

Annex: Challenges of working on women’s right to be heard

This is some of the learning about challenges to working on women’s right to political representation and participation, which the evaluators have picked up from our reading of the midterm evaluations. We include them here in case they are useful for future thinking, planning or documentation.

Building a collective voice for women’s rights:

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 ground, which may require a lot of groundwork and complementary work on social attitudes and awareness of women’s rights. The **Uganda** evaluation team interacted with some members of the RHV-supported women’s rights coalition, who do not believe in equality for men and women, with one coalition member arguing that *“Men and women are inherently unequal because God created them differently. Equality may come in terms of jobs, incomes and material resources and yet a woman will always remain subservient whether educated or not, employed or not.”* However, the Bolivia case study showed how space for meeting and reflection can help to overcome differences in a positive and constructive way, to build a stronger and more united movement for women’s rights. In Guatemala, too, support was given to reduce the disadvantages of rural women due to an urban bias in activities, including the design of practical activities to bring rural women’s organisations into existing networks.

For a coalition to function it needs to be able to discuss these types of fundamental disagreements openly, but there is also the need to draw a line between open and inclusiveness, and fundamental values which are non-negotiable. The **Uganda** evaluation considers that: *“The effectiveness of the campaign could be compromised if some of the key actors are not fully persuaded of its aspirations. Change in attitudes should therefore begin from within the coalition.”* This clearly points to the need to work on attitude change at all levels, as suggested by one respondent in the Uganda MTR: *“We need community educators to be trained to educate the community on issues of women’s rights.”* But it also suggests a need for open and transparent discussion of values and assumptions within any coalition, to ensure that the work is based on shared objectives and theory of change.

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. Transparency and full disclosure of financial status is key in gaining the confidence of group members. For RHV, MOUs were signed to guide implementation and release activity-based funds only when there was a definite commitment for activity implementation from the partner.

Women are not a homogenous group:

The **Indonesian** ‘Women’s Community Partnership Forum’ is very diverse, including women from different villages and ethnic backgrounds. This means that it can represent different interests and needs of women, but can also give rise to conflict, for example when developing proposals to put to local development planning processes. This requires careful facilitation, for if the chair uses the position to further their own interests this can derail the process. 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 in fact 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. The evaluation found that planning to ensure continued and sustained participation of all members,

including poorer women and those from more remote areas, was not adequate. Strong mechanisms for monitoring gender, diversity and participation in project implementation are needed to ensure that such spaces are effective. Close attention to power relations and marginalisation is an important aspect of women's political participation and representation.

In **Pakistan** and **Indonesia** the evaluations reported a relative lack of participation of rural women in RHV activities, because of practical issues of time, distance and money. In Pakistan, for example, a lot of networking, advocacy and campaign work goes on at district headquarters and women from remote areas are not able to participate actively without provisions for reimbursing their travel expenses.

The complexity of women's lived realities

The **South Africa** project highlights the complexity of women's lived realities, which cannot be dealt with through working on one or two different sets of issues in isolation. Partners agreed that using an intersectional analysis was important, and that women's movements had been slow to make these connections. Organisations mentioned that being part of the Raising Her Voice and being part of this process to tackle women's challenges from an intersectional analysis has broadened the scope of their work. One partner explained that:

'our understanding now is that the three can happen to one woman, in one place and environment...a woman can be abused or raped and it results in HIV/AIDS infection and because of dependency on men, women are not self sustainable and can live poverty.'

An activist from **South Africa** felt that RHV had value because:

"It does not only address GBV but other things that make women not enjoy their lives. It encourages women to enjoy their rights economically, physically or in other aspects too. It makes sure that all the challenges affecting women are covered. It does not leave other women outside, it includes also the challenges that the LGBTIs are facing."

Partners concurred that addressing women's issues through an understanding of the complexities and intersections of gender based violence, HIV/AIDS and poverty is a relevant way of addressing women's challenges that could be potentially replicated in other provinces. However, partners agreed that work on the three intersections (HIV, violence and poverty) shouldn't be limiting, forcing other realities into the background, but an entry point to addressing the different issues in a woman's life. Trainings on the intersections (based on the conceptual framework document), relevant regional and international instruments as well as strategies on how to engage effectively with state institutions and lobby and advocate for women's rights effectively should be done in other provinces.

Structural and organisational support for change

In Indonesia, RHV has targeted women leaders as a strategy based on the assumption that they would be agents of change, socialising and disseminating information and sharing the capacities they build with other poor women. However, it is difficult for just a few activists to make changes in women's political participation, when there are hundreds or even thousands of women in each village, and in many cases the women do not have time to attend all the available trainings and events. In Papua, the targeting of few women leaders to receive training and support actually created some social envy and resentment from women who were not chosen to participate, and a sense that RHV was discriminatory. These **women leaders need structured, institutional support and spaces** to act as change agents and represent the interests of marginalised women, without which the strategy has resulted in disproportionate benefits for elite women and can create rifts in the local women's rights movement.

In the **Pakistan** evaluation there are stories of individual lives being 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. Women leader groups have supported individual women in times of crisis, and have intervened to strengthen and protect services for women. For example in one area the group prevented a family planning facility being moved out of the area. In others, 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 create long-lasting linkages, for example with legal aid organisations.

A similar challenge was highlighted by POWA in **South Africa**. Participants for the leadership training were selected because of their work in communities and their potential in promoting the rights of women, but this meant that they were usually not directors in their organisations and **did not have authority to implement actions or change strategy as a result of the learning**. Participants have begun implementing what they have learnt, however key to this is ensuring that the momentum is maintained and translated to a wider scope. A representative from one of the South Africa partner organisations acknowledged the relevance and usefulness of concepts learnt through the RHV project and has at a personal level been able to incorporate them into her work. However she has not been able to influence the rest of the organisation. To address some of the challenges she has encountered in advocating for this expansion of issues, she is thinking of 'interrupting the power' in the organisation by establishing her own organisation that can work from an intersectional approach in assisting the community. It is important to look at mechanisms to ensure that benefits to the individual representatives are translated to a wider number of women.

In Nepal, the evaluation found that women's representation is increasing in the local community structures, but their capacity to meaningful contribution still needs to be enhanced. However, women representatives were not always able to influence proceedings, which required more training and experience to build confidence, and support from their families. Women representatives can be lost and de-motivated in their new role if they are unable to work on equal footing with and earning mutual respect of their male counterparts. What's more, women's participation has increased more in groups which have quotas for women's representation on committees, which indicates that **participation needs not only motivation on the part of women, but conducive policies and structures**.

Working with (men and) women to protect rights:

The **Nepal** review found that there is a **need to engage and raise the awareness of both women and men** to change long standing patriarchal attitudes, beliefs and practices that restrict women's opportunities, participation and influence in formal and informal decision-making structures. Women activists who had the support of the male members of the household were far ahead of the others as social workers and activists. In **Nigeria**, changing deep-seated traditions and cultural inhibitions informed by patriarchy is a major challenge. This informed initial resistance when engaging the men and traditional institutions. However, with effective advocacy and lobbying as well as transparency as a value for the engagements of the project, the resistance is gradually giving way.

In Pakistan, male civic activists were involved in the RHV project through participating 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 women's rights. The evaluation recommends that this approach be replicated in sector-specific projects, such as those in education and climate change.

In Tanzania 85% of human rights monitors targeted for local training are men. These campaign and carry out a number of activities to achieve elimination of FGM and domestication of the protocol for women's rights. While men are a resource to the project and to work hand in hand with women in the promotion and protection of women's rights, they should not be the dominant group that leads the process. **Women's participation needs to be seen and felt.** Otherwise we may not be so sure that women want these agendas; or want to be represented by men; or if men's commitment to the project's is genuine. In fact the report mentions one human rights monitor, trained under RHV, who submitted his own daughter to forced marriage and FGM for a bride price.

Balanced and sustainable change is slow:

The **Pan- Africa** report recognises the risk of working in an unbalanced way: the risk of back lash from religious and cultural fundamentalism and the 'success risk' of empowerment of grassroots women to become vocal rights advocates in contexts of imbalanced power relations. This is balanced by the risk of regional instruments not being implemented at national and local levels and needing to develop the demand side of advocacy. This has been seen in **Armenia**, where women candidates for election were demoralised when they were not elected due to entrenched discriminatory attitudes, or **Pakistan** where opportunities for women to hold government accountable, as elected representatives or citizens, have been shrinking since the project began because of dissolving local government structures (where 30% seats reserved for women) in 2009.

Opening up spaces for women to participate is not enough when their voices may still not be strong enough to make change. The strength and familiarity of mainstream interests and needs creates an unequal playing field for the promotion of marginalised women's interests, and means that tangible changes and results may be slow to come. In many cases campaigning for changes in law, society and practice is a risky activity, and women activists have to confront discriminatory attitudes head on. This can be uncomfortable, and if change does not come quickly can be demoralising or even risky. **In Indonesia**, village development plans are considered a key entry point for women's participation and representation, but with so many interests represented, including those of elite groups of women, it is not easy to get marginalised women's needs represented. As one activist pointed out:

"Lots of the women involved in the credit union want training, and this was proposed at the village development planning forum, but the participants felt that a breakwater was more important because otherwise the village lands would be lost...The forum has never discussed the needs of women in the village."

In Armenia, RHV has worked with female election candidates to support their election campaigns, but was not able to invest enough funds to match the campaigns of more established male candidates, or contend with attitudes, values and practices which favour them. In the absence of such funding, the failure of women candidates was likely and this was demoralising, as one candidate expressed: *"I wasn't elected. It is a very hard experience. I won't try again. There are other election technologies working in the community. I'd like more women candidates to run for elections in our community, but not me."* However, through the example they have set they have begun to change expectations of women's political participation, and built a certain momentum among the RHV supported women's advocacy groups to make women's voices heard in local decision making. One group claimed that: *"we want to have many female candidates for the Community Council. So they will raise problems concerning women, children, equity etc."* The midterm evaluation noted that RHV Armenia's approach of working with all the decision makers and problem solvers in the community, to draw out diverse resources, ideas and solutions which are appropriate to the local environment had been effective. This enabled the project to address discriminatory attitudes and beliefs without confrontation, and introduce new expectations and approaches.

In Pakistan, the discontinuation of the local government system has severely restricted the project's ability to improve women's role in accountability at the local level since many spaces for engaging with local elected representatives are no longer available. In many instances, ex-councillors who are a part of the women leaders groups have become disgruntled and inactive. However, some remarked that RHV had provided a platform for erstwhile elected representatives after the dissolution of local bodies. In the run-up to the next local elections, the project has an opportunity to work toward creating an impact on women's role in accountability and governance but that would require efforts not only in preparing these women to step back into the local political arena but also to strengthen their capacities.

... and expensive: Many reviews noted limitations due to lack of funds. For example, the ***Nigeria*** MTR states that poor budgeting for programme activities hampered the active participation of the project secretariat at RHV events and limited funding meant that a wider reach in terms of beneficiaries could not be achieved.