

Annex: Short case study from Armenia RHV

Objectives:

Raising Her Voice Armenia is a three year programme (2008-2011) to strengthen poor women's leadership and networking at community level. RHV Armenia is implemented by Bridge of Hope Civic Centres in four communities. These civic centres have a strong reputation and authority in communities and have built good relations with community leaders. They are all led by women with majority women members and are funded by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs with a range of international organizations including Oxfam.

Strategies:

RHV Armenia works with women to raise their voices both as elected representatives to the Community Council and participants in other planning structures, and as citizens, providing *space to organise* and *building their capacity* for advocacy, networking and lobbying.

- During the time of elections to community council, RHV *worked with women candidates* (6 women stood, supported by RHV) and organised meetings with the electorate to muster support. Although this work has been appreciated, it was also observed that more funding was needed for women candidates to deal with entrenched attitudes and traditional allegiances and practices which work against them. One civic centre manager explained: *"If we had more funding for the organization of the electioneering, we could be more successful. The candidate needs PR campaign which requires certain costs, authorized delegates, who would work better in case if paid, cars to transport the voters, etc."* Without this effort, female candidates are not playing on a level field, as one explained: *"I was one of the candidates and wasn't elected. It is very hard experience. I won't try again. There are other election technologies working in the community."*
- The project also *set up women's and youth advocacy groups* in all four areas where members can discuss and prioritise community needs, propose solutions and in the case of the women's groups, develop funding proposals in collaboration with local government and other local development stakeholders from private and non-government sectors.
 - Women advocacy group members are mostly professional women employed in different organizations, whose status helps them to communicate easily with local authorities, with some retired and unemployed women who are empowered through the working relationships and have time to work on community activities. The women's groups mobilize and direct resources from state, private and non-governmental organizations to the solution of the community problems. One civic centre director explained: *"We have learned how to communicate with the Community Council. We not only write letters and wait for the responses; we are inviting them to our centre for discussions to present our proposals, to raise community needs and problems."*
 - Women's advocacy groups cooperate with local government to develop proposals and funding plans. Local authorities provide some funding, and determine how much needs to be raised from other sources. In each of the target communities, 10-15 different issues were raised and discussed with local authorities including support for training and education of women and girls, financial support and tailored services to vulnerable people and families in need, and improved access to schools and nurseries. For example: *"Based on our proposal, a privileged approach is used for vulnerable children. Children with disabilities and without parents can attend the art schools free of charge; one-parent children can pay 50%. This donation is done by the community budget."*
 - The youth advocacy groups promote leadership and dialogue, participation and initiative through discussion clubs, competitions and events. Members have discussed their vision of equity and equal opportunities and share this in their schools and families. The children propose initiatives to improve their communities to develop clear plans and develop collaboration with local groups. With new knowledge and information, and regular activities including computer and art classes, their ideology and vision develops and changes, they make new links, learn how to communicate with each other

and with different officials, and how to present in public. One girl member explained: *“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.”* Another was quoted as saying: *“I am aware of my rights and nobody can violate my rights. I will not become a regular woman, who will have children and that’s it.”*

- In both youth and women’s groups, space was provided to discuss and reflect on the principles of integration and inclusion, human rights and non-discrimination, and *carried out community awareness and education activities*. For example, one group used international women’s day as an opportunity to raise local awareness of women’s rights: *“We distributed postcards to women in the streets with congratulations, and flyers elucidating women’s rights and issues to men in the streets so that they become aware of and respect women’s rights.”*

The project also works to *strengthen local relationships* between government, civic centres and other civil society organisations to strengthen women’s influence and monitoring of community development plans. Community websites were developed with information on the advocacy groups, community news and history with photographs and community development activities and projects, as well as a directory of organizations working in the community. The web site aims to ensure transparency and accountability, enabling dialogue between the community and local authorities.

Impact on attitudes and gender relations:

The women’s and youth advocacy groups have been able to use the space, structure, relationships and training to develop and initiate community activities and development projects which solve some of the problems they feel are important. The evaluation found that the project had effectively influenced local spending and planning decisions, and begun to make an impact on thinking. However, this engagement depends largely on the structures (and momentum) being maintained, which participants seem optimistic about: *“Women’s advocacy groups will continue functioning even without funding, because they don’t get any money for their work. Everything is based on our personal links and good relationships in the community, with leaders and decision makers. These relations will remain”.*

Transformative impact has been seen at the personal level. Advocacy group members were asked to list what they would have gained by the end of the project, and mentioned new friends, greater self-respect, new attitudes towards gender equality and awareness of gender issues, greater tolerance and respect for different approaches. They also noted that the training, and their experience of collaborating with local authorities and the media and running campaigns, had left them with important skills for advocacy. However, gender stereotypes persist, as do stereotypes of disabled, poor and marginalised people, and the momentum could be sustained through further media and campaigning work.

Members of both women’s and youth advocacy groups quoted in the evaluation as having new awareness and behaviour in relation to women’s political participation, with quotes such as this from an advocacy group member: *“Women’s voice has to be hearable in the community. It is impossible to imagine a family where women’s voice is not present, only men’s voice is accepted. The same is in the society and the state.”* And also in relation to women’s representation in local government, such as this advocacy group member: *“The elections are coming soon, we want to have many female candidates for the Community Council. So they will raise the problems concerning women, children, equity etc.”*

There are signs that RHV has strengthened the momentum for women’s empowerment in relation to men, with one group member noting that *“At first people wanted to get rid of us. Now they understand and listen to us.”* Another explained that *“The gender relations in Armenian families are not equal. Men have more power. But we have to change the situation. There are already changes. Women start to take part in the discussion of political issues. Girls of our age are more active than boys.”* But there are also signs that this

has potential to cause friction and conflict. One civic centre director stated that: *“When I talk like that men, particularly my brother rebels against. Men are afraid to lose power and control.”*

And there is clearly still far to go, with the greatest acceptance of women’s empowerment and political participation where it is limited to traditionally female domains, such as childcare. One participant described this attitude from a training participant, *“One of the male participants asked ‘We perceive our mothers like saints, women are the keepers of our families. How should we ennoble you more?’ ”* But the women themselves are often not challenging this limitation on their empowerment. One civic centre director explained: *“We don’t want to deduct men’s power. There are spheres like household and childbearing, where women are more aware. We want to make right decisions.”*

Impact on opportunities for women’s political engagement:

The civic centres have a very sustainable partnership network that includes local authorities, private enterprises and NGOs and have established cooperation with the media, networking which was strengthened through the project. They are also popular in the community, one of the few organisations carrying out activities of benefit to the communities, organizing meetings with community councils and citizens, discussions of the community problems and putting community needs forward on the planning agenda. In this way, RHV brings together the different human and financial resources in the community, creating a new model of cooperation between community, especially women, and local government, and consequently different ways of women’s inclusion in community decision-making: *“We got the right direction how to solve the problems in our community. We saw the problems but didn’t know how to solve them. Now we are empowered to apply to the LSG.”* There is still a way to go, as this member explained: *“In the frames of the Project we learned how to creep on all fours, we have to learn to walk, then we will be able to stand firmly.”*

However, the story also shows the great challenges for achieving gender equality in political representation, with many women candidates unable to compete with traditional allegiances and habits. In a society where decision making and breadwinning are traditionally male roles, the example of women participating in community council elections is an important precedent for the communities: *“We put forward our female candidate and she was successful, she was elected. She is very active. Thanks to her the communication with LSG is very simple and quick now... Our suggestions are always raised and approved at Community Council.”* Although not all women candidates put forward by the CCs were successful, the promotion of women’s leadership and participation in resolving community problems has been very important. One civic centre director explained: *“During the last Community Council elections I was one of 37 candidates, but wasn’t elected. We had even female candidate for city mayor, but she wasn’t elected either. But that’s not a problem. The good result is that women become more active, our voices become hearable, we communicate with the community on all the levels.”* However, some women who weren’t elected felt despondent and vulnerable, that the challenge was too much, showing that transformative change is incremental and slow and needs to be addressed on many levels.

Lessons learned:

The Armenia RHV project demonstrates the power of linking work on political representation, with work on participation and capacity to engage, in order to enable marginalised women to make the most of the structures and spaces available to them. This also requires them to have strong and effective advocates and partnerships both with local authorities, but also with nongovernmental organisations such as Oxfam who have an important role to play. The project evaluation listed some learning, which showed that it is necessary to work with different groups and on interrelated issues which is complex, and must be culturally sensitive. Building relationships requires inclusion of all units of decision making and problem solving, and awareness of local resources. By organising large-scale campaigns and involving the media, but also keeping communities aware of project progress and activities, trust can be built and messages heard to change local thinking and attitudes.