

Lessons from the Mid-Term Evaluation of Raising Her Voice



Background

Launched in August 2008 and running until March 2013, Oxfam's Raising Her Voice (RHV) programme aims to promote the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels by enabling their voices to be heard, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Oxfam is working with 45 partners and 410 coalition members in 17 countries across four continents to implement a portfolio of projects which have reached over 400,000 women to date. The projects share the overall objective of ensuring that public policy, decision-making, practices and expenditure reflect the interests of poor and marginalised women but take into account local realities and opportunities.

Seven African country projects are managed within a regional Pan-African programme. This has links to a continent-wide coalition which is working to ensure the ratification, domestication and implementation of the African Women's Rights Protocol. Ten country projects in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe have developed out of their own national priorities. A global coordination team supports project management and accountability, facilitates the sharing of learning and carries out global advocacy.

The global mid-term evaluation of Raising Her Voice was undertaken between March and May 2011 by a team of external consultants. The evaluation synthesised and complemented 14 country-level mid-term reviews, and assessed the global coordination and identity of the programme. This paper highlights the successful strategies that projects have used and draws out the lessons and challenges for working on gender and governance.

Raising Her Voice is founded on Oxfam's belief that women's access to political leadership and participation is a crucial aspect of achieving gender equality and development – and that Oxfam has an important role to play in supporting this, as part of our organisational commitment to putting poor women's rights at the heart of all we do. The evaluation confirms the importance and validity of this area of work, and concludes:

'This is an exciting time for Raising Her Voice. Half-way through the five-year funding and with all the projects firmly established, some signs of impact and transformation are already starting to be seen and plenty of learning about how and why to work on women's right to be heard is being generated.'



Effective strategies for promoting women's right to be heard

The Raising Her Voice experience shows that effective work on women's rights is necessarily complex and multi-dimensional, and requires work across different levels and domains. The evaluators propose a theory of change to help make sense of how change on women's participation and leadership is happening within the diverse Raising Her Voice projects. (See Appendix)

The theory of change identifies three broad spheres which influence women's opportunities to participate in decision-making: the personal, political and social spheres. The political and social spheres influence each other, and have strong influence over a poor woman's ability to secure her political rights, but from her personal sphere a marginalised woman currently has little opportunity to influence them back.

Therefore, in order to be effective, gender and governance programmes must explicitly redress this imbalance and support poor women to increase their participation and voice in the social and political spheres. This requires working across the spheres and at different levels: local, national and regional/global, employing a range of the diverse strategies summarised below.

The personal sphere: space and confidence

The first step towards increasing women's participation in decision-making is to build their confidence. With confidence, participants in Raising Her Voice projects have been able to claim their rights, challenge negative norms and stereotypes, and address the barriers that prevent them from participating in public life. A common theme across countries is that women participating in RHV activities at this level no longer doubt their own abilities.

"I was speaking very little before. Now I can express my thoughts and speak out in public. I have my own vision and can initiate something on my own." Project participant, Armenia

In South Africa, RHV partners work with 30 women activists from six local NGOs to build their personal and professional capacity to be leaders and advocates for women's rights. One activist explained that RHV: *"...focuses on women, empowering them, giving them skills, making a woman realise that she has rights and giving strategies on how to ensure that they enjoy their rights, how to challenge issues and make sure they make their voice heard."*

However, while Raising Her Voice projects provide many strong, positive examples which underline the importance of transformative work in the personal sphere, overall there is less focus at this level. A lesson for all gender and governance programmes is to make sure that good balance is achieved across the different spheres. For example, the Uganda project realised that successfully influencing legislation at the national level will make little difference to women's lives if the project doesn't also engage with grassroots women and support them to use that legislation to claim their rights. It is now piloting in-depth capacity building for community women in five project areas.

The social sphere: public awareness and organisation

Work in the social sphere helps to create a supportive environment and opens up opportunities for women's participation in decision-making. It can involve building and linking organisations that work for women's rights, and raising public awareness and challenging gender stereotypes.

Strengthening women's collective voice

Training and capacity building for women's groups and activists on a range of issues and skills, including leadership, advocacy, budgets and communications is a central part of most RHV projects and has strengthened organisations and individual activists. The projects provide examples of work at all levels:

- At **community level**, women are being supported to build a collective analysis of their situation, develop action plans to address issues, and gain confidence from strength in numbers.

In Nepal, women come together in daily community discussion classes where they learn about and discuss the issues that affect their lives. They have devised action plans to tackle issues in their communities, including violence against women, alcohol abuse and discriminatory traditional practices. In the words of one project partner, Raising Her Voice *“doesn’t give chickens which can die. It gives knowledge, information and new ways of thinking which change the women’s lives forever.”*



- At **district level**, Raising Her Voice has built platforms for women’s organisations and leaders to agree common strategic priorities and engage more effectively and coherently with authorities.

In Pakistan, RHV partners set up 30 district level ‘women leader groups’ to bring together women elected representatives and increase their influence, dialogue and relationships with key stakeholders in government and civil society. In each group, 50 women from different political parties came together for the first time on one platform, developed mutual trust and strengthened the collective voice of local women. The women leaders think alike on many women’s rights issues despite different ideological backgrounds and have worked together to resolve local problems such as violations of women’s employment rights and cases of domestic violence.

- At **national level**, several coalitions and networks have been developed and have become strong advocates for women’s rights, with the ability to link grassroots women to decision-makers.

In Honduras, a national coalition, *La Tribuna de Mujeres contra los Femicidios*, has brought together eight organisations and networks to develop a national campaign against the murder of women. The campaign is raising awareness of gender-based violence and demanding that public authorities make a strong commitment to reducing impunity. Already, the number of women reporting incidences of violence is increasing at municipal level, as women become more confident that they will be taken seriously.



Public awareness raising

Awareness raising activities seek to increase understanding among both women and men of women’s rights and of the laws that exist to protect women. They tend to happen either as part of an advocacy strategy for policy change, or to challenge the ideas, beliefs and practices that restrict women’s participation:

- At **individual and community level**, activities aim to raise women’s own understanding of their rights and associated laws, and to gain the support of family members and the wider community.

In Tanzania, the project has sought to raise awareness about the African Women’s Rights Protocol by making it more accessible to ordinary men and women. Activities have included translating the Protocol into Swahili, publishing a simplified version, and arranging folk and cultural performances to depict issues raised in the Protocol and engage audiences in reflection and debate. This may have contributed to a recent increase in the number of women speaking out against gender-based violence and discrimination.

- **Public events**, for example around International Women's Day, are designed to stimulate public debate, and often involve the media as strategic partners.

In Nigeria, RHV organised a mock tribunal, where women spoke publicly about their real experiences of violence. Although some victims used an alias and requested not to be video-recorded, about 90 per cent of the women confidently and openly testified. This exposed the devastating consequences of violence against women. Rosemary was among those who shared her story: *"Violence against women is real. As an acid bath survivor, I testify to that. It is not just the physical abuse but also the psychological trauma I go through whenever I realise I have to face society wearing this face. With the support I have been receiving from [RHV partner] WRAPA, I am finding it easier to cope."*

- **National and global level** awareness raising includes engagement with key stakeholders, and often involves bringing grassroots women to policy forums to speak about their experiences.

For the 2010 African Union Summit with the theme of maternal and child health, RHV Pan-Africa partners convened a rural women's conference to enable women farmers to participate in a preparatory meeting on agriculture, and participated in the East African Caravan on Maternal Health to raise the profile of the issue and encourage participation and debate by women and men across the region. This also generated follow up action for specific issues at national level including pressure on national governments in Kenya and Uganda prior to their ratification of the Africa Women's Rights Protocol in 2010.

Raising Her Voice shows that awareness raising at the different levels is often linked, and that engaging at the grassroots informs and gives legitimacy to work at the others levels. However, a key lesson is that programmes must be careful not to be extractive and to involve poor women in a way that is empowering.

The political sphere: laws, spaces and engagement

Strategies in the political sphere include working with government stakeholders to strengthen laws, policies and spaces to increase the number and influence of women in decision-making, and supporting women to participate formally as voters and elected representatives. This can involve:

- Advocacy to strengthen women's rights legislation.

Advocacy by the Women's Platform in the province of Cochabamba, Bolivia, resulted in a strong gender focus in the new provincial constitution, which has 35 'gender-sensitive' articles. Learning from this was shared to promote replication at national level. The national constitution now includes articles enshrining social and gender equity; non-discrimination; individual and collective human rights; non-violence; education without discrimination; equal participation in government positions; and women's economic, employment and land rights.

- Supporting women elected leaders and candidates to increase their capacity to participate and represent the interests of marginalised women.

In Armenia RHV supported women local election candidates on their election campaigns for the community council and in some cases as mayoral candidates, supporting their campaigning and arranging meetings with voters. One partner explained the significance of this in the traditionally male preserve of politics: *"We put forward our female candidate and she was successful, she was elected. We supported her through the election campaign, organized meetings. She is very active. Thanks to her the communication with local government is very simple and quick now."*

- Strengthening spaces for women’s political engagement by providing direct support to decision-making bodies; and by supporting local authorities to make their processes more transparent and open, and be accountable for commitments made.

In Indonesia the *Musyawarah* law aims to ensure that decisions are reached with the consent of local people. Raising Her Voice is enabling local government officials and village leaders to put it into practice, through training programmes on village planning. Elia Keiya, who works for a government programme to facilitate village development, is enthusiastic: *“Through this training, it is clear why participation is needed, and why we need to listen to women’s voices. Women’s aspirations are not only to reduce women’s burden, but also to help children and the family.”*



- Working directly with local authorities to raise their awareness of women’s rights and their responsibility to uphold them, and to increase their capacity to listen to and represent women, to improve the quality and relevance of service provision.

Project partners in Nepal have supported women to interact with district-level service providers, which has helped draw their attention to the specific needs of women. In some cases, immediate decisions have been made in response to women’s demands, such as in Bardiya, where CDC women went to the health post management committee to ask for adequate stocks of free medicines to be kept, and clear information given to community members about their availability, as well as other suggestions to improve the service. The head of the health service has noticed a notable increase in the number of women coming for treatment since these measures were implemented.

Challenges and lessons

The evaluation highlighted a number of challenges to working on women’s right to political representation and participation – and some ways in which these are beginning to be addressed.

Which women’s voices?

An important lessons emerging from many of the projects is that practitioners shouldn’t fall into the trap of assuming that women are a homogenous group. Close attention to power relations and marginalisation is an important aspect of women’s political participation and representation: programmes should ensure that all women’s voices are heard.

The Indonesian Women’s Community Partnership Forum is very diverse and includes women from different villages and ethnic backgrounds. This means that it can represent the different interests and needs of women, but can also give rise to conflict, which requires careful facilitation. This shows how important it is to keep focused on the objective of allowing different interests and needs to be heard and debated.

In Pakistan the local women leader groups have been very effective, but the formation and makeup of the groups was not informed with a thorough understanding and analysis of marginalisation, meaning that some minorities have been excluded. Work is now being done to address this.

In Honduras, women’s groups from rural areas came to the capital, Tegucigalpa, for the national campaign launch and are actively involved in organising and participating in local campaign activities. This is an important achievement, as advocacy work in Honduras is usually led by national women’s organisations, with activities concentrated in the capital city.

Responding to women's needs

One unintended consequence of raising poor women's awareness of their rights has been a subsequent demand on partners and women leaders for support to deal with personal issues, a demand that they are not always equipped to deal with.

In Nepal, staff at partner WEAFF are concerned that they are being approached by women victims of violence, but don't have any trained counsellors. They are anxious to be able to respond appropriately, and not to add to the victim's burden. Similarly, a social mobiliser in Surkhet district is worried that women confide in him about their problems rather than speaking to the police or other relevant authorities. While this could be interpreted as a positive sign of him having built trust with the community, he is worried that he lacks sufficient information and authority to address the issues, and is anxious not to create over-reliance on one person, for the long-term sustainability of the project.

In Pakistan many women's lives have been transformed through the intervention of women leaders and community activists working with RHV, which go well beyond the project scope and can be taken as an indication of their leadership qualities. For example, women lawyers have provided free legal advice to victims of violence and abuse. However, inspiring as they are, these stories highlight the need to institutionalise support and protection mechanisms for women, including guidelines for volunteers dealing with domestic violence issues, and creating long-lasting linkages, for example with legal aid organisations.

Supporting women to be effective leaders

While many projects have been successful in increasing women's participation in decision-making, opening up spaces for women to participate is not enough when their voices may still not be strong enough to make change. Ongoing work is needed to support women to be effective leaders and to represent women's interests.

In Nepal, women's representation is increasing in community decision-making structures, but their capacity to make meaningful contributions still needs to be enhanced. Women representatives can be de-motivated in their new role if they are unable to work on equal footing with and earn the respect of their male counterparts; whilst men often dismiss women's role in decision-making if women are unable to demonstrate results. In many instances, when women have managed to attain leadership positions, there is a sense that men are waiting for them to fail: *'As they were very vocal and insisted on leadership positions, we have given them the chance. Now let us wait and see what they can do with their limited capacity and low education level.'*

Working in coalition

Coalition building, or working through coalitions, has been an important part of the work in several countries, and working together strengthens women's collective voice. But there is a difference between speaking together and speaking with one voice. Effective coalitions need to be built on solid foundations, which may require a lot of groundwork and complementary work on social attitudes and awareness of women's rights. For a coalition to function it needs to be able to discuss fundamental points of disagreement openly, but also draw a line between openness and inclusiveness, and fundamental values which are non-negotiable.

The experience of coalition building in Nigeria was that inclusivity and engagement of religious and cultural institutions can help to break down apprehensions and engender dialogue and negotiation on issues of women's rights. However, broad based partnerships also run the risks of challenges in fund administration and accountability and it is very helpful if expectations and deliverables are agreed, put in writing and endorsed by all.

Working with women and men to protect women's rights

Another common theme emerging from the country projects is that it is necessary to engage both women and men in order to transform power relations and make progress on women's rights. Working with women alone often leads to suspicion and resistance from men, who need to be convinced that promoting women's rights can benefit the whole community. On the other hand, practitioners shouldn't assume that men are opposed to women's rights: several Raising Her Voice projects clearly show how gaining the support of key male stakeholders can help projects to progress.



In Pakistan, male civic activists were involved in the RHV project through participating in local action groups. In a cultural context where women have limited mobility and their presence in the public domain is not accepted by many, women-only projects can be perceived as a threat to traditional values, especially when dealing with political or economic rights. The project's strategy to include women activists in the women leaders' groups, while still involving their male counterparts in training and activities, has facilitated access to government and organisation of public events, while building participating men's knowledge and capacity on and support for women's rights.

In Indonesia, events and consultations have been held with tribal and religious leaders, who are almost universally male, to foster their support for the aims and activities of the project in their communities, especially amongst men. Community leaders and government officials are showing increased awareness of women's rights as a result. Leaders of the Catholic Church have expressed their commitment to the project and are delivering its messages in services. In the words of one religious leader in Papua: *"I realise now that women want to be involved but they have not enough opportunity to speak out. We have to start to listen to women's voices."*

Monitoring and evaluating the strength of women's voices

RHV projects are achieving transformative change in women's lives but weaknesses in our M&E systems mean that some of our successes are overlooked. We need to get better at:

- Monitoring and reporting on the right thing, moving beyond donor requirements, and activities and outputs to monitoring and reflection on outcomes and impact.
- Ensuring adequate capacity and resourcing for effective monitoring, including human and financial resources and time for reflection.
- Developing stronger indicators to strengthen reporting on progress towards transformative change in women's lives, particularly in the personal sphere.

You can find out more about the achievements of and lessons from the individual Raising Her Voice projects through the case studies available at:

http://intranet.oxfam.org.uk/programme/gender/programme_areas/womens-leadership/rhv/rhv-projects

You can keep up to date with the latest about Raising Her Voice through videos, images, key documents and blogs at: <http://raisinghervoice.ning.com/>

For further support or resources to help your gender and governance programming, contact the Programme Resource Centre: phd@oxfam.org.uk

Appendix: Proposed theory of change for Raising Her Voice

