




Raising Her Voice

An overview of Oxfam GB's programme to promote women's political leadership and participation



<http://raisinghervoice.ning.com/>



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Why work on women's political leadership and participation?

Women should be able to participate equally with men in all aspects of public and political life and decision-making. Whether it is deciding how the household income is spent, or determining how the country is run, women have the right to an equal say in all matters that affect their lives. This right is enshrined in a number of human rights instruments, as well as in national constitutions and laws.

Throughout the world, however, the power relations that shape social, political, economic, and cultural life prevent women from participating fully as citizens and leaders. While efforts to challenge the status quo have allowed more women to speak out and to reach positions of power in recent years, women are still under-represented in all areas and at all levels of decision-making.

Even those women who do manage to reach positions where they can contribute to decision-making continue to face significant barriers to their full and equal participation. These include: the disproportionate amount of time women spend on household labour; financial constraints; discriminatory attitudes regarding women's roles in public life; and harassment and violence.

This inequality is immediately noticeable in the political arena.

The global average for women's representation in national government is still only 18 per cent, and women make up more than 30 per cent of parliamentarians in just 24 countries. This is a concern because equal representation of men and women is a basic issue of justice. But more than that, women's and men's different experiences need to be voiced separately, so that men's opinions and experiences are not taken as the norm, and the sole basis for political decisions. Similarly, women and men have different – and often conflicting – interests; therefore, both must be represented in decision-making processes and structures.

There is no guarantee that women political leaders will promote gender equality; nor should we assume that male leaders will not do so. But there



Power relations that shape social, political, economic, and cultural life prevent women from participating fully as citizens and leaders.

Opposite:
Campaigning for
women workers'
rights in Chile.
Photo: Cristián
Iglesias/Oxfam

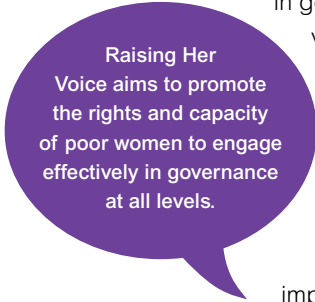
is a very clear relationship between personal identity and experience, and commitment to a cause. So while having women in leadership positions does not automatically mean that women's concerns will be put on the political agenda, it does increase the probability of this happening.

How did 'Raising Her Voice' come about?

Part of Oxfam GB's vision is that millions more women will gain power over their lives and overcome the barriers that keep them in poverty. To achieve this, we need to challenge often deeply entrenched beliefs that women are fundamentally of less value than men. We also need to transform the unequal power relations between men and women which result from these beliefs.

In 2007, Oxfam realized that our gender mainstreaming approach was only a partial solution, and that we needed to make a more concerted effort to 'put women's rights at the heart of all our work'. The organization decided to place renewed emphasis on work that deliberately aims to increase women's status, including in the area of political leadership and participation. 'Raising Her Voice' is one of the programmes designed to respond to this need.

Launched in August 2008 and running until 2013, Raising Her Voice aims to promote the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This will be achieved by enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.



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Oxfam is working with local partners in 17 countries to influence public policy, decision-making, and expenditure to reflect the interests of poor and marginalized women, and to overcome women's exclusion from political, social, and economic life. The programme also seeks to draw out important lessons from our experiences at country level, to strengthen our wider governance work, and to increase our impact in this area of work.

The programme builds on Oxfam's previous work on gender and governance, most notably in Sierra Leone. Here, a successful project mobilized women to participate in parliamentary and local elections as



Encouraging rural women to voice their needs and concerns in Nepal. Photo: Sandhya Shrestha



both voters and candidates, and generated lessons on how to engage with gender and governance issues in difficult contexts. We have also drawn on experience from Oxfam's 'We Can' campaign to end violence against women, run in South Asia.

Raising Her Voice is mainly funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development's (DFID) Governance and Transparency Fund. DFID supports initiatives to help civil society, the media and other stakeholders to promote accountable and transparent governance and governments.

What is the focus of Raising Her Voice?

Raising Her Voice is a collection of projects, each with its own priorities and approaches that take into account local realities and opportunities. However, projects focus on four broad 'clusters' of activities:

- Enabling poor women activists to network, campaign, and advocate;
- Working with public institutions and decision-making forums, including traditional structures;
- Empowering civil-society organizations to achieve poor women's rights as citizens, through awareness raising, capacity building, and training; and
- Disseminating lessons and good practice through innovative media and communications work.

Here, the programme's work is summarized by region:

Africa Women in Africa face a variety of legal, economic and social constraints to their participation in public life. In addition, discrimination and violence against women remain widespread. The African Union's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (known as the Africa Women's Protocol), which came into force on 25 November 2005, represents a significant step forward in addressing these issues.

The protocol is particularly significant as it has been developed by African leaders to respond to the demands of activists within African women's movements. It guarantees comprehensive rights to women, including their right to take part in political processes, enjoy social and political equality with men, and control their reproductive health. The protocol also includes clauses aimed at bringing an end to female genital mutilation. The emergence of new continental policies and legal standards initiated and monitored by the African Union provides an unprecedented opportunity to mobilize women to engage in governance and to take a more active interest in political issues.



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Oxfam's partners in Africa have decided to make the protocol the focus of the Raising Her Voice programme. Raising Her Voice is working to ensure that women's voices are heard in eight African countries: the Gambia, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. At the pan-Africa level, work focuses on lobbying for countries to sign, ratify, and 'domesticate' the protocol.

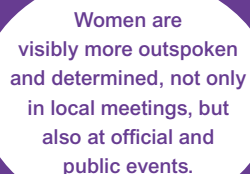
Case Study Promoting poor women's participation in governance in Indonesia

Indonesia has undergone rapid decentralization of power to the district level in the past few years, particularly with regard to the delivery of essential public services. Village development plans feed into planning at sub-district and district levels, and budgets are allocated accordingly. By law, these plans are to be developed through a process of consultation and prioritization of issues with villagers, and should be driven by their needs. In reality, women's involvement in developing and monitoring village development plans has not been significant, as prevalent social norms favour male-dominated forums and prevent women from participating.

Martina Tekege from Tipakotu village, Papua, is an enthusiastic participant in a training session for women's groups. Photo: Susana Dewi R, OGB Indonesia.



Indonesia's Raising Her Voice project is working in the province of Papua to encourage women to participate in development processes and in local government decision-making. In partnership with three local organizations, much has already been achieved since the project was started in April 2009. In Papua's Paniai district, poor women are now more aware of their rights, and have greater knowledge of, and access to, development resources. Elsewhere, community and local leaders are showing increased awareness of women's rights, as the result of a continuing capacity building programme. Following a basic gender training session with local religious leaders, one participant said: *'I realize now that women want to be involved but they don't have enough opportunity to speak out, so we have to start to listen to women's voices'*.




Women are visibly more outspoken and determined, not only in local meetings, but also at official and public events.

Events and consultations have been held with (almost universally male) tribal and religious leaders, to gain their support for the programme, and to encourage them to engage men in their community in programme activities. Government officials are also showing increased awareness of gender issues following training sessions: the highest official in Paniai – the Regent – has already requested that the programme be expanded to other areas of the district.

The programme partners have exchanged a considerable amount of knowledge and information on their respective areas of experience: governance, gender, and livelihoods. In this way, they are growing in confidence and strength. Several women's groups have also been formed, and have been trained and supported to develop proposals, through which they will access resources to implement development projects.

Above all, women in the groups are visibly more outspoken and determined, not only in local meetings, but also at official and public events. During festivals in August 2009 where the partnership between Oxfam and local organizations was celebrated, women were active and vocal alongside men, and even led prayers for the very first time.

Domestication of the protocol involves ensuring that its provisions are reflected in national legal frameworks and that these are implemented effectively. As a result, country projects have different approaches that take into account each national context. However, violence against women is a major barrier to women's participation in all countries, and many partners are prioritizing work to achieve effective legislation that addresses this issue.



Violence against women is a major barrier to women's participation in decision-making processes

Equality Now, one of Oxfam's implementing partners, is the Secretariat for the Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) coalition, which is made up of 30 organizations from across Africa. All country-level partners are members of the coalition, which enables the programme to carry out work at a continental level that draws on the specific experiences of different countries. In one example of how such a broad coalition can work effectively, in 2009 Raising Her Voice and SOAWR were able to bring civil-society leaders and women working at the grassroots level from several African countries to the annual UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York, enabling them to lobby their country representatives directly.

Asia In South and East Asia, elected women remain on the fringes of political decision-making, and women are often excluded from state-led development planning. The Final Declaration of the Asia Pacific NGO Forum on Beijing +15 recognizes that there are still complex challenges facing women and girls in Asia. These include: violence; discriminatory laws; resistance from some countries to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); and a lack of consistent democratic processes encouraging, promoting and protecting women's participation in leadership and decision-making at all levels.

Raising Her Voice is working with partners in Nepal, Indonesia, and Pakistan. In Nepal, the project is using popular communication media, such as radio, to encourage rural women to contribute to national-level advocacy and campaigning on women's rights in governance and conflict mitigation.

Already, women have become involved in campaigning for legislation on gender violence, which culminated in the passing of a domestic violence law in April 2009. Community radio is proving to be a very successful tool for mobilizing opinion, as evidenced by the spontaneous emergence of listeners' groups. This project – in common with our work in Pakistan – seeks to ensure strong relationships between grassroots groups and women entering political processes, to ensure that women elected to office adopt positions that highlight and address poverty-related issues.



Demonstrators against violence against women in Nigeria. Photo: Osaro Odemwingie

Case Study Raising Her Voice in Pakistan

There are reserved seats for women at all levels of government in Pakistan, and as a result, relatively high levels of women's representation: approximately 33 per cent in local government structures, and 21.3 per cent and 17 per cent in the lower and upper houses of parliament respectively.

However, the majority of women who enter local government are new to politics. Women councillors face institutional and social constraints that limit their capacity to perform their roles effectively, lack information about how the system works, and face resistance and discrimination from male council members.

Working with the Aurat Foundation and their established network of civil-society organizations, Oxfam is supporting women to overcome these barriers, influence decision-making processes, and be effective leaders. The project is also fostering connections between community women's groups and women elected representatives, to encourage women in governance to represent poor women's interests.

Another project objective is to register 75,000 women to receive identity documents for the first time. This is an important first step towards

participation in local-level decision-making, and 20,000

women have already been registered. Councillor

Aayshaan Mai has taken the lead in her district by

exploring the reasons why women do not obtain ID


cards, and encouraging adult women to register. She

discovered that the offices of the National Database

Registration Authority are located in far flung

areas, and that there are no segregated registration

arrangements for women, meaning that they have to have their thumb prints taken by men.



Women who enter local government face institutional and social constraints that limit their capacity to perform their roles effectively.

Aayshaan Mai negotiated with officials to arrange for mobile teams to visit her village. She used loud speakers at the mosques to publicize the visit and took thumb prints herself. As a result, 390 women were registered and received ID cards for the first time.



Women's participation in school management committees has helped increase girls' enrolment in rural Pakistan.
Photo: Oxfam

Members of an Oxfam-supported women's group in Dibra, Albania. Photo: Jon Stewart/Oxfam

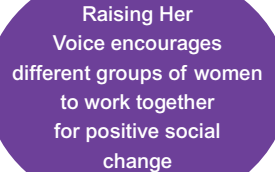


Latin America In Latin America, the situation regarding women's rights and status varies considerably from country to country. In general, Latin American women suffer less overt gender discrimination (in terms of ownership rights, civil liberties, family codes and physical integrity), than women in other parts of the developing world. However, some groups, including migrant workers and indigenous women, suffer disproportionately. Violence against women is widespread, and the murder of women is on the rise. Both of these violations of women's rights are met with very weak response from the authorities and society in general.

As in other parts of the world, women's ability to participate in political processes at all levels is restricted by a number of barriers, including: resistance from male-dominated political parties; women's inability to cover the financial costs of standing for office; and criticism and abuse from their communities. As a result, the number of women in elected office is low. For example, women make up only seven per cent of Honduran legislators, while in Guatemala only eight of the country's 361 mayors are women.

Raising Her Voice's main projects are in Bolivia, Guatemala, and Honduras. There is also a region-wide project based in Chile, which focuses on migrant women workers as a particularly excluded group.

The country-level projects work with women's groups and movements to build the leadership capacity of poor women, and to develop their ability to influence decision-makers. Projects also address the barriers to women's participation. In Bolivia, there is particular emphasis on violence against women as a major barrier to participation. Projects also aim to encourage different groups of women to work together for positive social change, for example linking rural and urban women to form a united women's movement in Bolivia, and connecting poor women with members of parliament sympathetic to their issues in Honduras.



Raising Her Voice encourages different groups of women to work together for positive social change

Eastern Europe In Eastern European countries, there are legal frameworks in place to protect the rights of women. However, given countries' limited resources and competing priorities, authorities lack the capacity to respond effectively to rights violations and enforce legislation. There is also relatively weak citizen involvement in governance and development. Our projects in Albania and Armenia are therefore working to encourage people to speak out at the community level, and strengthen civic activism to make local government more responsive to the needs of people who are vulnerable and living in poverty.

In Albania, work centres on fostering local public-private partnerships for rural development projects, investment, and advocacy through Local Action Groups in three regions. This draws on the experience of similar schemes in European Union countries. Poor women, in particular, are being targeted to join and participate fully in these groups, for instance by writing proposals for development projects that will meet their needs.

In Armenia, the project focuses on ensuring effective service delivery for children and young people with disabilities, as well as promoting the active and informed engagement of poor women in local government decision-making. The project has worked with the media to help educate women about their rights; it has also supported women to be elected to local government positions in three of its target communities.

Case Study Supporting women's right to communication in Guatemala

In Guatemala the project is using the media and other means of communication to support rural indigenous women's groups to raise awareness of their rights among the general public and government officials. Oxfam is working to strengthen these organizations, and to improve their advocacy and campaigning skills.

Over 40 per cent of the Guatemalan population is indigenous. The country has the second-highest level of economic inequality in Latin America, as well as the highest numbers of deaths among women due to violence. The combined effects of poverty, racism, and violence all serve to silence the voices of Guatemalan women, and this is usually supported or ignored by the media.

Participants from the municipality of Patzún, Quiché Department register at a workshop on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, held by Indigenous Defense Organisation.
Photo: Oxfam



Oxfam is working with four indigenous women's groups and a centre that specializes in social communication. The project is being implemented in two regions – Quiché and Petén – where Oxfam has worked for several years. To date, the four women's groups have been trained in different means of communication, for example, radio, press and television journalism, and they have linked up with a group of journalists who support their work. In one of the regions, the groups have managed to secure an agreement with the authorities to increase the budget for indigenous women's initiatives.

In the words of one woman from Petén: *'This project has made us understand that communication is a right that we had been denied. Now we are learning to exercise that right in order to improve our position as women leaders, to raise the voices of other women and make the authorities listen to our agendas'*.



What next for Raising Her Voice?

Although the programme is still at a relatively early stage, it has made good progress over its first year. We hope to build on what we have already achieved and work towards further successes in the future.


By the time the programme comes to an end in 2013, we anticipate the following main outcomes in the 17 target countries:

- **Poor women feel that they are able to participate and are heard in government planning and policy-making;**
- **Civil-society organizations represent poor women and influence changes in governing policies and practices;**
- **Government institutions take concrete steps to be more accountable and transparent to women; and**
- **Media outlets provide information to women and hold governing bodies to account.**

As the programme develops, we intend for there to be a greater focus on linking staff and partners in the different project countries. This will enable them to share ideas and experience, which will build their own capacity and strengthen their work. The lessons that these exchanges generate will inspire future programme development, and inform debates within Oxfam about how to enable women to become leaders and ensure that their voices are heard, to bring about lasting change in women's lives.

We will undoubtedly meet with challenges along the way, but we can be encouraged by what we have already achieved. In the words of Lusine Avetyan, head of the Qarahunch village council in Armenia:

'A lot of things have changed thanks to this project. Before, women did not approach the local authorities with their problems and requests. Now they are actively involved in the social and political life of the community. At the last community council elections, two of the six elected candidates were women. This is evidence of a change in people's attitudes towards women's participation in public decision-making and the role of women leaders'.



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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.

Cover Picture: May Day marches in La Paz, Bolivia. The first of May traditionally sees workers march through the centre of La Paz and has recently been a focus of all the social movements to voice their demands to the government. Photo: Renato Guimaraes/Oxfam

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