential to hold those in power to account. This is particularly urgent in a context where funding for women's organisations is declining whilst becoming increasingly de-politicised, and where religious fundamentalism and economic crises are already eroding women's rights and freedoms;
- Change in women's abilities to participate in, influence and lead the decisions that affect their lives takes time. Funded projects should be conceived as stepping stones on a path towards a well thought-through, longer-term, process of change.

ENDNOTES

1. RHV Tanzania Project Completion Report 2013*
2. Albania, Armenia, Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia (Aceh), Indonesia (Papua), Liberia, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Tanzania, The Gambia and Uganda. Plus 2 regional programmes: Mercosur (from Uruguay) and Pan Africa (from Kenya)
3. <http://bit.ly/19WgoFC>
4. <http://bit.ly/1aQYTF1>
5. For more information about the programme, the full evaluation and detailed country case studies - or for numerous blogs and videos from some of the many women involved - visit the RHV community site at www.raisinghervoice.ning.com
6. In the context of official minimum wage for unskilled workers of €39.11 per month. U.S. Department of States' Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2012/sca/204407.htm>
7. RHV Honduras. For the full case study see: <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?p=9962>
8. S. Laurel Weldon & Mala Htun (2013) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802158>
9. <http://www.humanas>
10. RHV Chile Final Evaluation Effectiveness Review, 2013*
11. World Bank Study World Development Report: Investing in Health, 1993. <http://files.dcp2.org/pdf/WorldDevelopmentReport1993.pdf>
12. RHV Paper: Strengthening governance programming through tackling VAWG, learning from RHV experience at <http://bit.ly/19isxWI>
13. RHV Final Evaluation Report, 2013* <http://bit.ly/19WgoFC>
14. RHV Bolivia Project Completion Report*
15. RHV Pakistan Final Evaluation Report 2013*
16. The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres <http://www.sparcindia.org/index.aspx>, not an RHV partner but an inspiring reference point

* For copies of evaluations and for more information about the work of Raising her Voice email Emily Brown, RHV Coordinator, at embrown@oxfam.org.uk.

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