

Women's Participation and Voice in Community-Based Organizations

I. Key Issues

Women's participation in community-based organizations (CBOs) has created an important space for women's exercise of voice and agency across different arenas—access and control of community resources, enhanced decision-making power in the household and community, and chipping away at social and cultural norms that constrain women's exercise of agency.¹ Women are active participants in CBOs such as water user groups, sanitation committees, farmer groups, loans and savings groups, and irrigation user groups. Yet, they are still underrepresented in leadership positions, and entrenched traditional views and cultural practices continue to restrict their public roles.

Development wisdom maintains that community-based institutions are more successful and more sustainable, and deliver better outcomes in improved operation and maintenance (O&M), collection of user fees, and ownership of the facilities by communities. In short, they are more effective and efficient in managing community infrastructure and local service delivery. This has led to devolving and transferring the operations and management of community water supply and irrigation systems and other infrastructure to communities through the establishment of user groups. Women are actively involved in these user groups, which have opened new windows for women to engage in public and leadership roles.

Given women's primary responsibility for household water, sanitation, and family health, women's membership in water supply and sanitation groups has been actively encouraged and facilitated. In

many community-based water supply and sanitation projects, women's membership in water user groups can be as high as 30%–50%. Still, women have limited influence over key decisions on technology choice, location and design, fee setting, and O&M. These decisions are still largely made by men, who dominate the apex water management committees. Unlike water supply, women's involvement in irrigation management groups has remained a challenge since women are not seen as farmers or irrigators, and few are landowners. Landownership is usually a criterion for membership of irrigation water management committees. While women's participation in CBOs has certainly created new spaces for women's expression of agency, their effective participation and entry into key decision-making roles still requires improvement.

Participation and membership in CBOs is a good first step to having women's voices heard in areas that particularly affect women's lives and livelihoods such as management of community resources, water supply and sanitation, etc. Membership on its own, however, is insufficient. Women need complementary support to build their financial, technical, management, negotiation, and advocacy skills to help them influence key decisions and to make the transition to leadership positions. For women to become leaders of infrastructure management groups, gaining the support of male community members is equally important. Changing public perceptions and stereotypes of women as leaders is also required.

Regardless of the intrinsic value of women's involvement in CBOs, caution needs to be exercised so that women's already heavy work burden is not inadvertently increased. Interestingly, women's

¹ A. Evans and D. Nambiar. 2013. Collective Action and Women's Agency: A Background Paper. *Women's Voice, Agency and Participation Research Series*. No. 4. Washington, DC: World Bank.



participation is actively mobilized when free community labor is required as part of community contributions. The same does not hold for encouraging women into leadership positions. Women are more likely to get involved in CBOs if they can see some direct benefits, i.e., opportunities for income generation, reduced time for water collection, improved incomes, crop yields, and/or better production methods.

Despite some remaining challenges, there is no doubt that CBOs have provided women a valuable platform to extend their networks beyond the family, expand their physical mobility, and develop and practice their public leadership roles. Experience in CBOs has been critical in helping women develop the skills, self-esteem, and confidence to become community leaders, and to exercise their voice and agency in community activities. CBOs have also provided a rich learning ground and platform for women's entry into the more formal world of local politics.

II. Strategies for Supporting Women's Participation in Community-Based Organizations

Creating an enabling environment for women to express their voice and agency in CBOs requires employing different strategies to facilitate their meaningful participation. The following are some strategies used in Asian Development Bank loan projects that have yielded good to mixed results, while drawing attention to issues that need further analysis and consideration.

Quotas for women's participation

Female quotas can help establish the necessary "critical mass" required to facilitate women's effective membership and leadership of CBOs. In Asia, water and other governance policies have codified female quotas (usually one-third) for community user groups. Setting female quotas can help shift social norms and create the space for women's entry into the public space of community decision making—previously largely the domain of men.

In Nepal, the Community-Based Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project targeted 50% women's participation in water user and sanitation committees as a key strategy for promoting women's voice in water and sanitation projects. Impressive participation rates were achieved with 52% women in these committees and 51% holding key positions (19% Dalits and 14% ethnic minority women).² The female quotas contributed significantly to empowering women and other excluded and disadvantaged groups. Women and Dalits were not only included in water user and sanitation committees but were active in leadership development and decision making in most subprojects.³ Women-led management committees were highly motivated and were able to establish higher social capital and better cohesiveness among the users. As a result, women became agents of change in their own local communities. Strategies and initiatives that promote women's participation in local planning and decision making have the potential to break down traditional barriers and promote the economic, political, and social empowerment of women. However, low levels of education and age-old exclusionary practices can constrain excluded and disadvantaged women from participating.⁴ Complementary customized capacity building should be provided for these women to bring them into the decision-making processes.

Likewise, the Central Region Urban Environmental Improvement Project in Viet Nam successfully achieved high levels of women's participation through community management committees (CMCs): 70%–90% of CMC membership, 100% female CMC directors, and 89% of community motivators.⁵ Women contributed to decisions on construction and O&M of small infrastructure; and to priority setting for road and drainage channel construction, flood protection, wastewater, public sanitation, and solid waste management. While women's participation levels were impressive, it had the unintended consequence of increasing their already heavy workloads. A gender review of the project recommended that future similar projects need to consider a better balance between men and women on CMCs, as well as strategies to encourage men's participation on CMCs to reduce the burden on women for sole responsibility for community and household water and sanitation. Attention to these aspects could have contributed to further changes in gender relations.⁶

While women's participation in CBOs is now common, the nature and levels of their participation can continue

² ADB. 2012. *Completion Report: Community-Based Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project in Nepal*. Manila.

³ Footnote 2, p. 12.

⁴ Footnote 2, p. 56.

⁵ K. Nethercott, T. Nguyen, and J. Hunt. 2010. *Gender Equality Results in ADB Projects: Viet Nam Country Report*. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

⁶ Footnote 5, p. 14.

to reflect and reinforce traditional gender roles. In many instances, women are assigned responsibility for community mobilization, bookkeeping, accounting, and fee collection in user group management committees—areas where women are perceived as having the comparative advantage. For example, the Northern Community-Managed Irrigation Sector Project in the Lao People's Democratic Republic achieved 35% women's representation in water user association committees with women holding positions as treasurer and/or accountant.⁷ Women were considered to be better money managers, better at convincing members to pay fees, and more successful at collecting water user fees—a reflection of the traditional gender division of labor in the country where women manage household finances. In contrast, the 50% female targets set for membership in irrigation user and crop productivity groups were not achieved due to the perception that women were not involved in irrigated agriculture, and claims of time constraints experienced by women. Despite the competing demands on women's time, women's voluntary labor was mobilized for village labor in assisting engineering surveys (24%), construction (35%), and O&M (37%).⁸

Capacity development to support female quotas

The design of the Tonle Sap Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project in Cambodia included specific targets for women's participation in water and sanitation user groups (WSUGs), resulting in nearly 44% participation in WSUGs; 56% participation in village meetings, 39% in O&M training, and 40% in supervision of well construction. Women were empowered to take on roles on the boards of WSUGs (43%), contribute to selection of technology and decisions on location, and participate in O&M.⁹

Women's participation levels were impressive, but some women faced difficulties in participating as WSUG board members if their parents or husbands did not allow it, and women were generally reluctant to speak and express their views in large village or WSUG meetings in the presence of males. In Khmer culture, women feel uncomfortable sharing their views publicly and can be “silent spectators” during meetings. Cultural perceptions that women should not speak freely when men are present and that men should lead discussions remain

prevalent. Project completion review field visits also reported that many female board members were not active, and possibly overshadowed, due to their lack of confidence and perception that their contribution was of less value in decision making.¹⁰ Leadership, advocacy, and facilitation training to strengthen women's participation in the WSUGs were recommended to overcome this hurdle. The follow-on project has built in complementary leadership and capacity development for women.¹¹

Using a community empowerment approach, the Community Water Services and Health Project in Indonesia achieved notable results, with 38% (115,870) female representation in various forums and meetings, during which decisions were made on the construction of water and sanitation facilities, 30% (4,298) in O&M of infrastructure, and 36% (4,380) elected to community implementation teams and as members of infrastructure maintenance boards.¹² Female community facilitators were recruited to train women so they felt more comfortable in attending, participating, and being more vocal in meetings.

As community implementation team members, women received training on water quality surveillance, selection of appropriate water supply options, finance and administration, and bookkeeping and auditing skills. The project strengthened women's capacity to plan, implement, manage, operate, and maintain water and sanitation facilities, resulting in changed community perceptions about women's and men's role in water and sanitation at home and in the communities. Community implementation teams and O&M groups where women were actively involved were also better managed, particularly with respect to financial reporting.¹³

Women's enthusiasm to take part in the decision-making forums was driven by their urgent need for better access to clean water for drinking, cooking, washing, and bathing. In village meetings, men were often more interested in discussing implementation of civil works and on whose land the facility would be constructed, while women were more interested in the location of water supply facilities, distance to the facility, and ways to improve sanitation practices in their community.¹⁴ The project contributed to giving women voice in decision making on water and sanitation and helping them on the path to making the transition to community leaders.

⁷ ADB. 2011. *Project Completion Report: The Northern Community-Managed Irrigation Sector Project in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila.

⁸ Footnote 7. Appendix 11.

⁹ ADB. 2011. *Project Completion Report: Tonle Sap Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project in Cambodia*. Manila. p. 20.

¹⁰ Footnote 9, p. 21.

¹¹ Footnote 9, p. 22.

¹² ADB. 2013. *Project Completion Report: Community Water Services and Health Project in Indonesia*. Manila. Appendix 6.

¹³ Footnote 12, p. 37.

¹⁴ Footnote 12, p. 36.

Economic opportunities and empowerment

Self-help savings and loans groups and female farmer organizations are known for their mobilization and group formation activities. These institutions have been instrumental in providing women access to economic opportunities and experience with group formation and have contributed to their social empowerment. In the Crop Diversification Project in Bangladesh,¹⁵ 150,000 women farmers were supported to form small farmer groups, both women-only groups (51%) and mixed groups. Through the small farmer groups, women were provided with extension services; new technologies; technical, marketing, pricing, bargaining, and negotiation skills; and access to credit. Some female farmers were also assisted to enter supply contracts with large farmers, traders, seed merchants, and processors.

End-of-project surveys reported some strategic shifts in gender relations at the household and community levels. Women reported that increased incomes led to “freedom” to spend family money. On average, 80% of women beneficiaries reported they had autonomy over household expenditures related to health, household assets (furniture, television), children’s school materials, and clothing. However, only 22% reported control over decisions relating to land purchase or leasing. Some women reported asset accumulation: cash savings (18.98%), land (4.89%), goats (4.89%), and jewelry (2.10%).¹⁶ Women’s confidence and family status improved, with 57% of males expressing positive views about women’s contribution to household incomes. Women-only small farmer groups also functioned as vehicles through which information on gender-related issues such as dowry, domestic violence, and child marriage was disseminated and discussed. In end-of-project surveys, about 34% of women reported a reduction in domestic violence and 29% reported enhanced mobility.

Similarly, in the Community Empowerment for Rural Development Project in Indonesia, women’s participation in village committees and community savings and loans groups gave women opportunities for new roles in public and community affairs, control over income and credit, and improved status in the family and community.¹⁷ Access to finance, as well as new financial management and enterprise development skills, led to increased incomes

for women, more financial independence, and increased confidence. Women felt proud of their contribution to the household income and gained greater respect and support from males within the family and in the wider community. Some signs of changes in the division of household labor were also reported with some husbands assuming child-care duties while women attended meetings. Participation in community savings and loans management committees led to women’s increased physical mobility beyond the household and village environment, new opportunities for meeting women from outside their communities, and learning from a wider set of experiences. Women’s enhanced public role gave them a newfound confidence. While some of these changes may not appear significant, these small steps were a big leap toward women’s empowerment in rural Indonesia.¹⁸

III. Lessons Learned

- Setting quotas for women’s participation in community institutions can create the enabling environment for women to break traditional perceptions of women’s roles in public and community decision making.
- Quotas alone, however, are insufficient for sustained and meaningful participation. Complementary capacity-building initiatives are required to build women’s technical and leadership skills and instill confidence.
- In conservative societies, setting female quotas for women’s participation can help to slowly chip away at social norms and confront cultural barriers that restrict women’s public roles and involvement in community decision-making groups.
- Caution needs to be exercised to ensure the enthusiasm for women’s involvement in CBOs does not result in adding to women’s already heavy workloads.
- CBOs have the potential to provide a rich training ground for women to develop and practice their leadership skills.

¹⁵ ADB. 2011. *Completion Report: Northwest Crop Diversification Project in Bangladesh*. Manila.

¹⁶ Footnote 15, p. 83.

¹⁷ ADB. 2009. *Completion Report: Community Empowerment for Rural Development Project in Indonesia*. Manila.

¹⁸ K. Nethercott, R. Marianti, and J. Hunt. 2010. *Gender Equality Results in ADB Projects: Indonesia Country Report*. Manila: Asian Development Bank. p. 10.