

# Forging a strong coalition in Uganda



Raising Her Voice in Uganda achieved a major success with the ratification of the African Women's Rights Protocol in July 2010. The project has also raised awareness of the Protocol at grassroots level; successfully lobbied for legislation against domestic violence, female genital mutilation and trafficking of persons; brought the voices of poor women to the attention of policy-makers; and developed a strong, diverse coalition with a single identity to campaign for women's rights in Uganda.

## Background

Uganda has made good progress on women's rights at a policy and legal level in recent years, but this has primarily affected the lives of the educated elite. In rural Uganda, family planning remains almost impossible; girls are far less likely than boys to complete school; and domestic violence is often seen as acceptable. Women working in the informal sector have not benefited from efforts by government to provide credit, as few meet the necessary conditions. Women are also faced with the burden of care as the country struggles with the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

## Objectives

The Raising Her Voice project aims to promote the role of poor and marginalised women in decision-making, enabling them to enjoy their rights as equal citizens of Uganda. Implemented by Akina Mama wa Afrika, and working in coalition, the project has achieved its aim of ensuring the ratification the African Women's Rights Protocol. The coalition is now lobbying the government to implement the Protocol, and to remove the reservations on women's right to medical abortion and control of fertility. This will be achieved through:

- Building a strong coalition to promote women's rights.
- Networking, lobbying and advocacy with poor women activists.
- Working with public institutions and decision-making forums, including traditional structures.
- Building the capacity of civil society organisations to achieve women's rights.
- Disseminating examples of good practice through innovative media and communication work.



## Achievements

### A strong coalition to promote women's rights

Raising Her Voice is working in partnership with the Uganda Coalition for African Women's Rights to implement the project. The coalition was set up in October 2007 and now comprises 30 civil society organisations. It has brought the voices of ordinary women to the attention of policy-makers – helping to bring the Protocol, and its potential, alive. The coalition has developed a single logo and identity, and will continue to campaign for women's rights in Uganda far beyond the lifespan of the project.

### Widespread popular support

A wide range of activities, including public discussions, workshops and marches, have raised poor women's awareness of the Protocol, and how they can use it to claim their rights. Members of the public were enlisted to collect signatures for a mass petition which was presented to Heads of State at the African Union (AU) Summit in Kampala in July 2010, where the Protocol was later ratified. Workshops have been held for District Councillors, students, representatives of community-based organisations, and community leaders to engage their support for the project.

### Support from public institutions and decision-making forums

Ahead of the 2011 parliamentary elections, meetings were held with the two main political parties, which then incorporated key articles from the Protocol in their campaign manifestos. During this period the project helped to ensure that reproductive health was high on the agenda. Presidential candidates took part in televised debates on the issues and during International Women's Day celebrations in March the President spoke out against Uganda's high maternal mortality rate. Prior to ratification of the Protocol, coalition members held several meetings with key stakeholders, including cultural leaders, to lobby for their support. The Coalition also carried out training for the Uganda Police Force on the relevance of the Protocol to their work.

### Increased capacity of civil society organisations to achieve women's rights

Coalition members have 'mainstreamed' the Protocol into all other areas of their work. For example, coalition member The Council for Economic Empowerment of Women in Africa (CEEWA) organised a workshop targeting Private Sector members. This aimed to raise awareness of women's difficulty in sustaining livelihoods

in agriculture and small-scale enterprises, and demonstrated how the Protocol can be used to promote women's economic rights.

### Innovative media and communication work

Strategies to communicate the aims of the coalition and engage the media and the public include: translation of the Protocol into local languages; publishing a petition in a national newspaper calling on AU Heads of State and government to ratify and domesticate the Protocol; producing and distributing policy briefs on the Protocol to raise awareness and encourage campaigning by grassroots activists; developing a media kit and holding training sessions with media editors, with the aim of improving coverage of women's rights and the Protocol; documenting women's personal stories and experiences during the East African 'caravan on maternal health' prior to the AU Summit in July 2010; and producing and airing television spots calling on the government to address women's issues.

## Lessons

- It is sometimes necessary – and acceptable - to compromise. Initially, coalition members were adamant that they would only accept full ratification of the Protocol, but were convinced by Raising Her Voice activists from Gambia that accepting 95 per cent success was better than taking an 'all or nothing' approach.
- Working in a coalition has proved extremely effective. Coalition members work in different parts of the country, focus on different areas of work, and have different, complimentary spheres of influence and areas of expertise.
- The involvement of local or community religious and cultural leaders at the grassroots level has been critical to the success and acceptance of the campaign. Linking grassroots women with national policy-makers has also been an effective strategy.

*"I wish to take this opportunity to thank and congratulate SOAWR\* and all NGO networks in Uganda, who worked for many months, and round the clock at the Kampala Summit, for the ratification of the Protocol."*

Litha Musyimi-Ogana, Women, Gender and Development Director, African Union Commission

\*Solidarity for African Women's Rights (implementing partner for the Raising Her Voice Pan-African Programme)

Uganda is one of seven countries under the Raising Her Voice Pan-African Programme promoting the acceleration of the African Women's Rights Protocol.

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.

