



Policy Briefing:

Creating new spaces:

Women's experiences of political participation in communities

Summary

Womankind Worldwide's research on women's political participation at the community level in Afghanistan, Ghana, Nepal and Zimbabwe has found that women-only groups or 'spaces' have multiple benefits for women's participation in politics and public life.¹ Participation in these groups builds confidence and self-esteem; an understanding of women's rights; and the skills needed to take an increased role in decision-making inside the home, in community groups and ultimately, for some, in electoral politics. Support for such groups and spaces has to, therefore, form a central element of efforts to promote women's participation, empowerment and leadership in politics and beyond. However, as the research illustrates, there are persistent challenges that continue to hinder women's political participation that also need to be addressed. This briefing sets out the research's key findings, provides an overview of how Womankind partners (women's rights organisations) in each country support the spaces, and makes recommendations for all actors engaged in work to support women's political participation.

1. Womankind Worldwide, Global Report: Creating new spaces: Women's experiences of political participation in communities, December 2015.

Cover image: Women participants in the quarterly meetings in Ada East District, Ghana
Below: Chair of a Fishmongers' Association, Ada East, Ghana



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The research

The research explored women-only groups in Zimbabwe, Nepal, Ghana and Afghanistan. It looked at the factors that enable women to engage in these spaces, the benefits women got from these spaces and how they translate their involvement in decision-making spaces into real changes in their lives and the lives of others in their community.

All of the Womankind partners involved in the research provide training to women participating in the groups. The specifics of the training vary, although the following elements are usually included: understanding politics, the constitution and decision-making; informing women about their rights; how to plan and present issues to decision-makers and speak in front of men; and how to present themselves and their issues.

The groups studied were a mixture of selected and self-selected women. In Zimbabwe and

Afghanistan, existing decision-makers were involved in nominating and selecting women or suggesting different groups from which women should be invited. In Ghana and Zimbabwe, some women decided independently to go to the meetings because they heard about them or were curious. In Nepal, the Dalit Women's Groups (DWGs) are inclusive of all Dalit women whereas in Afghanistan all women Community Development Councils (CDCs) members are nominated.

For all four partners, the groups were considered to be mechanisms for women's empowerment, building women's confidence and preparing women to raise issues with decision-makers. The groups were also a place for sharing the concerns of women and girls, for example violence against women and girls and land rights, and they were an opportunity to meet other women and create a sense of solidarity.

Partners' Specific Activities

Women in Politics Support Unit (WiPSU): In Zimbabwe, WiPSU created a new women-only group called the Ward Consultative Forum (WCF), which brings together up to 50 women from different communities at the ward level. The participants meet a few times all together in WCF meetings convened by WiPSU over the year, but women from the group convene meetings in their own communities/villages once a month, to continue the work started in the WCF, sharing information and promoting dialogue around key issues with women where they live.

Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre (Gender Centre): In Ghana, the Gender Centre created a new group that brings together 70-80 women leaders from different associations and communities at the district level, with the District Chief Executive, as well as with government officials such as the Budget Officer and Planning Officer. The Gender Centre facilitates the meetings every quarter. Women are also encouraged to share what they have learned in their communities and associations.

Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO): In Nepal, Dalit Women's Groups (DWGs) were formed by Dalit women at the community level and supported by FEDO to become established. Around 50 women are active in each DWG and all Dalit households in the community usually have a member in the groups. All Dalit women are encouraged to join. The groups meet monthly and operate a savings and loans scheme - money is collected every month and loans disbursed. The meetings also provide a forum for awareness raising on women's rights and training. FEDO identify women with leadership potential and help them access training opportunities and link them to other women leaders.

Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC): In Afghanistan, AWRC supports women's participation at the village level through the Community Development Council (CDC) structures set up as part of the National Solidarity Programme. Each village has either one female and one male CDC or a joint male and female CDC. CDCs are comprised of between eight and twelve members from the community and the members are usually nominated by decision-makers in the community (although they are supposed to be elected by community). The National Solidarity Programme had held elections to select women members of the CDCs prior to the start of the project but their role was often merely symbolic; therefore, AWRC worked with the women's CDCs to build their capacity to engage effectively.

The power of the spaces for women

"I have become fearless and determined to tackle any situation."

Young woman member of Kavre District Board, Nepal

This section explores the value of the women-only spaces for their members and looks at what the spaces enabled them to do for themselves and for their communities.

The value of women-only groups

"WCF is where I found my friends and it inspired us to find opportunities. After the first meeting I realised I could do something and could be a leader, something I had never imagined."

Young member, Mutasa WCF, Zimbabwe

Across all four countries, the research found that women-only spaces have real value for women. They provide a safe place, essential to building women's confidence, self-esteem and agency. Women meet other women, learn, share, make friends and start to do things together. These groups also made women feel empowered to take action to address problems in their communities and others felt inspired to contest leadership roles, or take on greater responsibilities elsewhere. In Nepal, for example, the creation of safe spaces enabled Dalit women to work together to challenge caste-discrimination. In Afghanistan, the safe spaces gave women the confidence to participate at district-level meetings, including voting against projects proposed by the men's CDCs.

Entering male-dominated spaces

"Some men say 'it is not good when women crow like a cockerel'. They say this about any women speaking, not only Dalit women. Men dominate the meeting; we have to struggle. Now it has changed a lot and now men listen a lot. Even if some make comments, others say 'we should listen to women'. We have learned we have rights so we are more persistent."

Treasurer of DWG, member of Ward Citizens' Forum, Ward 6, Hokse Municipality, Nepal

Through their participation in the groups, women learned they were equal to men and through this were able to challenge the discriminatory attitudes, behaviours and social norms that have prevented women's meaningful participation in other groups where men dominate. In Nepal, women participants said they were now able to

meaningfully participate in different decision-making processes. In Afghanistan, some women Community Development Council members travelled with male members to district-level meetings. In the past, this would have been considered shameful.

More equitable decision-making in the home

"I have learnt to be independent and not rely on my husband."

Women's Fellowship Church Council and farmer, Atwima Mponua, Ghana

Across all four countries, women participants reported more equitable decision-making in the home. In Afghanistan, some women stated they had increased confidence, which enabled them to be more demanding in obtaining control over their lives. For example, women spoke of fighting for their own or their daughters' right to go to school and being able to be more vocal in expressing their opinions in domestic affairs. By being part of a community initiative, they said they felt more important, which in turn increases their self-worth. In Ghana and Zimbabwe, women participants said that their new learning and confidence had enabled them to talk to their husbands or brothers about, for example, the use of farming land, or how to raise girls and boys equally.

Gaining knowledge, knowing rights

"The sessions I really liked were on knowing my rights as a woman; it made me value myself as a woman, see myself equal to others."

Mutasa WCF Co-ordinator, Zimbabwe

Women felt the knowledge and skills learnt through the groups meant that their families and communities respected them more; they were able to articulate where to go to solve local problems and how to approach decision-makers.

Many women were acutely aware of their lack of education; this was particularly the case in Afghanistan and Nepal where women perceived this as a huge barrier holding them back from participating in decision-making processes. In Ghana, women talked about the respect earned from other members of their communities due to the knowledge gained through their participation in the groups. While the women in Zimbabwe had more formal education, they also felt unaware of

many issues, including their rights to be represented, to speak out and to be free from violence. They felt that learning about their rights and legal issues, such as the importance of making wills, securing birth, marriage, citizenship and identity certificates, was of critical value to their lives - as did women in Ghana and Nepal. In Zimbabwe, women particularly valued knowing about their rights to participate in voting and to stand for election, to be represented and learning that they could do what men do.

New leadership roles

"When nominations opened I wasn't confident to pick up a form but now I am bold and will apply for the Unit Committee."

Women's organiser NDC, Ghana

For many of the women, participation in the women-only spaces - and the confidence and knowledge they had gained as a result of this participation - was the catalyst for them to take on leadership roles elsewhere in their communities.

The groups enabled them to learn from other women already in leadership positions on how to prepare for and speak at public meetings. Others talked about learning about the qualities required for leadership through the training they accessed.

Women in Zimbabwe started attending and speaking at village head meetings. They ran village meetings themselves to share learning with other women and there was evidence that more women had taken up leadership positions in, for example, School Development Committees, saving groups, church groups and health committees. In Nepal, participants were inspired to become more active in promoting Dalit women's rights and attended other forums and groups to make their views known. They have also joined political parties.

Taking action for change

The spaces themselves either brought women into contact with decision-makers or provided a forum for women themselves to be involved in community decision-making. In Ghana, Nepal and Zimbabwe, participants lobbied decision-makers to take their needs and rights into account. Some women, particularly in Ghana and Zimbabwe, have taken up a range of issues in different ways; individually, in their homes, communities and by working in groups make their views known.

In other cases, women were not waiting for decision-makers to act but took action themselves, often because of the lack of Government resources available. In Ghana, for instance, women mobilised others to begin building toilets and teaching quarters, whilst lobbying Government to contribute support to these initiatives.

Addressing other forms of discrimination

"I have suffered lots of discrimination so I make a point of being in many committees to wipe it out."

Group participant, Nepal

The spaces provide an opportunity for women to come together in solidarity to discuss and address wider forms of discrimination. Many Dalit women in Nepal, for example, felt they did not know how to challenge discrimination and 'untouchability', but through their involvement in the DWGs and, for some of them, being members of Dalit pressure groups, they have been able to take action to tackle discrimination and now know where to go to seek justice, as well as being able to advise others suffering from these problems.

Men's support for women's participation

"Although my husband and his family were initially sceptical of my attendance, they don't object to me getting out of the house and attending trainings or meetings such as this one with the rest of the CDC members anymore."

CDC member, Kalakan, Afghanistan

For many women, without the support of their husbands or male relatives, they cannot attend groups or meetings. In many cases, men were hesitant at first but after seeing the benefits of women's participation they were encouraging their wives to attend.

Men's support was said to have increased in Ghana, Zimbabwe and Nepal as women built their confidence and gained benefits for the household or community through, for example, savings and credit; or getting services into their communities by speaking out at meetings. There was some backlash for women in Ghana and Nepal with men spreading negative gossip about active women, but this was often said to diminish when men could see the tangible benefits for the community. While some women in Zimbabwe did not participate because their husbands refused them permission to attend meetings, most of the women and those observing the progress of these women - such as the male village heads and local Councillors - said that as the women developed through the training the men appreciated their work and contribution and supported their involvement.

In Afghanistan, although some women had concerns about young men curtailing their mobility, most women in the CDCs felt that men were generally becoming more supportive of women's increased mobility and girls' education, over the past ten years.

Challenges for women's political participation

Despite the above successes, the research found that across all four countries, there remain significant barriers to women's political participation. This section briefly highlights some of the main challenges found across the contexts.

The enabling environment

“Men can go anywhere. We have to be accompanied so cannot go and mix with people. Men have freedom. When we go somewhere they will send a small brother as a chaperone. We know he won't protect us. When we go out we have to ask and inform the men but they don't do the same. We also have to report back after our meetings.”

Member of the Kalidevi DWG, Shikapur, Nepal

The research found that, despite the good work of women-only groups, meaningful participation by women is undermined by a lack of a legal framework that supports public participation, including by women. In Zimbabwe, for example, Local Government is not committed to including citizens in decision-making processes or to allocating funds to meet the needs of marginalised groups. This hampers lobbying efforts by the women who participate in the groups.

The social and cultural context also impacts in women's participation in all four countries as they are forced to navigate pervasive gender discrimination and other forms of discrimination. Many women spoke of needing men's permission to attend the meetings and having to juggle participation in the groups with heavy domestic duties, which meant some women were getting up at 4am so they could do domestic work and participate in the groups.

Impact of lack of economic empowerment and resources

Women's lack of economic resources also affected their political participation. Attending the meeting for some meant losing income, or time away from working on the land and domestic chores, and for others transport and food costs. In Ghana and Zimbabwe, Womankind's partners covered women's transport and refreshment costs for the main meetings with decision-makers and for training, but the meetings the women themselves ran in the community were not funded at all in Zimbabwe. Here women had severely limited

financial resources and some chose to walk up to 15 km to meetings to save the \$5 bus fare.

Women's lack of economic resources was also a barrier for women aspiring to be elected as they could not fund their own election campaigns and publicity materials.

However, in Nepal, the savings and loans element of the groups is a key factor in sustaining the groups and bringing the women's husbands and wider families on board, making it easier for them to justify going to the meetings.

Low literacy levels

Many women who were not literate did not have the confidence to put themselves forward for leadership roles or participate in other decision-making processes. This was especially the case in Nepal and Afghanistan.

Holding decision-makers to account

The research found examples of women programme participants raising issues, sometimes repeatedly so, and decision-makers not taking any action. In these circumstances, the women often had few means to hold the decision-makers to account, beyond reminding them that they committed to specific actions, because of a lack of power or sanction. The relationship between demanding rights and receiving them is mediated by a wide range of other factors including political affiliation, available resources, district priorities, what donors are willing to fund in the district, and the interests of the Member of Parliament.

Political nature of the work

Unsurprisingly, women's political participation is affected by the political context and political tensions can increase the challenges. Political parties may not prioritise women's equality and women's rights. Reliance on external donor funding – as is the case in Zimbabwe's Local Government – can blur the lines of accountability. The lack of open discussion around these complex political realities because of sensitivities means that the projects appear at times to be working in a vacuum. Yet, without taking clear account of the local political and economic realities and working with the women to find ways to address them, this can leave women open to disappointment or political manipulation.

The importance of not essentialising women

There is an assumption that runs through a lot of work with women that they have shared interests and will work together in harmony to achieve agreed goals. This research confirmed that this is unrealistic: women's aspirations and needs differ according to location and many other factors. In some places there was more solidarity and unity around shared interests than others.

In Zimbabwe, for instance, women were brought together from different villages within one ward. These villages are often miles apart and have very different characteristics in terms of livelihood options, access to roads, transport and markets, and in relation to infrastructure and essential services. When they come together to talk to the Councillor about their priorities, many feel they represent their specific village and its needs and it is hard to find a common agenda that affects all the villages in the same way.

Sustainability

There were different levels of follow-up support to the women or the groups and in some contexts this was minimal. Once project funding or the training cycle ends there are no resources provided for follow-up visits and training or for financial support for women to carry on their own meetings.

This means relying heavily on women's unpaid time for the continuation of projects. Expecting women to do long-term development work, as volunteers without financial and other support, is the subject of much debate. Oxfam's evaluation report of the Raising Her Voice programme noted that women's care responsibilities and lack of financial autonomy impact heavily upon their ability to participate sustainably in project activities and their ability to take up long-term 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 impact heavily on the likelihood of these spaces continuing to function once funding comes to an end.²

Conclusion and recommendations

The research showed that women are using women-only groups and spaces to make important incremental changes that are challenging some of the social norms that uphold gender inequality. They also lead women to carve out new roles for themselves elsewhere in their communities and gain respect for having done so. This confirmed the real value of women-only spaces in promoting women's participation in politics and public life.

The research revealed that in the countries, except Afghanistan, women were taking on new leadership roles and were mobilising other women to take action for change. The research points to the importance of monitoring and learning from incremental change, including women's raised awareness and self confidence; their knowledge of the political terrain and where to go for knowledge and advice; their ability to come together to solve their own problems and mobilise other women in their communities; the changes they feel able to make within their own households; and their ability to use their agency and voice in public meetings. However, these changes are often overlooked or undervalued. The research also pointed to some common barriers to women's participation including persistent discrimination, a lack of time and economic resources, the political context, a lack of sustainability once external support ends and the challenges of accountability between women and decision-makers.

These findings are relevant and timely, given the recent agreement of Target 5.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which calls on UN Member States to "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life,"³ as well as the reaffirmed commitments to women's full, equal and meaningful participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding made in October 2015 during the High-Level Review of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.⁴

This offers an important opportunity for donors, institutions and governments to both engage in an increasingly productive dialogue around how best to support women's participation and leadership, and how to ensure this support has full impact. Based on the findings of this research, *Womankind Worldwide* makes the following recommendations in this regard:

2. Oxfam, *Raising her Voice, the power to persuade*, Oxfam's Summary Evaluation of the Raising her Voice programme evaluation, full report written by Hannah Beardon & Eva Otero, June 2013.

3. *ibid.*

4. UN Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice and Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR1325*, 2015.



Right: Women members of the Ward Consultative Forum Makoni, Zimbabwe.

Elanor Jackson

Recommendations:

- Increase investment in women's participation and leadership, particularly at the sub-national level, and recognise that supporting the creation of women-only safe spaces is an essential element of this.
- Recognise and explicitly address the obstacles to women's participation arising from the lack of enabling environment in policies and programming, and by partnering with women's rights organisations.
- Recognise and support women's diverse pathways into political participation and leadership, and the technical and political role women's rights organisations play in working with women to understand and engage in political systems in a myriad of locally-relevant ways.
- Ensure funding for women's political participation is long-term, sustainable, flexible and accessible to locally-based women's rights organisations to enable social norm change around women's participation and leadership, and so that they can respond to sudden and unexpected changes in the political context in which they work.
- Ensure that global and national indicators agreed to accompany Target 5.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals are robust and true to the scope and ambition of the target. This means capturing both qualitative and quantitative changes in women's participation in decision-making, including at the local and household level.

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This briefing was written by Bethan Cansfield with input from Abigail Hunt, Bethan Williams and Claire Hickson. It is based on research delivered by Elanor Jackson and Tina Wallace with input and support from Womankind staff and partners (WiPSU, FEDO, AWRC and Gender Centre).

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