



Elanor Jackson

Creating new spaces

Women's experiences of political participation in communities

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Cover image: Women participants in the quarterly meetings in Ada East District, Ghana



Abstract

Research on women's political participation at the community level was undertaken by Womankind in four very different countries – Ghana, Zimbabwe, Nepal and Afghanistan. The work in each context intends to increase women's political participation and voice. The time available for the research was limited but much was achieved through the participation of Womankind staff and the deep involvement of Womankind's partners working in each country; this enabled easy access to the women who work with, know and trust the partners.

Women's own situation varied across each country and between the countries; some had previous experience of engagement in public spaces while others were largely confined to their homes; some had formal education, while many were illiterate; some had access to trading and other livelihood work, others were financially dependent within their households. Their starting points for engagement with political influencing at the local level were disparate. Similarly, the political contexts into which they were moving in terms of local governance structures and processes were also diverse. In some, the Government had set up quotas and specific allocations for women, the poorest and the marginalised, such as Dalits, in others there were no such legal or statutory provisions and leverage on those with power over key resources, such as Local Government officials and Councillors, was very limited. In spite of these wide variations, it became apparent that achieving political change is challenging, often dependent on the political will of local officials, and policies made at national level are not necessarily implemented, or easy to get enacted locally.

The research focused on the spaces created for women by the Government or more usually Womankind's partners, to explore what these mean to women. It explored how women access the spaces, what they learn, what benefits they get from them and how far their participation enables them to organise and make demands on Local Government for better service provision. While each space was different and shaped by both the political context and women's realities, a number of key findings emerged, some positive and others challenging. In the interests of learning, all the core findings are presented and discussed in the report.

Women certainly appreciated and benefit from women-only spaces; they socialise, they learn new knowledge and skills, they appreciate the safe environment for learning how to speak in public and for sharing problems, fears and hopes. The spaces proved to be important in building women's confidence, self-belief and also in encouraging their agency and extending their ambitions, especially through teaching them their rights and promoting women's leadership. Women talked of realising that they can do what men can do, and the importance of their contribution and voice in political debates. There was ample evidence of their growing confidence, excitement about their right to be involved, and of the many skills they were learning, including how to present a case to decision makers, how to approach them and their right to be listened to. As well as learning about the political landscape and where the opportunities lay for working with local officials, they learned where to go to address problems such as child abuse, violence against women, income generation, and securing documentation for example birth registration, marriage and land ownership, areas which may be beyond the Local Government's remit.

The women face myriad problems caused by poverty, their second class status in the home and community, their lack of access to key resources including decision-making and the social norms that curtail their freedoms of movement, choice, and representation. While the focus of Womankind's partners' projects is on political participation and the achievement of access to better resources or improved policies, it was clear from the research that engagement in these different spaces contributes to meeting other needs women have and they are using the new skills, knowledge and confidence to find ways to address their problems, both individually and together.

The women were able to secure some improvements in critical services, though progress was often slow and there were many difficulties to be overcome – including the lack of funds available to Local Government, competing claims on these funds and the wide range of women's needs.

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The limits for women when claiming their rights were clear in contexts where political parties compete, there are too many requirements in relation to the funding, and the political system and process is often slow and determined by multiple factors outside of women's control. While the gains were important and motivating, we should not focus too much on these and ignore all the other benefits and changes for women as a result of their engagement in the spaces, including: their ability to speak out in their homes; to promote issues of value to them; to join forums where they can have influence in the community such as user groups and School Boards and when some go on to become leaders and even stand for political posts.

Learning from the women themselves about the purpose and value of these spaces opened up many important issues often omitted from governance projects and highlights the need to look widely to understand the influence of this kind of work. The challenges are many and include: a reliance on women working as volunteers often with limited support when project funding ends; a lack of adequate analysis of what accountability actually means and how and when women have the power or ability to call decision makers to account and what the limits are to political engagement in resource poor and often fragile Government structures. The need for donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) including Womankind and partners and Governments to take a more flexible approach to this work in order to understand what women gain and how they can use their learning in ways that improve their lives and start to challenge their inequality came out clearly, as did the need to find ways to ensure the work becomes sustainable in the longer-term.

Acronyms

AWRC	The Afghan Women's Resource Center (Afghanistan)
CDC	Community Development Council (Afghanistan)
DA	District Assembly (Ghana)
DWG	Dalit Women's Group (Nepal)
FEDO	Feminist Dalit Organisation (Nepal)
FLOW	Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women
GC	The Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre (Ghana)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSP	National Solidarity Programme (Afghanistan)
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
VDC	Village Development Committee (Nepal)
WCF	Ward Consultative Forum (Zimbabwe)
WiPSU	Women in Politics Support Unit (Zimbabwe)
WROs	Women's Rights Organisations

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Section 1

1.1) Introduction

This report presents research undertaken in four different countries – Afghanistan, Ghana, Nepal and Zimbabwe, where Womankind Worldwide supports the work of partners to promote and enable women's political participation. It explores what is being done, how, and with whom and aims to draw out the differences and similarities of approach across the four countries as well as reflect on what has been achieved. What is the quality and purpose of participation in each context, what do women gain, how do they use their learning to influence decision makers, and where do the barriers to further progress lie? Currently a significant focus of development work with women is on increasing their political participation and voice, especially at the local level. Although there have been some improvements in the representation of women in formal national political processes it is recognised that women continue to be marginalised in other decision-making spheres. At local levels, women often remain under-represented and lack influence in the structures and decision-making processes that govern their everyday lives.

A recent evidence review by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on women's voice and leadership in decision-making found that women's participation in social mobilisation and social accountability processes can increase their voice and influence over public decision-making; however, they also noted that there is a need for more empirical work in order to better understand women's participation and how it works. The capabilities women require to participate in meaningful ways, and the pathways through which presence becomes influence remain opaque; voice and leadership remain essentially a 'black box'¹ and the causal pathways between participation and direct and indirect outcomes continue to be under-explored.² This research tries to contribute to filling in some of those blanks, exploring what enables women to engage, what value this engagement has for them, and how they can translate their involvement in decision-making spaces into real changes in their lives and the lives of others in their community. The

research explores women's participation in different spaces and how they use this to leverage voice and influence over decisions, often around service delivery.

But the research goes further than that. It is not an evaluation to see whether the development targets were met and the changes anticipated in the results frameworks were achieved. It looks beyond the expected results around achieving decisions in favour of women at the local level, to explore what women's participation in these spaces means for women and what it enables women to do for themselves and others. Sometimes the headline objectives are not fully or even partially achieved yet many benefits and changes accrue from women's engagement in different spaces. Hearing from women themselves enables a better understanding of the steps they are making towards changing their roles, challenging their exclusion from key forums and decisions, chipping away at the social norms that keep them marginalised and finding their voice in the household and local community. The incremental nature of these changes and their significance in building changes for women over time was highlighted in research by Trocaire on participation and empowerment, illustrated especially through examples of different women's empowerment journeys.³

The Womankind research was undertaken by two consultants and involved Womankind's Programme Managers in facilitating some of the country research. It focuses on selected spaces supported by Womankind's partners⁴ at the local level, which have been created for women to promote their political participation. It was funded through Womankind's FLOW programme, although not all the research sites selected were from FLOW-funded projects.⁵

This report, an overview of the learning from the four country case studies,⁶ aims to draw out the comparative findings around women's political participation as well as exploring the other benefits and changes for women resulting from participation in the different spaces they enter.

1. In science, computing, and engineering, a black box is a device, system or object which can be viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs, without any knowledge of its internal workings. Wikipedia, 18/12/15.

2. Domingo, P, Rebecca Holmes, Tam O'Neil, Nicola Jones, Kate Bird, Anna Larson, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Craig Valters (April 2014) Women's voice and leadership in decision-making – Assessing the evidence, ODI.

3. Newbury, E and Tina Wallace (2015), Pushing the Boundaries: Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment, Trócaire.

4. The Gender and Human Rights Documentation Centre (Ghana), Women in Politics Support Unit (Zimbabwe), Feminist Dalit Women's Organisation (FEDO) and Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC).

5. Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW) programme (2012-2015), funded by the Dutch Government in Afghanistan, Ghana, Kenya and Nepal, with Womankind Worldwide as the UK-based partner.

6. These reports are available on the Womankind website: www.womankind.org.uk

The research focused, as far as possible, on listening to women in their different contexts to understand how they use the different spaces, the barriers they face, their successes, and their hopes and fears.

Currently a significant focus of development work with women is on increasing their political participation and voice, especially at the local level.

While the four partners selected, all Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), have worked with women in communities for many years, they are often constrained by short-term project timeframes and evaluation requirements that focus on numbers of women participating, numbers of policies or plans influenced or enacted. This means opportunities to take the time to listen to women themselves or to learn in any detail what is happening for them is limited. We know that bringing women together in groups increases their confidence, their ability to raise issues of concern to them and increases the likelihood of them joining other groups, however there is a dearth of information exploring what enables women to change and grow and how they fare once they enter what are often complex and political decision-making arenas.

The analytical framework

Whilst Womankind's partners work to promote women's participation and build women's leadership at the local, regional and national levels, this research focused on the work undertaken at the local level, usually women's first experience of participation. This is the area partners and Womankind were keen to learn more about, in order to better understand the possibilities and challenges for women to effectively engage and even move into other decision-making arenas.

In each country selected, the research focused on one or two spaces located at the local level with which Womankind's partners work. The research understands spaces as groups or meetings in which women participate; they can be established by Womankind's partners, other NGOs, Government or set up by women themselves. In the projects where the research was conducted, these spaces include those where women meet with each other and those in which they meet with decision makers to

influence them or engage in decision-making processes. In each country, spaces were selected in two different locations.

The conceptualisation of spaces draws on Andrea Cornwall's work on participation, which she understands as taking place in different types of geographical or virtual spaces. These are bounded although the spaces are permeable and not completely fixed. They may be fleeting or long-term spaces.⁷

- **Closed spaces:** these are hard to enter, only certain people are welcome and they require qualifications for entry or access through elections. Decisions are taken by a very specific set of actors behind closed doors.
- **Invited:** these are spaces created by external agencies – such as Local Government or NGOs - in which people are invited to participate. Those who created them frame the rules of participation. They are often constructed as specific opportunities for those excluded from decision-making, i.e. women or low caste or minority groups to actively participate.
- **Claimed/organic spaces:** these are spaces created by people themselves, to build unity and to challenge power holders. They meet usually because they have a common cause; this can be a collective and popular space where people come together to address urgent social needs, to build a lobby group, protest, or undertake self help. These are often women's groups at the local level, very commonly income-generating groups.

Spaces are differentiated especially by who establishes them and also by their rules. Those created by women themselves are open to the women they invite and they set the rules. Spaces opened up by Government or NGOs are usually established for the community to participate in and are open to those who are invited; those who created them set the rules of entry as well as what is acceptable within the group and how people are expected to engage or perform. There are other spaces in the community context, such as law courts, School Boards, local Councils, that are largely closed to the community, especially women. Here, decisions, often key to people's lives, are made behind closed doors and are usually the targets for women's lobbying and advocacy, in order to push for change.

Cornwall and Coelho developed the concept of spaces further when they identified what they

7. Cornwall, A (2002) Making Spaces, changing places: situating participation in development IDS Working Paper 170 <http://www.drc-citizenship.org/system/assets/1052734369/original/1052734369-cornwall.2002-making.pdf?1289311080>.

called hybrid 'new democratic spaces.'⁸ These are spaces situated at the interface between the state and society and are intermediary spaces that provide conduits for negotiation, information and exchange. Like invited spaces they may be provided and provided-for by the state, backed in some settings by legal or constitutional guarantees; these spaces are regarded by state actors as their space into which citizens and their representatives are invited for decision-making or negotiation around issues of importance to citizens and the state. The concept also covers spaces created or taken over by civil society, demanding inclusion in decision-making. Some of these 'new democratic spaces' are fleeting, one-off consultative events; others are regularised institutions with a more durable presence on the governance landscape. They also refer to spaces that fill the gap between the legal and technical apparatus that has been created to institutionalise participation and the reality of the effective exclusion of poorer and more marginalised citizens. This gap is where Womankind's partners' work is often focused, aiming to create and embed opportunities for women to participate in decision-making processes, which while nominally set up for their inclusion effectively create barriers that in fact keep them excluded. These barriers include, for example, literacy, the ability to travel and the time available to attend meetings, organisational skills and the confidence to speak out.

The research questions (see Annex 1) focused on what happens in the selected spaces, including who is included or excluded in the space, what participants understand to be the purpose of these spaces, what training is given, what issues get taken up with decision makers, and what enables women to make a shift from their personal issues to more community and political issues? Does participating provide a stepping-stone for some women to participate in other decision-making structures? The research also explored how women are able to work in the groups and whether decision makers and the wider community see women as more legitimate if they are part of a women's group.

The questions were modified and different questions became more or less important in the four different contexts; new questions arose during the research, which was participatory and iterative. The focus on women's participation in selected spaces and what this enabled them to do, personally and together, remained central throughout.

There are other spaces in the community context, such as law courts, School Boards, local Councils, that are largely closed to the community, especially women.

8. Coelho, VSP and Andrea Cornwall (2004) Introduction: New Democratic Spaces? The politics and dynamics of institutionalised participation <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/CentreOnCitizenship/cornwall.pdf>.

1.2) The comparative contexts where women's political participation takes place

1.2.1 Country contexts

Broad political context

Women's political participation does not take place in a vacuum and it is crucial to understand the different political, economic and social contexts in which women are situated. Security, stability and ethnic and religious harmony varied widely. The political situation in Ghana is stable, women are members of different political parties and are free to meet and organise and there is a culture of civil society having a voice. Muslims and non-Muslims live harmoniously and participate in different groups and political structures. In Zimbabwe, the political context is unstable and challenging; all issues are highly politicised and there are high levels of oppression. For example, holding a meeting with more than three people requires prior permission from the Government and often involves a police presence. Here, Muslims are a minority and live quite separately, so it is challenging to bring them in to groups and the divisions between political parties is deep and it can sometimes be hard to work across party lines.

In Nepal, the Government is struggling to rebuild the country in the aftermath of the earthquakes, which struck the country in April and May 2015 and devastated large areas. Both men and women frequently participate in political protests and although the unrest creates instability and tension, people are committed to maintaining the peace established following the ten years of civil conflict that ended in 2006. However, caste-discrimination is a key issue for marginalised groups such as Dalits, who actively promote greater inclusion in political and governance structures; they are working hard to be heard in a country where their issues are still often ignored. Afghanistan is riven by conflict, past and present, and the Government and other stakeholders are trying to establish peace and rebuild the country after years of both international and national violence.

The opportunities for women's political participation vary significantly in the four countries. They are severely limited in countries in a state of conflict such as Afghanistan and to a lesser extent in the oppressive political environment in Zimbabwe, where political sensitivities have to be very carefully navigated at all times. In Nepal,

whilst there are decentralised structures with quotas for women and marginalised groups' representation at all levels of the political system, the absence of any Local Government elections for the past 15 years means officials are nominated rather than elected and there is a lack of transparency related to the temporary local structures which have unclear accountability mechanisms. In Ghana, the Constitution requires the state to make democracy effective at all levels through decentralisation, and to promote gender balance in recruitment and appointment in Public Office.⁹ The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection is institutionalising gender responsive budgeting which means that at the local level there are guidelines about budget allocations to gender issues. Freedom of movement and association is part of civil society and people are able to gather, speak and engage, however in spite of this, women's representation and participation in decision-making processes and structures is low.

The local political context

The local political context in the research sites presented below is informed by wider documentation on existing structures and processes in the four countries, but also draws on the women's and partners' experiences of the different structures in the research areas and how they function. It is important to understand how women have been participating in different decision-making spaces as well as other groups prior to the Womankind supported projects. These initiatives to create spaces for women's engagement in decision-making are not established on a blank canvas; women have already been involved in different groups and spaces for a range of purposes over several years.

In both Ghana and Nepal, local decision-making bodies have been created as part of a decentralised governance structure for both planning and budgeting; women are able and even expected to participate. There are established processes for Government consultation with constituents at the local level and clear budget commitments to marginalised groups to improve their conditions, including women in both countries and in the case of Nepal, also for Dalits.

9. Ofei-Aboagye, E. (2004) Promoting Gender Sensitivity in Local Governance in Ghana, *Development in Practice* 14(6): 743-760.

However, in practice, the political will to ensure that consultation and participation takes place varies across different locations and often depends on the personal commitment of individual decision makers. In addition, in Ghana, traditional decision-making structures such as the Chiefs and Elders also have power and influence and the role of the traditional authorities varied in the two sites visited, particularly the Queen Mothers,¹⁰ who were more organised and active in one of the Districts. Generally, women reported having little access to the meetings of the Chiefs and the Elders.

In all four countries, traditionally women are not expected to attend meetings or get involved in politics even though the opportunities for them to do so varied in the different locations visited.

In **Nepal**, the lowest level political structure is the **Ward Citizens' Forum**, which is a temporary structure established in the absence of Local Government elections. It has responsibility to propose community development plans responding to the needs of all members of the community to the next tier of Government – the Village Development Committee (VDC, which comprises nine Wards), which in turn submits its plans to the District Development Committee for approval. The Ward Citizens' Forum then receives the funds, which have been agreed at District Level. The Ward Citizens' Forum is supposed to include 33% women and these may be invited or nominated to participate.

In **Ghana**, the Local Government is organised into **District Level Assemblies**, which comprise of 70% elected members and 30% Government appointed members. The District Assembly (DA) has responsibility to develop a District Development Plan and to secure the District budget. The Assembly is supposed to demonstrate that communities have participated in determining the priorities included in the District Development Plan, through holding meetings in communities and incorporating issues raised by DA members. Some communities have elected Unit Committees that are supposed to bring issues to the DA. Women can be elected to the DA and also to the Unit Committees. Of the appointed members of the DA, 30% are supposed to be women. In spite of these provisions, women are seriously under-represented at DA level.

In **Afghanistan**, while there is no formal decentralisation, the Government's flagship

National Solidarity Programme (NSP) rolled out in 2003, organises rural communities into **locally elected Community Development Councils (CDCs) which are village-based units** for planning, implementing and monitoring local development. There should be a women's CDC in each community, which is supposed to meet with the men's CDC to agree development priorities for the community and to share these with the Provincial Government. However the women's CDCs do not always exist and, even if they do, these meetings do not always happen and women's access to and participation in these structures remains severely limited. Those women who do participate are usually nominated to join the CDC rather than elected and the CDCs themselves are often established by NGOs collaborating with the NSP. Power structures are extremely localised and dynamic; in addition to District Governors, *Maliks*¹¹ and CDC members, a number of other actors may hold power in local communities including religious leaders and scholars, *Qomandans* (literally, 'commander' but generally referring to warlords). CDCs do not stand in isolation of other actors, nor are they fully subject to other actors. They instead represent one piece of a complex puzzle of power that both exerts and is subject to external power.

In **Zimbabwe**, there is no formal decentralisation policy and even at the Local Government level - **the local District Council**, the lowest level for Government budget allocations for community development, a great many decisions are set in line with Central Government priorities. There is no legal requirement for the Government to ensure people in communities can shape local policy in practice, and the room for manoeuvre for even local Councillors is quite limited, especially at a time of serious budget constraints. Local level structures such as the Village Head Committees and Ward Committees do exist and make development plans based on local needs that are expected to feed into the District Level plans and budgets, though in practice many of these plans appear to be delayed. These structures are largely male dominated and even at the Councillor level, women are very under-represented and have been largely excluded from active political participation in most Districts.

In all four contexts, traditionally women are not expected to attend meetings or get involved in politics even though the opportunities for them to do so varied in the different locations visited. The decision-making spaces available to women are influenced by multiple factors including the local political landscape, especially linked to which party

10. Queen Mothers play a central role in traditional governance in communities in Ghana.

11. Traditional tribal leader recognised by the Government, usually selected, through consultation and mutual agreement in a community *jiirga* or *shura*. The *malik* then represents the Village's needs and interests to external parties and deals with any internal matters.

holds power; the Local Government's access to locally generated resources in addition to the budget support it receives from Central Government; women's education and livelihood opportunities; and the norms shaping what women are expected or not expected to do in relation to travel to meetings or speaking out. The factors constraining or encouraging women's participation differed widely even within one country, and between urban and peri-urban and rural and more remote areas.

Women's experiences of local political participation prior to engagement in the research spaces

In Nepal and Ghana, some women reported raising issues with decision makers before they became involved in the research spaces. For example in Nepal, a few Dalit women spoke of raising issues with members of the Ward Citizens' Forum in their community, or going to the VDC Secretary to make requests for support for their communities. In Ghana, some women spoke of participating in community meetings with Assembly members and traditional leaders. A very small number had written to or visited the District officials at the DA offices. Others were members of the women's wing of political parties and some, in different traders' associations, had previous engagement with the District Government through their associations.

Some women participated in intermediate structures established by Government agencies such as Water and Sanitation Committees, School Management Committees, Forest User Groups etc. These types of group were common in Nepal, Zimbabwe and Ghana. Women who participated in these structures were generally invited, nominated by others or put themselves forward, but women were always in a minority in these bodies. Some women had also joined political parties in these countries.

Also there were many examples given of organic created spaces at the grassroots, in which women had participated at some point.

In Zimbabwe, it appeared in the two areas visited that women had not engaged actively in working with their local Councillor or the District Council. Village-level women and women in the peri-urban areas do not usually expect to engage in local political issues and remained marginalised in relation to decision-making, plans and budgets before the project started.

In Afghanistan, women do not go out of the house to public meetings to raise their concerns at Village Level although Womankind's partner has highlighted that in Provincial capitals women may have more opportunity to participate. Most women generally remain excluded from the public sphere, particularly community decision-making structures and processes. The women therefore explained that they shared issues with their husbands who raise them with the *Malik* or in different *Shuras* (religious Councils) or the men's CDCs.

Other groups in the research sites in which women participate

It is clear that in Ghana and Zimbabwe the women consulted at the local level were involved in a range of different groups, and there is a long history of civic engagement and group activity for the benefit of communities in Zimbabwe going back to pre-colonial times.

Women in these countries had more mobility than in Nepal and Afghanistan, going out of their houses to school, for health care, regular visits to markets – including in Zimbabwe to cross-border markets, or to work outside of the home.¹² In Zimbabwe, there have been many different spaces in the women's communities over the past ten years or longer, usually Government or NGO created spaces, where some women have been able to go to seek help, receive training, and participate in a range of activities, such as HIV and AIDS care and prevention, emergency food supplies, care work, or supporting children in schools. These are communities that have been exposed to different outside influences. Also there were many examples given of organic created spaces at the grassroots, in which women had participated at some point, including savings and credit groups, burial societies, poultry groups, kitchen top-up parties (where women contribute kitchen utensils to other women) and caregiver groups, although many of these spaces had not been sustained.

In Ghana, women were involved in Church groups and neighbourhood associations. Many of the women who were involved in informal labour were also organised into associations related to their work such as the Market Women's Association, the Tomato Growers' Association, the Salt Producers' Association, Hairdressers' Association etc. These associations were seen as important spaces for women to meet and share technical knowledge but many said they were fairly dormant until their leaders became involved in the Gender Centre's project; in Ada East District the project focal person who is also the Community Development Manager

12. Prior to independence women from this area had access to formal jobs on white farms or food processing factories, other women, one met during the research, had worked in Mutare e.g. in a shop.

for the District Government was seen as having an important role in revitalising these associations and encouraging women to raise issues in groups and develop a united voice.

In Nepal, the Dalit women involved in the research had more limited experience of participating in other groups, although some women had been involved in various savings groups for a number of years and some of the intermediate Government structures and political parties mentioned above. Overall, Dalit women's freedom to go out of the house and the community was fairly restricted; Dalit women were less likely to travel outside of their communities for meetings, although some of the younger women and women who were actively involved in promoting Dalit women's rights were doing this. In Afghanistan, as noted above, women also had limited mobility and little opportunity to participate in different groups, seldom leaving their households. A few women had attended spaces created by NGOs in different projects over the last

10 years, however these had not been sustained and were seen as opportunities for training and learning rather than as groups in which the women could continue to participate and shape themselves.

Selected spaces for the research in each country

The research sites varied in terms of geographic location meaning that some were more remote and rural than others, which were closer to urban centres and transport routes. There were also differences in terms of the level of engagement and interest from decision makers, the political context, level of infrastructure, access to natural resources, women's livelihoods, access to services, exposure to different influences and cultural differences etc. The interplay of these factors clearly has an influence on the main concerns of women in the different research areas. Further details of the contexts of the selected sites are included in the separate country reports.

In each context the following spaces were agreed for the research:

In **Nepal** the research focused on **Dalit Women's Groups (DWGs)** formed partly organically by Dalit women at the **community level** and supported by Womankind's partner the Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) to become established. These are groups of 45-50 Dalit women. All Dalit households in the community usually have members in the group and 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; these are not spaces in which Dalit women meet with decision makers. The two groups visited were in Kavre District and are supported by members of FEDO's Kavre District Board. These groups were not part of any donor funded project (because it was not possible to visit the groups in the FLOW funded project due to security issues explained further in Section 1.3), but were established as part of FEDO's on-going work as a social movement. The researchers also met with Dalit women who participate in two Local Government structures, the **Forest Users' Group** and the **Ward Citizens' Forum** as well as with Dalit women who participate in different political parties.

In **Afghanistan**, the research focused on a **village-level space – the Community Development Council (CDC)**. This is comprised of 8-12 women from the community, the women are usually nominated by decision makers in the community, although they are supposed to be elected by community members. As described above, the CDC is supposed to be set up as part of the Government's National Solidarity Programme, but in reality these groups often only exist as names on paper. Womankind's partner the Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC) works with six CDCs through the FLOW programme and two of these were visited for the research. These groups are supposed to meet monthly.

In **Zimbabwe**, the **Ward Consultative Forum (WCF)** was created by Womankind's partners, Women in Politics Support Unit (WiPSU), bringing 35-50 women at the **Ward Level**, from different communities across the Ward, usually but not always together with a female Ward Councillor. They meet only a few times all together in WCF meetings convened by WiPSU over one year, though the 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.

In **Ghana**, the space was also created by Womankind's partner, the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre (GC), bringing 70-80 women leaders from different associations and communities together at **District Level**, with the District Chief Executive (elected political head of the District), as well as with Government officials such as the Budget Officer and Planning Officer. The Gender Centre facilitates the meetings referred to as the 'quarterly meetings' or by the women as the 'gender meetings,' which last 2-3 hours on a quarterly basis. Women are also encouraged to share what they have learned in their communities and groups.

1.2.2 Partner contexts

The four partners working on political participation are also quite diverse, though they share some characteristics and approaches. They are all established WROs experienced in working with women, committed to women's rights and gender equality and are deeply engaged in lobbying for women's rights at the local to national and international levels. FEDO focuses specifically on Dalit women's rights and advocating for Dalit representation at all levels of the political system in Nepal.

All are based in the capital city and all except for FEDO work from a distance. In Ghana, the GC select a focal person at the District Level to link to the District Government and organise the quarterly meetings, bringing together the women from different groups and communities with the District Chief Executive and District officials; this work stretches over several years. GC staff from the head office facilitate the quarterly meetings and meet with the District Chief Executive to follow up on agreements made in the meeting. GC staff also provide training to a selected group of women mainly working in Government agencies who have been identified as aspiring women leaders. In Zimbabwe the WiPSU staff identify where there are elected female Councillors in different Provinces and then select sites in their Ward to establish the WCFs to work with, training women to support and bring their issues to the Councillor, who is expected to represent them at the District Council. They always work with Councillors from both political parties, try to have a good geographic spread and ensure the work the Councillors do is inclusive and cross-party. Staff visit the Districts to run the training days with the women, for monitoring and evaluation and when there are other opportunities to work with the women.

FEDO have established Boards at District Level and also have trained groups of women leaders in different Districts. In the research sites (which were not part of FEDO's FLOW programme) it is the Board members who support the DWGs set up in the District. The Board members encourage Dalit women to come together into groups and support them to set up the savings and loans procedures and they also provide training and orientation on women's rights. They identify women with leadership potential and help them access training opportunities and link them to FEDO's women leaders. In Afghanistan, AWRC staff from the office in Kabul visit the communities to establish/strengthen and support the women's

CDCs, providing training and orientation on the role of the CDCs as prescribed by the National Solidarity Programme. They facilitate quarterly meetings at District and Provincial level for the women's CDC members to attend along with the men's CDCs from the same community.

All of the WROs undertake training in the spaces they have created. The specifics of the training vary, although the following elements are usually included: understanding the local political context and the constitution; identifying where decision-making takes place; teaching women about their rights and their equal rights with men; how to plan and present issues to decision makers and speak in front of men; how to present themselves; and the importance of women using their rights to speak out in different spaces. In FEDO there is a special focus on encouraging the women to save, to challenge caste discrimination and register as citizens and in both Ghana and Zimbabwe, the partners cover other topics of concern to the women such as securing legal documents, addressing violence against women, the care and prevention of HIV. They are all involved in awareness raising and committed to encouraging women's participation in the spaces they have created, and beyond to decision makers. The partners in Ghana and Zimbabwe also put emphasis on women's leadership skills.

The length of time partners can spend with the women varies but can be less than partners feel the women need (e.g. in Zimbabwe where WiPSU's training days have been cut over time), due to the lack of time and resources available in the project funding, as well as pressure from 'value for money' agendas. Women echoed this saying they needed more contact for a longer time as they are learning many new skills and experiencing several challenges where more support would be appreciated. In Ghana, women in one District would have liked to meet more often than four times a year and would have appreciated more training, such as that offered the smaller group of aspiring women leaders who participate in intensive training sessions on women's rights and leadership. In Nepal, the FEDO Board members in the Kavre District lacked resources to be able to meet with the DWGs as often as they would have liked.

In Ghana, the GC have worked with the quarterly meeting space over a period of four years and this is similar for AWRC in Afghanistan; whereas in Zimbabwe the support to the WCF happens over a year and then women are expected to continue the work without WiPSU staff present.

The access to decision makers is different in each context and the partners work with political intelligence in each location to maximise the opportunities there are and to minimise the political risks of working with women in decision-making arenas.

The training for the CDCs by AWRC took place in the first two years, beyond which time the AWRC has facilitated some of the monthly meetings of the women's CDCs in the community and the quarterly meetings mentioned above. In Nepal, the work is on-going, taking place outside of any project framework as part of FEDO's work of creating and supporting a social movement, however, the women in the DWGs visited do not have the same access to training activities as those DWGs involved in the FLOW programme.

In all the invited spaces, in Zimbabwe, Ghana and Afghanistan, it is Womankind's partners who set the agenda and facilitate the meetings; in the case of Zimbabwe this is for the first year, where they have a key role in providing the guidance and training in the WCF space they created; after that the WCF is expected to continue on its own. In Ghana, while the GC sets the rules they ensure everyone is able to speak and raise their concerns. In Ghana and Afghanistan meetings do not happen without the partner facilitating them.

The political structures mean that the access to decision makers is different in each context and the partners work with political intelligence in each location to maximise the opportunities there are and to minimise the political risks of working with women in decision-making arenas. They have very different challenges to navigate and in Zimbabwe this work of political monitoring and adjustment is a continuous process.

What is important to note is that just as the contexts are very diverse so too are the partners and their ways of creating spaces and working with women. There are some strong core common strands they share in their work with women but what they are able to do in relation to decision makers varies significantly. They have different ways of using project funding, with some facilitating more intense but short term training and others working less intensively but over the longer term. These differences mean it is hard to generalise or aggregate the findings from each context.

1.3) Methodology

Two consultants, working in collaboration with Womankind and its partners, developed the research methodology. The core research questions grew out of a literature review undertaken by the consultants and on-going dialogue with Womankind's programmes staff and staff from the selected partners. The process was participatory and the research was undertaken in different ways in each context, modifying the approach in line with partner interests, the time available, the realities of the different contexts, and the availability of e.g. interpreters. The core focus of the research, however, remained steady throughout.

Following the literature review and many discussions, a qualitative participatory methodology designed to understand the spaces women participated in, what they understood about them, and how they were being used, was developed. The research involved time and discussions with partner staff as well as with women, and some key stakeholders or observers such as decision makers themselves. The approach included a number of different exercises such as mapping, the river of life, problem ranking, role-plays and focus group discussions to explore different questions.

A key element of the research was for a Womankind Programme Manager to plan and undertake the research together with one of the consultants in each location. This approach was adopted in all but one of the countries – Afghanistan – where due to security constraints the research was carried out by a local consultant. In each country, Womankind's partner organisation staff selected the research sites, facilitated the research visits and accompanied the researchers; this was critical because staff were able to take the researchers into spaces which could otherwise be closed to such research. It was often only possible to organise the research meetings because of the strong relationships of trust between partners and different women and Government stakeholders and women were willing to give their time because of the value they placed on their interaction with the partners. The details of all the groups and individuals consulted are included in Annex 2. In Ghana and Zimbabwe, partner

staff acted as interpreters and in Zimbabwe as key informants also. In Nepal, an independent interpreter was needed, whilst in Afghanistan, an interpreter was not required.

The partners were encouraged to map their work and select two communities where the research could be undertaken, communities where there were some key differences to get a picture of the range of women involved in the programme. While there was a commitment to planning in advance, the realities of the four contexts meant that last minute changes had to be made in three of the four countries. This was demanding for staff and communities, who had to respond at short notice.

Within the constraints of short term research and noting that power very much rests with the researchers, the approach endeavoured to use some aspects of feminist as well as participatory research thinking, especially trying to listen to multiple voices and placing the women at the centre of the narrative; understanding the significance and specificity of context; and recognising that knowledge is a powerful resource (implicitly if not explicitly) and so the research process, however limited, should be of value and use to the women themselves, as well as the partners. The researchers understand women's inequality as a source of social injustice and exclusion and that it is structural and systemic, and this guided the way questions were asked and exercises run as well as some of the analysis undertaken.

Following the research visits there were debrief sessions with partners in country, feedback and reflection meetings were organised with Womankind programme staff and a two-day learning event was facilitated in the UK in November 2015, including two staff from three of the partners involved in the research (the participants from Afghanistan were unable to acquire visas) and two staff from three other Womankind partners who are undertaking similar work with women in Kenya, Zambia and Ghana. The learning from this meeting has contributed to the overall research findings presented in this report, although the key focus remains on the four locations visited.

Challenges of the research

The overall time available in which to undertake the research in each country was limited to around two weeks. This was only sufficient time for researchers to visit women from two different locations in each context and only 2-4 days could be spent in each place. It was often difficult to access women from the different communities for longer than a day due to travel requirements and women's lack of time, limiting the time for both group work and individual interviews with the main groups of women. Also it was not possible to see women participating in any decision-making spaces.

The complexities of each context had an impact on how the research was prepared and undertaken. In Zimbabwe the locations were not chosen until two days before the fieldwork, because of political instability in one key area that had been selected; changes had to be made for reasons of safety for community members and the researchers. Even in the two sites selected, time in the field had to be limited to two days in each for security reasons and permission sought from local officials; the police accompanied the researchers in one site. It was not possible for the researchers to walk around the communities visited to talk to other women or men and the research could only be done in the women's groups. Political unrest in Nepal required a last minute change to the visit schedule, so it was not possible to travel to the areas in which FEDO was implementing the FLOW-funded political participation project, however alternative locations were selected where FEDO had established DWGs as part of its core work as a social movement, independent of project funding. While FEDO's support to these groups was not intensively focused on promoting women's leadership and political participation, these aims are part of FEDO's overall approach. The two communities selected had both been severely affected by the earthquakes in April and May 2015, many people had lost their homes or were in temporary accommodation awaiting house repairs, so these problems were very much on their minds during the research visits. In Afghanistan the work was only confirmed late, again because of security issues, and a local researcher undertook the research with limited time in the field and a modified approach.

The limitations were many, especially given the reality that the research relied on women giving their time to attend meetings and share their experiences. While most found this energising

and engaging it is not known why some decided to come and who was not represented. This is, in fact, often the case for community-level research. Nevertheless, the women who came did open up and share many issues with the researchers and the partners confirmed the issues they raised were of real interest. Some of the findings were new and very interesting for partner staff, others reflected issues and viewpoints they have seen and heard before and which have been found in longer-term research.¹³ In spite of all the challenges this gives confidence that the findings reflect experiences and perspectives of the women who came, and that they raised issues of real concern to them and reflected on ideas shared by the group they were part of. Many of the women in each context gave positive feedback on the process and found the exercises and reflections interesting and of value to them; for some of them it was a life affirming experience. In Nepal and Zimbabwe several women said they appreciated the visit and the focus on listening to them and one older woman in Zimbabwe expressed her gratitude after an interview saying no-one had ever asked her about her history before and it had helped her to reflect on her life; she much enjoyed the time to listen and to talk to the researchers, especially as she had been through some very tough times in her life which few people knew about.

13. Newbury, E and Tina Wallace (2015) Pushing the Boundaries: Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment, Trocaire
<http://www.trocaire.org/sites/trocaire/files/resources/policy/pushing-the-boundaries.pdf>.

Section 2: Key Findings



Elanor Jackson

Above: Chair of a Fishmongers' Association, Ada East. Ghana.

2.1) Introduction

The key findings are framed around the core questions of the research. They present primarily the data provided by the women from the eight different spaces visited, supplemented by inputs from Womankind's four research partners¹⁴ and issues raised in the wider literature. They enable women's voices to be heard, important because they are so often overlooked, especially in an era of reporting results against targets where listening to women is a low priority. The main focus is on what these spaces mean for women, what they gained from them and the key challenges they found, as well as the views of Womankind's partners around their purposes and expectations of the spaces.

It is important to understand that women raised issues that went beyond the research focus and questions and the work on political participation

cannot be isolated from the multiple challenges they face. In Ghana for example, beyond concerns around political participation and influence, women highlighted they face a myriad of barriers in their lives and that all of these need attention such as high rates of teenage pregnancy, early marriage, school dropout and poor education opportunities for girls, domestic violence, men's neglect of parental responsibilities, polygamy and child labour. Access to credit and skills training opportunities for improving their livelihoods, so as to become more financially independent, were also important issues for them.

In Afghanistan, the women were also concerned with education for their children and access to income-generating skills. In Kalakan they were particularly concerned about security, fearing a Taliban comeback and also spoke of increasing

14. And occasionally by contributions from three other Womankind partners from Ghana, Kenya and Zambia working on women's political participation, who attended the learning forum in the UK in November 2015.

criminality in the area. In Istalif, women mentioned that although over the past 10 years there has been an increase in opportunities for girls to attend school and for women to seek employment, or participate in trainings, this had brought with it a backlash against women. The women reported that young men were the most likely to express strong objections to their female relatives' education and limit their presence in the public sphere, being protective of family image and vulnerable to judgments of masculinity by their peers. Women noted that young men have been hit hard by decades of war and economic instability making them more aggressive and religiously conservative. This is a concern for the women - many of these men are unemployed, some migrate to Pakistan or Iran to seek work but others linger in the community, angry and disillusioned with a weak and corrupt Local Government incapable of providing basic services and suspicious of organisations promoting women's rights.

In Nepal, the women were greatly concerned with issues of caste-discrimination as well as the immediate problems facing them after the earthquake, and the slow response of the Government to their needs. They also raised their lack of education and livelihood opportunities and their limited mobility constraining their livelihood options. They spoke about early marriage and domestic violence often linked to men's alcohol problems, although they felt that there were some improvements in these areas in the past few years.

In Zimbabwe, the women were especially worried about their poverty and poor economic opportunities, unsurprising given the very damaged state of the Zimbabwean economy. Finding ways to develop a sustainable livelihood, especially to ensure education for their children including the girls, was a high priority. So too were the devastating effects of HIV and AIDS, which is prevalent in the area, and the large number of women who are carers, especially the grandmothers. Violence against women was another issue raised, as was the traditional nature of marriage, which results in many separations leaving women with no rights. Many women are responsible for their households as divorcees, widows or with absent husbands, and these responsibilities weigh heavy when they lack access to good jobs or productive land.

Women, as discussed above, are not a homogeneous category nor are they a blank canvas waiting for development partners to arrive; they have multiple agendas of their own, as well

as a wide range of experiences of engaging with local civil society. This is recognised by the partners in Ghana and Zimbabwe, who in this programme, select women likely to be experienced in working in groups, of being leaders, of engaging in participatory processes. They are often selected for these characteristics because the time available to work with the women is short and the partners need to work with more experienced and motivated women on political participation. It is sometimes less well acknowledged by funders who appear to expect the programmes they fund to effect major changes for women in a short time and do not properly acknowledge the long timeframes needed for building up women's confidence, voice and influence.



Elanor Jackson

Above: Women from Kalidevi DWG, Nepal.

2.2) The spaces across the four countries

2.2.1 The creation of the spaces

The eight spaces researched were mainly invited spaces. In Ghana, Zimbabwe and Nepal, Womankind's partners created the spaces especially to enhance women's political participation. In both Ghana and Zimbabwe these spaces were set up to bring women and some key local-level decision makers together in one place to meet and negotiate. In Ghana, the District Chief Executive (DCE) and sometimes the Budget and Planning Officer (both males) attended the meetings but in Zimbabwe the spaces were women only and the decision maker invited was the female elected Ward Councillor. In Nepal, the DWGs visited in the research were originally organic spaces formed by Dalit women who came together to mobilise others but then, with FEDO's support, the groups were encouraged to become savings and credit groups.¹⁵ Here the boundaries between organic and invited spaces became fluid. In one community studied the DWG was women-only, in the other community, there were four to five male members, one of whom was the secretary of the group.

In Afghanistan, as noted above, the CDCs are invited spaces established by the Government.

However, these often exist only on paper, the NSP had held elections to select women members of the CDC prior to the start of the project but their role was merely symbolic so Womankind's partner, AWRC worked with the women's CDCs to build their membership and their capacity. The CDCs are invited spaces within an overall Government framework for promoting women's engagement in local-level planning.

2.2.2 Who participates?

It was not possible to undertake a detailed analysis of who exactly attends the spaces.

The selection of the women in each context was different and not always very clear.

In Zimbabwe and Afghanistan different decision makers (traditional or Government) were involved in nominating or selecting the women or suggested different groups from which women should be invited. But there was variation between locations, so in Zimbabwe, for example, in one location the female Councillor played a large role in identifying and selecting women, while in the other, the Village Head was charged with advertising and drumming up support for the proposed new women's group.

15. The formation of DWGs varies, sometimes it is FEDO which establishes them, sometimes the women themselves mobilise. For example, under the FLOW programme, FEDO established the DWGs in the project areas and worked with the women in them to prepare them for political participation in local level decision-making bodies.

In Ghana, the Gender Centre identified different associations and groups of women and sent out invitations to their leaders directly. In both Ghana and Zimbabwe, some women decided to go to the meetings by themselves because they heard about them and were curious and wanted to know what the groups were all about. Some joined later when they heard through word of mouth how interesting the meetings were. The process is a mixture of selection and self-selection.

In Nepal, on the other hand, the groups are inclusive of all Dalit women - all the women from Dalit households are encouraged to come to the groups and sometimes some Dalit men. In Afghanistan, although the CDC structure requires that all members – including women – be elected, in practice existing power structures play a strong role in determining the membership. In the two CDCs visited, the Heads were nominated or invited by the *Malik*. The head of the women's CDC is expected to provide a space (i.e. her home) to other members for meetings and related activities. Given that the *Malik's* house is often the space used for community meetings (if not, then the local mosque, where women can't attend), the *Malik's* immediate female relatives are therefore most likely to become the Head of the CDC.

Partners' knowledge of the women participating varied.

In Ghana and Zimbabwe, there was a lack of detailed knowledge about who comes; there are many women in the groups (35-50 in Zimbabwe and around 70-80 in Ghana) and partner staff do not work closely with them for any length of time. In Ghana, the quarterly meetings lasted between two hours to half a day with participants often arriving at different times during the meetings. In Zimbabwe, the all-day meetings take place over three to four days during one year, with additional monitoring and evaluation and follow-up visits depending on resources. Once the women have been trained, WiPSU is not present for their on-going meetings with the Councillor, indeed they want these to continue without them from an early stage. The limited time available with the women is spent training so there is little time for getting to know them. In Nepal, the groups visited varied in size, one group had 35 members and the other around 45. The women conducted their own meetings, apart from occasional visits from FEDO's District Board members from whom they receive training and information, so the Board members did not know all of the women well. Of course the women in the DWGs know each other very well as they are from the Dalit

households in the community. In Afghanistan, there is more knowledge of the women because the AWRC facilitator meets with the groups every month or quarterly and there are only a few women members.

In every context a wide age range of women were involved. The ages attending ranged from 25 to over 70, but they clustered in different ways in each site, sometimes with younger women dominating, whilst in others 30-45 year olds were the majority. There was no clear pattern related to age or position in the life cycle, though younger women were better represented in Nepal and in Afghanistan, for example, they were welcomed into the CDCs in Afghanistan because of their literacy skills and a perceived notion that they can be effective in helping with managing and leading the groups as they were less burdened with family responsibilities. This was less the case in Ghana and Zimbabwe.

In some contexts women leaders from other groups or women experienced in public spaces were selected. In Ghana, the women were usually leaders in different groups such as church groups and traders associations and in Zimbabwe the women who were selected or encouraged to come were sometimes leaders of church and community groups or had attended other NGOs or user group spaces in the past. WiPSU and the GC wanted to work with women who were already experienced in public spaces as these were the women they saw as able and potentially motivated to undertake political influencing and even leadership positions. In contrast, most of the women in Afghanistan and Nepal were unused to leaving the private space of the household; their mobility was curtailed and their experiences limited to the places where they live.

In all the locations except for Nepal, it was not the poorest or most marginalised women who were attending the spaces.

In Afghanistan, as noted above, the women tended to be those linked to the *Malik*, the tribal leader and who were more likely to have had more opportunities or status than other women. In one community, the CDC members were mainly from the *Malik's* family, which was the most privileged family in the community. The women in Ghana and Zimbabwe had some skills, and as noted were selected for their experience and leadership potential. Those in Zimbabwe in the Province visited were literate and some had completed secondary education; education is highly valued in that part of Zimbabwe and many girls are often educated well into secondary school.

In the groups, as in the population there, there were a high proportion of women who identified themselves as the head of the household - because they were widows or divorced, or their husbands were ill or elderly, or worked away and came home very rarely.

In contrast, in Nepal, the Dalit women are from the poorest and most marginalised sector of the community; most of them were not literate, except for a minority of younger women who were either still in education or had completed their school leaving certificate. Similarly, in Afghanistan, the older women were illiterate, while some of the younger women had received some education, but had usually dropped out of school upon reaching puberty.

In each space there were women who were more confident and vocal than others and consequently had more power to be heard than others.

In all contexts, women who were married or living at home with parents had to ask permission from or inform men about their engagement in different spaces. Most women said men were generally supportive, especially when they saw the value of the groups and that their support had increased over time.

The spaces were largely women-only, though in one of the communities in Nepal a minority of men attended the DWG and in Ghana male decision makers participated in the quarterly meetings. Not all women were invited to the spaces, e.g. in Zimbabwe the process is quite selective and only a small percentage of women attend out of all the women living in each Ward. In one location where Muslims lived the Muslim women were not included, and indeed the WCF women said they did not mix socially. In Ghana, only one Muslim woman attended the space in one of the research Districts and women come from a selection of communities across the District.

Whether and how far the women participants saw themselves as representing other women in their communities, particularly marginalised women, was explored in some contexts. It was interesting to see that the answers varied both between and within countries. In Afghanistan, the women CDC members did not see themselves as representing other women in the community, the researcher in Afghanistan

attributed this to the fact women have little opportunity to interact with women outside of their households and also because of the selection process resulting in women mainly being from the same family. In Ghana, in one District the women saw themselves as representing their respective trader associations; in the other District they saw themselves as representing their communities and bringing the concerns of their communities to the ears of decision makers. In Zimbabwe the issue was not raised much, although women said they brought issues of concern to the whole village up for discussion with the Councillor. The female Councillors saw their remit as representing all the people living in their Ward though they did also serve as role models for the women in the WCFs. In Nepal, the Dalit women who participated in local level decision-making structures very much saw themselves as representing the concerns of all Dalit households in their communities, saying that other women on these structures were there to represent women.

In each space there were women who were more confident and vocal than others and consequently had more power to be heard than others.

Often these were the women who had been elected to specific roles or women who were active in other spaces and had experience of leadership, or were members of the political parties that held the most power in the area. Some were respected church leaders or had community roles that brought status and respect such as the District Assembly members (Ghana), the Chair and Treasurer of the Ward Citizens' Forum (Nepal) or the care case workers or community police women (Zimbabwe). There are many factors, both personal and those relating to their role in the group, that can increase women's confidence and status. While there was a lack of time to explore group dynamics and the realities of power hierarchies in the spaces, it was evident that various hierarchies existed, with leaders and followers, which influenced who spoke and whose voice carried weight.

The dynamics are fluid though and can be influenced by the way the groups are run, as was seen in Nepal and Zimbabwe when women were divided into small groups for exercises and discussions. Staff in Zimbabwe noted during the research how everyone spoke and participated in the smaller groups while in plenary 'the usual suspects' dominated the discussions and decisions.

2.2.3 The purposes of the spaces: for women and for partners

Both partners and women highlighted several purposes for the spaces. It was clear from the feedback that women and partners do not necessarily have shared purposes and their priorities for the space may differ. In some cases, the partners' purposes may be either unclear to the women, especially at the start, or may feel a little 'imposed,' such as in Afghanistan and Zimbabwe, however women were clear about which purposes they valued. In each context, the women's purposes for the spaces often changed over time, partly depending on what they were learning or the opportunities they saw as arising from their participation in the space.

Purposes for partners

For all four partners, the spaces were considered to be spaces for women's empowerment, building women's confidence and preparing women to raise issues with decision makers. The spaces were also a place for sharing the concerns of women and girls around, for example, gender-based violence, land rights, writing wills.

In Ghana, Zimbabwe and Nepal the mobilisation of women for achieving specific purposes was a key aim of the spaces, focusing especially on improving service delivery and promoting leadership in a range of decision-making spaces (Ghana and Zimbabwe), inclusion, challenging caste-discrimination, accessing entitlements for Dalits and income generation (Nepal), political lobbying and holding decision makers to account (Zimbabwe and Ghana), bringing women's voices into community development planning (Afghanistan):

"The purpose is to raise the voice of women to champion issues and hold their leaders accountable."

(The Gender Centre, Ghana)

"It is intended to encourage women's participation and enhance their ability to ask elected representatives to be accountable to them, and to build their leadership abilities thereby enabling them to enter other spaces where decisions are made."

(WiPSU, Zimbabwe)

"The FEDO District Board members go to communities and we form Dalit Women's Groups to motivate women and tell them about their rights and discrimination / untouchability. We emphasise that to

address these issues it is important to develop a feeling of helping each other and understanding each other. Our objective is to campaign against discrimination."

(FEDO Kavre District Board, Nepal)

"We wanted women to understand their roles and responsibilities as CDC members. We also wanted them to participate in the development of their community and raise their voice on behalf of other women in the community. However, despite our efforts, the women continue to have difficulty internalising the fact that as members of a CDC, they should have a voice in decision-making processes as well as highlighting the needs and challenges of women in their communities."

(AWRC Field Trainer, Afghanistan)

Training women for leadership roles was important for three partners although the approach varied in terms of who was trained, for how long and on what issues. In Zimbabwe all the women attending the space participated in leadership training, whilst in Ghana specific women who attended were selected for further training in a smaller group and in Nepal, FEDO's Kavre District Board provided some training to the DWGs and some of the women they identified as having potential leadership qualities in the different DWGs in the District were selected to participate in training events and exposure visits.¹⁶ The training is short term in Zimbabwe while in Ghana they have built separate leadership training for a smaller group of women that spans two years.

In Nepal, creating the space as a savings and credit group was a key step in the process of bringing women together and empowering them. FEDO were clear that this provides an incentive for both women and men and ensures that the women's husbands and other family members are supportive of the women's participation in the group. It also serves to sustain the groups as women value the opportunity to continue saving over the long term. In Afghanistan, the work is focused more on enabling the women in the group to better understand the purpose of the CDC and the role of CDC members and on providing literacy training for women.

There were differences across the four countries in relation to the importance placed on encouraging women to work collectively. In Ghana, one purpose was to bring the voices of lots of different women to the space

16. It is important to understand that in the FLOW project areas in Nepal, the DWGs are trained on a range of women's rights and leadership topics by FEDO's women leaders who have also been trained as trainers in these areas.

so that different issues affecting women in the District were raised, listened to by the decision makers present and discussed. Hence the emphasis was not on creating a collective voice amongst the quarterly meeting participants, although women were encouraged to coalesce around particular issues and to mobilise other women in their communities and associations to take collective action around their concerns. In Zimbabwe, the intention was to bring women together from different communities to raise issues and to implement a shared community action plan, raising issues the Councillor should take forward at Council meetings. Similar to Ghana they also wanted to inspire the women to work together to resolve the problems they face in their communities. Selecting the priorities was not easy though as different villages had different needs and some women wanted to promote their village issues; sometimes they clustered around one issue, but at other times they vied to get their village issue taken up.

In Afghanistan, the focus was more about empowering individual women to have a voice and identify the opportunities available for raising their voice. The CDC groups visited were not yet at the stage of determining priorities for women in the community or working collectively to achieve these. In Nepal, in complete contrast, the underlying principle of FEDO's work with the DWGs is to support Dalit women to create a collective force for change, in order to tackle discrimination and to promote Dalit representation in all decision-making structures.

Purposes for the women

In Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Ghana, many of the women were not sure what the space was for when they joined and over time the purposes came to be different for different women. However, one important shared purpose in all four contexts was the **opportunity for meeting and sharing with other women and creating a sense of solidarity**. For the women in Afghanistan, who have so few opportunities to leave their houses, the importance of coming together with other women cannot be underestimated. The women in Nepal, Ghana and Zimbabwe may have been members of different political parties, and in the case of Ghana and Zimbabwe, come from different churches and communities, but they were clear that meeting other women, to make friends, to share problems and be together was a significant purpose for them.

“It is good to have it. Women are coming together to network and sit to address issues together as women.”

(Women's National Democratic Congress member, Atwima Mponua, Ghana)

For some women in each context, learning was a key purpose. Women in Zimbabwe and Ghana particularly valued learning about their rights; in Ghana women appreciated learning about wills and marriage registration. In Zimbabwe, the work on the Constitution was seen as critical to many women who were excited to know their rights were now enshrined in the Constitution. They appreciated learning about where they could go to get support in upholding their rights, for example the role of the police or community leaders in preventing or addressing violence against women; the Village Head, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and the Disabled (MoLSAMD) or local care workers for child protection and so on. The women also appreciated gaining an understanding of different decision-making structures in their communities and in Ghana what actions the Government is taking in their communities. For some women in Ghana, over the course of their participation, the purpose for them changed from being about learning about their rights to the importance of women taking up leadership roles.

For many women in Afghanistan their participation was seen more as an opportunity to learn something new, with less clarity around the aim of the learning, as well as an opportunity to socialise with other women or receive goods. One or two women were clearer that they were learning about women's rights.

“I come to the CDC meetings because I want to learn something such as women's rights. I also want to learn about current events in the community and how to interact and get along with others.”

(Woman from Istalif CDC, Afghanistan)

In Nepal, as it was usually one or two Dalit women who encouraged others to come together in a group for savings and credit purposes in the first place, the women had a very clear and shared understanding of this as the primary purpose of the space and were motivated to continue participating because of this. They also talked of sharing learning with each other.

“It is about savings and investing the savings. If one has a problem they will share it in the group.”

(Women from the Ekata DWG, Nepal)

While building confidence and self-esteem was not necessarily defined as a purpose of the space this was something that women in all contexts felt they had gained as a result of their participation. For many this was the most significant benefit of being in the space, it was a place where they learned they had rights, including the right to speak out; to lead; to make demands of others; to explore what mattered to them as individuals and women in the group.

In Ghana and Zimbabwe, some understood the space itself as being an opportunity for direct engagement with decision makers (Ghana), or preparing issues to take to decision makers through the Councillor (Zimbabwe). They understood the 'influencing' purpose of the partners in creating the spaces and felt they had learned how to articulate issues and present concerns to decision makers in order to influence them, although their success in doing this was variable. None of the CDC members, however, saw the CDC as an agent for furthering women's causes and only one or two saw it as a means that would enable women to participate in decision-making processes at the community or District Level. This is despite the fact that women had received initial training on CDC functioning and its purpose as well as members' roles and responsibilities in relation to influencing local level plans.

For some women in Zimbabwe, Ghana and Nepal, they saw one purpose of the space as providing a platform for going on to participate in other local level decision-making structures. For these women it was a forum to learn about leadership and become prepared for leadership, through training and also through learning from other women in leadership roles.

"To participate in governance and take up leadership at the DA, Unit Committee and National Parliament."

(Women's organiser for the National Democratic Congress, Atwima Mponua, Ghana)

Partners tended to place more emphasis on the aim of building women's capacity to engage with decision makers and decision-making structures, promoting women's leadership and preparing some women for leadership, whereas for the women, the purpose was often more about coming together with other women, gaining confidence, building self-esteem, and learning together about their rights and how to work to promote these in their communities.

2.2.4 The power of the spaces for women

The research explored what happened in the spaces, what women valued, what the spaces enabled them to do for themselves and for their communities, including in relation to political participation.

The value of women-only spaces

Women really valued having safe spaces to come together as women in all four countries. They spoke of enjoying the freedom to talk about their concerns and building confidence and skills together; they valued having the opportunity to discuss amongst themselves how they could resolve the many problems they face. Women talked about making friends and feeling empowered by coming together in a group.

"Sometimes when you meet together with other people and talk together there is something inside you that opens up and others can help you."

(Teacher, Church Fellowship member and trainee aspiring leader, Atwima Mponua, Ghana)

In Zimbabwe, women said that support from other women in the group helped to build women's confidence and has inspired some of them to become leaders.

"WCF is where I found friends and it inspired us to find opportunities. After the first meeting I realised I could do something and could be a leader even without education; this inspired and strengthened me. The group identified me as a leader, something I had never imagined."

(Young member, Mutasa WCF, Zimbabwe)

In Zimbabwe, several women also said that initially they lacked confidence to speak in the meetings but they had gained confidence to express their views over time, explaining they all had to participate in the WCFs and they learned to speak out in the meetings, something they can then carry into other spaces in the community.

"The personal empowerment taught me confidence, I am no longer shy to speak my mind. I am now involved in other programmes and groups since joining the WCF."

(Mutasa WCF coordinator, Zimbabwe)

In Ghana, women said they found the meeting space supportive and valued the approach of representatives from each group and association

being given the opportunity to speak in turn, claiming that everyone did speak in the meetings.

"I enjoy the unity, voice, supporting each other and sharing ideas."

(Queen Mother, Ada East, Ghana)

"I was confident before but I didn't have a platform to raise my issues. Without the platform I was left with silence. Now the Gender Centre has given me a platform and through the meetings I have received encouragement and education. They have taught me I can go forward."

(Women's organiser NDC, Atwima Mponua, Ghana)

In Nepal women also found the space supportive and were encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions.

"I used to feel awkward to speak in front of strangers. Now we are more encouraged and have no reservation."

(Young woman from Parijat DWG, Nepal)

Women really valued having safe spaces to come together as women in all four countries. They spoke of enjoying the freedom to talk about their concerns and building confidence and skills together.

Women also gave examples of having gained confidence and courage from working together. In Ghana some women said that this newfound confidence enabled them to speak to the Chief in their communities or to church leaders, as well as the District Chief Executive. They shared many examples of speaking in the community at Parent-Teacher Association and church meetings to pass on what they had learned in the quarterly meetings.

"Formerly market women didn't have confidence to speak, I myself didn't have confidence. I am now confident as a result of the gender meetings. The meetings gave us confidence to organise and discuss among ourselves."

(Member of Market Women's Association, Ada East, Ghana)

The women in Zimbabwe felt able to go back to their communities and convene groups there to share their learning and skills and to mobilise women to speak out at Village Head meetings, for example, something they had never done before.

They felt able to challenge some of the social norms that keep women silent in public spaces once they had learned new confidence in the women's groups.

In Nepal, being united in the space was of fundamental importance to women as they were clear that only through coming together and acting as a group could they challenge caste-discrimination and fight for progress for Dalits.

"In other groups I am a member but in the DWG we are together for a cause – caste-discrimination. Here we have the same voice, in other groups it is just savings."

(Member of Parijat DWG, Dulalthok, Nepal)

Women in Nepal also talked about their increased confidence gained from the group enabling them to become more active, assertive and mobile.

"Now we can speak because of the training and meetings. We can go out of our house and we had the opportunity to meet you. We inform our husbands about the meeting, we don't have to ask permission."

(Young woman from Ekata DWG, Nepal)

In Afghanistan, women talked about their self-confidence improving, as they had venues where they could and were expected to voice their opinions. They also felt their mobility improved, with families allowing them to travel for attending meetings. One or two women had a sense that they could improve their communities and improve their own lives through trainings, etc.

"I am a member of this CDC and attend meetings regularly because the Malik (whose house is used as the meeting point for the female CDC) is my sister-in-law's husband. It is also because I live next door so it is very easy for me to attend the meetings and be a regular member. I also wanted to learn new things and become more aware of community matters."

(CDC member, Kalakan, Afghanistan)

Participation gave women confidence to speak in front of men

This was the case in Ghana, Zimbabwe and Nepal and was especially important for women in Ghana and Zimbabwe. They understood that not only can they participate in many spaces they previously saw as the domain of men, but also led to the realisation that they can take up leadership roles that they thought were closed to them.

Right: Women from Mutasa WCF, Zimbabwe.



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“Women have been left out and men don't let women express themselves; male leaders discriminate against women even though they know this is wrong. From the WCF I learned that women can be leaders and have a right to stand in the community, they need not be afraid and can ask questions and engage with leaders.”

(Member of Mutasa WCF, Zimbabwe)

“Initially I thought leadership was a man's world. Now because of the meetings I realised that women can do what a man can do. Not just what men can do, more!”

(Member of Fish Trader's Association, Atwima Mponua, Ghana)

Women in both Zimbabwe and Ghana were proud that they had learned they are equal to men. This

positive outcome counteracts many of the messages women have received all their lives: understanding that their education is less important than their brothers, that boys should get preferential treatment over girls in relation to health care (Zimbabwe); that polygamy is acceptable (Ghana); when they see their mothers or female relatives experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse and exploitation; when their experience in marriage is one of being told what to do, being dependent and experiencing men making the decisions.

In Nepal, some women who participate in different decision-making spaces said they are now listened to in meetings by the men present. This did not happen straight away, women said it took them a few meetings to develop the confidence to speak out.

“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)

In Afghanistan, women CDC members had little opportunity to meet with men outside of the household, although some of the women had attended occasional District Level meetings with the men CDC members, facilitated by AWRC. In the not so distant past, the mere presence of women at the District Office would have been considered shameful. At the District meetings, the women had the confidence to raise their concerns about various issues such as the lack of a wall for the girls' school and lack of flood control infrastructure. They also raised their hands to vote for or against projects proposed by the men's CDCs, although none of the CDC women believed that they had any power to select or reject projects as there was so few of them and they do not attend every meeting.

Women's newfound confidence gave them courage to speak out in their homes

Women in all four countries talked of better relations at home. One or two of the women who were in leadership positions in the CDCs in Afghanistan said they already enjoyed status and decision-making roles in their families but they were a minority. Some women here talked about their increased confidence enabling them to be more demanding in terms of obtaining control over their lives, for example, women spoke of fighting for their or their daughters' rights to go to school and expressing their opinions in domestic affairs more vocally. By being part of a community initiative and thus contributing to community affairs, they said they felt more important, which in turn increases their self-worth.

Very few women in Nepal talked about having any status in their families prior to their involvement in the DWG except for older women and those younger women who were educated, but through their participation in the group, they talked of earning respect from family members. In

Afghanistan and Nepal, participation in the spaces increased women's mobility as well as their exposure to other women from outside their communities and knowledge about their rights. Women in Nepal spoke about this knowledge empowering them.

“We have rights from time of birth – going for a medical check-up when pregnant is a right. In the household we have rights.”

(Member of Kalidevi DWG, Shikapur, Nepal)

The husbands of the women in the Parijat DWG in Nepal said they had also seen changes in their wives. One explained that earlier women had restricted mobility and feared their in-laws and husbands and didn't go out but now they participate in many groups and their husbands 'allow them to attend.'

In Ghana and Zimbabwe where women had more mobility and experience of participating in public spaces, although still often restricted, some of the women 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 (Zimbabwe), or how to raise boys and girls equally (Ghana). They also reported a difference in their household relations, feeling more able to discuss issues and participate in some household decision-making. They talked of men in their families and the community respecting them more as they had good information to share about where to go to solve local problems and how to approach decision makers. They were seen as women able to participate in public meetings and make a good contribution and this raised their profile and standing.

The opportunity to learn, especially about women's rights, is hugely significant

Many women in Nepal, Afghanistan and Ghana were acutely aware of their lack of education and welcomed any opportunity to become better informed and learn something new. This was particularly the case in Afghanistan and Nepal where women perceived their lack of education as a huge barrier holding them back from progressing. Older women in these countries saw it as important for their daughters to attend because they had not had the same opportunities when they were younger. Younger women in Nepal, when speaking of whether their mother-in-laws support them to attend the meetings, said, “Some say you should go and learn, we didn't have this opportunity, and you shouldn't miss it.”

“It has been an eye opener – when women were beaten I thought it was discipline. Now I know I can report it. I thought sex was an obligation, now I know that if sex is forced even within marriage, then it is marital rape.”

Whilst 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, and said strongly that learning a wide range of new information was of critical value to their lives.

Women in Ghana, Nepal and Zimbabwe all talked about the value of learning about their rights and the importance of e.g. making wills, securing birth, marriage, citizenship and identity certificates, accessing their land rights, the right to a life free from violence, and Dalit rights. In Zimbabwe, women particularly liked 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.

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

(Mutasa WCF Coordinator, Zimbabwe)

“I realised it was not only me but that other Dalit women face the same problems. So I became determined from a very young age. I could feel the pain of other women. I learn a lot from being in this organisation and from central FEDO, I learned we have rights and can fight for our rights. I was happy when I learnt that we are equal to everybody and have rights like everybody.

I realised there are other women in pain and that I can help them so I have come together with other sisters and have started to form groups. At first nobody would listen to us, Government offices would say, ‘you are so young’ but I said ‘yes I can do it’ and everybody encouraged me. My sisters from my community are happy and that makes me happy. Happiness is not just about me. I have become fearless and determined to tackle any situation.”

(Young woman member of Kavre District Board, Nepal)

Women in Nepal, Zimbabwe and Ghana talked about having a better understanding of land rights and marriage rights, and in Ghana they stressed the rights and responsibilities of men and women within marriage. Some women in Zimbabwe and Ghana also talked about learning to be independent, which is important for them, and understanding that women should take more responsibility to support their families financially, as traditionally this is seen as men's responsibility.

“I have learned to be independent and not rely on my husband. Initially the perception is that the man should take care of the family so even as a woman you shouldn't need to support him but I now realise I should do.”

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

“Women have learned to be financially independent and not to wait for men, before they were waiting for men and dependent on their salaries. They used to buy on credit in shops and the men were expected to pay later but this often led to arguments. Women can now take up leadership positions and go far with training, even to the top.”

(Member of Mutasa WCF, Zimbabwe)

In Ghana and Zimbabwe, women were also concerned about how to address violence in their communities.

“It has been an eye opener – when women were beaten I thought it was discipline. Now I know I can report it. I thought sex was an obligation, now I know that if sex is forced even within marriage, then it is marital rape.”

(NDC organiser, Atwima Mponua, Ghana)

For the women who were learning new information, they were committed to sharing this learning with others in their homes, communities and groups they belong to. Whilst they were encouraged to do this by Womankind's partners, it was also clear they enjoyed taking on this role and feeling valued and respected by others in their communities.

“The meetings even enter into our marriage; we have learnt how we need to work together at home. We have been educated on marriage and divorce. I now counsel other women on their marriage problems.”

(Chair of Anyakpor community Fishmongers' Association, Ada East, Ghana)

A platform for women to move into other decision-making arenas and take up leadership roles

In three countries (not Afghanistan) the experience of the spaces enabled some women to stand for positions in other decision-making spaces and even take up leadership roles. They talked about the space offering them the opportunity to learn from their peers and other women already in leadership, in relation to how to dress and present themselves, how to prepare for public meetings and how to speak out. Others talked about learning about the qualities required for leadership through the training they accessed.

“I thought influential positions were only for men. I can participate now as a woman and I have learned skills and qualities of leadership, including being cheerful, understanding the issues, recognising the challenges, and promoting gender equality.”

(WCF member, Mutasa, Zimbabwe)

Women in Zimbabwe started attending Village Head meetings and spoke up; they ran village meetings themselves to share learning with other women and there was evidence that more women had taken up leadership positions in e.g. School Development Committees, saving groups, church groups, and health committees. Some were talking about standing to be Councillors in the future.

This was similar in Ghana, where some women who had learned about their rights in the quarterly meetings and had listened to the feedback from decision makers about the actions they planned to take, subsequently approached the Assembly members in their communities to raise issues, sometimes inviting both the Chief and Elders along with the Assembly members, to meetings. Women also shared their learning with other women in their associations and communities. Others spoke of taking up leadership positions in Parent-Teacher Association, church groups and standing for the Unit Committee or District Assembly elections.

“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)

In both Ghana and Zimbabwe, some women were taking up leadership roles in existing community structures and others standing for election to

Government decision-making structures (e.g. the Council in Zimbabwe and the DA and Unit Committees in Ghana). However, the challenges of organising and funding election campaigns were a deterrent to some and political manoeuvring by men involved in politics was a barrier for others.

In Nepal, some women from the DWGs were inspired to become more active in different decision-making groups in pursuit of Dalit women's rights. Some had been invited in by different structures such as the Ward Citizens' Forum and the Forest Users' Group, others had been encouraged to join by community members. Also women had been invited to join, or taken initiative to become members of, political parties.

“We are active and linked to other organisations hence we get into the Ward Citizens' Forum. I was invited by the community to participate in the group as a Dalit representative as there were no other Dalits.”

(Young woman member of Ward Citizens' Forum, Ward 14, Panchkhal Municipality, Nepal)

These bodies are supposed to include representatives of the Dalit community and whilst members of these groups may find it convenient to include Dalit women who have not been educated and fear to raise their voice, many of the Dalit women who were participating in these groups were determined to be heard and secure entitlements for Dalit households.

“It is not difficult when they ask for requests for the budget, they listen to me. I have been active in the community for a long time so they trust me and now the VDC Secretary even visits me and asks me to meet when I come to the VDC. We are now getting electricity and water. It is funded from the Government but my party is putting pressure on the Government at VDC level.”

(United Marxist Leninist member at District Level, Nepal)

In Afghanistan, the heads of the CDCs may be related to the influential figures of the community, but they were also active and ambitious individuals who considered that participation in the CDC could be a platform for other opportunities. For instance, the head of the Kalakan CDC wanted to run for parliament and saw being in the CDC as a stepping stone towards that goal.



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Above: Clinic building, Mutasa, Zimbabwe.

“I was an active member of my community from a young age and interested in serving my community. I remember that I had to convince our relatives to allow their two girls to attend high school. We are now the only three high school graduates in our village. Because of my interest in community matters, I also attended the CDC meetings that would convene in our house before I became a member and then the head. I want to become a member of the parliament some day and I believe that my involvement with the CDC and community can help me in achieving that goal.”

(Head of female CDC in Kalakan, Afghanistan)

Women are able to address their problems, as women together or through lobbying decision makers

In three countries some of the women had taken up issues and 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 through working in groups to leverage their voice. They have used their new knowledge of who to approach in relation to different issues and some have worked together with other women to influence decision makers and get things done.

“We didn’t know where to channel our issues. We know now that for some issues we should go to the Social Worker before going to the Chief or the Queen Mother.”

(Market Queen, Atwima Mponua, Ghana)

“Before we used to go to the District officials but didn’t have the courage to wait to meet them. Secretaries would stop us and we didn’t have the confidence to challenge them. Now we go confidently.”

(Teacher, trainee aspirant, Atwima Mponua, Ghana)

In other cases, they were not waiting for decision makers to act but demonstrated their ability to take actions themselves through mobilising others

and undertaking communal labour or actions, often because of the lack of Government resources available.

The Councillor in Mutasa in Zimbabwe, outlined several achievements that she and the WCF, along with the Residents Association, had made including getting a bridge repaired that had been broken for over 20 years, road grading in some areas, and work on the nurses' house for the clinic. There were many examples in both sites in Zimbabwe of women working together to raise funds, provide materials and offer labour to support the Local Government in improving local infrastructure.

In Ghana, in Atwima Mponua District, women had mobilised others to begin building toilets and teaching quarters, whilst lobbying Government to contribute support to these initiatives. They had also demanded assistance from the District Government for the construction of health clinics, road and bridge building. In Ada East, women had pressed the District Government to build market sheds, resolve the drainage problems in the market and make the market area more secure. Some women had mobilised others to undertake regular communal labour in the market and others had become market toll collectors ensuring an increase in the tolls collected and through this being able to exert greater influence over how the DA spends the toll income.

In Nepal, a few of the women who were very active in the DWGs also approached Local Government offices directly such as the VDC Secretary; or the DWG as a group submitted proposals to the Ward Citizens' Forum to secure support for different initiatives in their communities such as the provision of water taps. However, the main route women were taking to influence Government was through participating in different Local Government structures and political parties and exerting their influence that way.

The researchers met with Dalit women who had become members of the Ward Citizens' Forum and Forest Users' Group Committee and who saw their role as securing the proportion of the Ward Level budget allocated to marginalised groups (15%) for the needs of Dalits in their communities. Often this would be for a water supply or for income generation projects. Similarly, participation in the Forest Users' Groups (FUG) was to ensure that Dalits could access the forest and secure the allocated income from the sale of forest resources to marginalised groups (35%).

“Dalits weren't on the committee and didn't know when the forest was open so I decided to join. They couldn't tell me not to be a member but they didn't want me. I was forceful, they cannot say you can't join. The non-Dalits on the Committee said 'you are not educated and you would have to go to meetings regularly, are you sure you want to join?' I insisted and came to every meeting.”

(Member of FUG Committee and Ward Citizens' Forum Sub-Coordinator, Panchkhal municipality, Nepal)

A key issue for the Dalit women had been not knowing how to challenge discrimination and untouchability, but through their involvement in the DWG 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.

Being able to affect such changes and successfully lobby for improved services for communities for example, gave women increased self-esteem and the motivation to continue their efforts.

In these countries, those women who were active in one group often found themselves invited to other groups and asked to participate in different initiatives. In spite of the challenge of finding time to participate in several groups and manage their household and other work, women were mainly positive about their involvement in so many activities. In Nepal, Dalit women considered it especially important to be members of different groups because of their very personal experience of exclusion and discrimination. One of the founder members of the Parijat DWG and member of FEDO's Kavre District Board expressed this sentiment clearly.

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

(Member of FEDO's Kavre District Board, Nepal)

Women appreciated that men responded quite positively to their participation.

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 e.g. savings and credit; getting services into their communities; speaking out at meetings for securing benefits.

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 there were concerns by some women in Istalif about young men curtailing women's 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 10 years.

“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 any more. There was a time that we wouldn't even conceive the idea of going to a literacy class or training session. We basically didn't feel as free as we do now. We go shopping in the bazaar without much restriction. In addition to the impact the trainings have on women's movement and knowledge, I believe there is also a positive change in the attitude of men as more and more women attend trainings and other activities organised by NGOs. I also see less restriction on girls' education and I think it is because of trainings both for men and women, either through the CDC or otherwise.”

(CDC members, Kalakan)

In Afghanistan only a few changes brought about by the women CDCs were reported.

Women do not manage or implement projects in the research communities. They instead defer to men, noting that the projects proposed by men are 'for the whole community' which includes women and girls. Generally women viewed their participation on the CDC as a training platform for their personal and professional development instead of as an opportunity to work for the benefit of all women and girls in their communities. In Istalif, the women did propose an initiative to set up a small catering shop and the CDC allocated some funds to this. The idea was that when families organise weddings or other kinds of ceremonies in their houses, they would have a reliable source to borrow dishes from, for free. However, the shop did not last long because of mismanagement and the negligence of borrowing families in caring for the dishes, so it was dissolved and the dishes distributed to CDC members.

Although the CDCs as collective action groups may not have yet helped women participate in community level decision-making platforms, there are individual women in both of the Districts who have been able to break community rules and participate in their community's affairs at the District Level. Two women serve as the deputy heads of their respective District Level Development Councils. They are both literate, married, and in their late twenties. Although their education has played a role in their ability to participate in these male-dominated and intimidating environments, they would not have been able to do so without the support of their families (especially of their husbands).

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



Elanor Jackson

Above: Vice Chair of Parijat DWG, Nepal.

2.3) Challenges for women's political participation

There are many challenges facing the women in participating and turning their new skills and knowledge into political lobbying. For many women the engagement is more about raising their awareness, building their ability to talk to others and call women together, to share and find new ways of addressing the problems they face within their own groups. It is often about self-help and support. Many of the women in Nepal, Afghanistan and in Zimbabwe do not actively engage in the work of influencing decision makers to get improved services or recognition of their needs. This work was done by some of the women in Zimbabwe, especially those in leadership roles, and the women in Ghana whose meetings were specifically built around this discussion and negotiation with decision makers.

Some of the women in Zimbabwe, Nepal and Ghana reached decision makers through different forums and played different roles within e.g. user groups and service delivery groups, which they joined as members or leaders, often following the training delivered by the partners.

The importance of an enabling environment

The enabling environment for women's political participation is understood to mean the legal context, the personal and cultural context and the political context at the local level.

It was clear from the research that an enabling legal framework that requires the Government to consult with citizens and to allocate funds for vulnerable groups at community level is critical in enabling women to raise their voices and make demands of planners and budget holders at the local level. This allowed the women in Ghana and Nepal to link to recognised consultation processes that had been established by Government but were previously largely a male domain. Women could contribute their ideas and make demands of decision makers as of right under the decentralisation laws and had some leverage if these were ignored.

In Afghanistan, although the provisions exist for women CDCs to participate in meetings at the

District and Provincial level with NSP officials, women were seldom accessing these spaces and those who were supported to do so by AWRC did not see themselves as having real influence. Although theoretically the NSP requires that women be consulted when developing community projects, and had imposed a 30% allocation of NSP funds for women-only projects, the NSP staff interviewed noted that this allocation had been lowered or removed because the 'women-only' projects were not deemed sufficiently compelling or helpful to the wider community.

In Zimbabwe, these legal structures are not in place because decentralisation is not a Government policy. Decision-making at the local level is not very open to citizens and there is no Local Government commitment to including people in discussions nor are there allocations of funding to meet the needs of e.g. poor women or other marginalised groups in the communities. The barriers to successful lobbying and influencing were high in Zimbabwe, partly because of the lack of this enabling framework.

Barriers to providing an enabling environment for women's political participation included the social and cultural contexts that shape women's personal experiences and opportunities.

One common factor is that each context is patriarchal, with women having different degrees of mobility, freedom to join groups, and acceptance as active citizens in their community. Many of the women talked about needing to seek men's permission to attend the meetings, although over time they found that men were largely supportive of their wives and daughters attending meetings. In all contexts - where women had husbands at home - there were women who explained that this meant giving their husbands sufficient notice and being clear about the time commitment involved, in order to be allowed to attend.

Some women said that they did not need to ask for permission but instead they informed their husbands that they were going to meetings. The division of labour everywhere meant that women had heavy domestic duties and lacked time for the multiple tasks they are required to do. In contexts affected by out-migration (for some women in Nepal and women in Zimbabwe) and HIV and AIDS (Zimbabwe), women carry multiple responsibilities for the household, which is often expanded by the presence of orphans and people with HIV and AIDS

needing care. Women talked about having to organise their work and other domestic responsibilities to ensure they would be able to go to the meetings. For some this meant getting up earlier than usual at 4 a.m. to make sure they could get everything done.

"We are allowed to go out but they are strict on timing e.g. if we take permission for an hour and the work might take two hours, we have to return on time."

(Member of the Parijat DWG, Dulalthok, Nepal)

"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)

For women in Afghanistan, high levels of gender inequality are deeply ingrained in the cultural norms of rural communities. It was evident from the discussions with the women, that one of the main factors inhibiting women from leaving their houses was a lack of permission from family. This was said to be either because the family was culturally and religiously conservative or because some families continue to be suspicious and sceptical of NGO activities.

"I think men have become more liberal. They don't object to our venturing out for shopping, healthcare, and visiting relatives. However, they still won't like us to attend trainings or become CDC members on a regular basis."

(A woman who is not in the CDC, Qala-e Qomandan village, Istalif)

It was not surprising therefore that the CDC groups did not meet independently in the absence of the AWRC or its local partner staff. Women also indicated a belief that their potential and actual agency as CDC members as well as simply women in the community was limited. They noted their lack of agency on multiple occasions noting that leadership activities were 'not possible' and were the 'work of men.'

For some women in Nepal and Ghana, their participation in groups has resulted in insults and gossip about them from other men and women in the community. People in Zimbabwe said some women refused to join the groups for fear of this kind of reaction. It was mentioned by some of the women standing for elections in Ghana and was also referred to in Nepal by women who said that men in the community would make disparaging comments to their families about them running around freely. In Ghana, for women aspiring to be elected at the Unit Committee or District Assembly level, there were concerns that men would not support them as they knew of examples of men pushing people to vote for male candidates who were standing from a particular party, which resulted in women not getting elected. Some Dalit women faced comments from men in the different groups in which they participate when they spoke up in meetings, saying that the woman is 'crowing like a cockerel' and some of the women in political parties had experienced threats and harassment. Existing social norms and concepts of what it means to be 'a good wife' or a 'respected woman' can act as significant hurdles for women to overcome to be able to join groups.

Women's participation can be limited though their lack of economic means

There were clearly costs involved for the women to attend the meetings. For some this meant a loss of income for the day, or time away from working on the land and domestic chores and for others transport and food costs. In Ghana and Zimbabwe, the partners covered women's transport and refreshment costs for the main meetings with decision makers and for training, but the meetings the women ran in the community were not funded at all. Here women were severely cash strapped and some chose to walk up to 15 km to meetings to save the \$5 bus fare for use in their homes.

In contrast, access to savings and loans was at the heart of the groups in Nepal and the women met in their local community in the house of one of their members to pool their savings and access loans, which are highly significant for these women who are poor and struggling to earn an income. This was seen as key to their participation and the sustainability of the groups. In Afghanistan, the women also met in the house of

the Head of the CDC but many of the women were hoping that their involvement in the spaces would lead to some financial benefits.

In Zimbabwe, there was a strong theme running through the discussions that highlighted women's lack of income and their hope that somehow their involvement in the project would lead them to financial benefits, or loans to support income-generating work. Acquiring better income-generating work was also extremely important to the women in Nepal and Afghanistan and in Ghana, women were concerned to access credit and loans as well as skills training to boost their income-generating activities.

Women's lack of economic empowerment was a barrier also mentioned by the various women who were aspiring to be elected to different bodies such as to the District Assembly or Unit Committee in Ghana, to the Council in Zimbabwe and women involved in political parties in Nepal. The women cannot fund their own election campaigns and publicity materials, most do not have a regular income; while some worked in the informal sector others had no independent source of income.

Low literacy levels hold women back

For some women, especially in Nepal and Afghanistan, they considered their lack of education as holding them back from participating in decision-making spaces, for others it was preventing them taking on leadership roles within the groups in which they participate. Many women who were not literate did not have the confidence to put themselves forward for leadership roles or to join other decision-making spaces.

"Even when these groups invite people they look for knowledgeable people so I tell them, 'educated people already know but it's more important for those of us who are not educated to be in those groups.' We always say we want to be there but they say we have to be educated. We feel the biggest barrier is illiteracy."

(Vice Chair of Parijat DWG, Nepal)

Other women felt that they needed to be literate to participate in different spaces and that they would not be welcome in groups if not able to read and write or wouldn't be listened to.



Womankind Worldwide

Women members of the Ward Consultative Forum Makoni, Zimbabwe.

In Afghanistan, several women felt they were unable to learn and retain learning. Whilst literacy is not a requirement for participation in spaces created by NGOs, it is important for participation in decision-making. Members in both CDCs showed appreciation for literacy and the lack of it was considered a major challenge in the communities. Hence, AWRC facilitates literacy classes for the CDCs to enhance women's understanding of their duties and responsibilities. In Ghana, women saw their lack of education as keeping them from progressing further up the political ranks while not preventing them from participating in Unit Committees or the District Assembly. Although the Gender Centre noted that women's education level could also limit their involvement in some of the District Sub-Committees such as the Finance and Administration Committee. While many women have more education in Zimbabwe, few have

passed public exams and still feel awkward in the presence of more educated men.

The intransigence of decision makers and a lack of Government budget

The women in Zimbabwe know it takes time to prepare and present a case to the Council through (or with) the Councillor and understand the need to collect the evidence, organise the material and be clear in their requests. However, many times they came up against the constraints of the Council; several Wards come under the District Council and each Ward has multiple villages all with a range of urgent infrastructure and service delivery shortfalls; there is a severe lack of funding in the Council for providing basic services and money is often earmarked for Central Government priorities. The women do not have access to Local Government plans or budgets so are unaware of

priorities. There are problems of corruption. Women's requests are often met with familiar responses, either to solve their own problems or where the Council agrees to support a request, the community has to contribute money, materials and labour first. These are time consuming tasks and sometimes their work was not matched by a contribution from the Council. While they were proud of writing letters and making good cases it was clearly out of their control whether or not the Councillor or the Council did in fact respond.

Nevertheless, women persevered in some cases and in others the women were learning to do a lot for themselves. They took on issues surrounding e.g. child abuse, HIV and AIDS, orphans, and domestic violence and found ways to raise awareness in their communities, including identifying people or agencies that could provide help. They worked together, sometimes with the support of the Village Head or the Councillor, to try and change attitudes and behaviour around these issues. What was much harder for them was to make progress on issues that the Government is responsible for and which are too complex for the community to do themselves, for example stocking clinics, repairing bridges, the need for dams for water reserves, new classrooms and exemptions for those who cannot pay school or water fees.

Two focus groups openly expressed their frustration at the experience of taking issues to the Councillor and the feedback they are getting from the Council through her. One woman said 'they don't care about what is happening in communities' (Mutasa). Some complained that every request is met with the same response, 'you collect money, materials and organise some labour and then we will respond.' One woman talked of her anger about the way their requests are treated, another said it made her 'feel stupid' to keep going through the same routines to get the same ambivalent answers. While there are successes these are often relatively limited and usually for one village only; some of the big issues of concern to the women get very little response, such as the high cost of water and metered water in Mutasa, the lack of markets (Mutare), the problems of alcoholism and the vulnerability of young girls, and the urgent need for schools in some villages.

Some women had the same experience in Ghana, where they talked about raising issues with the District Assembly but help was not always forthcoming. There were clearly certain areas which the District Government was more likely to finance such as building toilets, school classrooms

and clinics, nevertheless usually these projects were contingent on people undertaking communal labour to clear the site or lay the foundations/ begin the building work. Most people also understood that the Government budget was limited and that there were usually delays in the Central Government disbursement of the budget to the District. Government staff in Ghana also had frustrations of their own, being expected to deliver services and undertake development activities with scarce resources. Shortage of resources particularly affected the work of the Community Development and the Social Welfare Departments with a lack of transport to visit communities to understand the issues as well as a lack of human and material resources to be able to respond. An Assembly member in Ada East in Ghana explained:

"The decision makers have a big load on them. Many groups raise their problems and these need prioritising. We practice local governance and are supposed to listen to the grassroots but have the issue of Central Government dictating to us. There are as many priorities as there are grains of sand on the seashore."

(Assembly Member, Ada East, Ghana)

In Afghanistan it appeared that decision makers did not take the demands made by women seriously.

"We have been pushing for a wall to be built around the school in our village and have raised it with the male CDC as well as with the District and other NGOs. However, no one has listened to us. We also don't know what happened to the money that was supposed to be allocated to the women's CDC. We didn't really follow up on that case because we don't know how to go about that and who to hold accountable."

(Head of CDC in Kalakan)

In the interviews with the District Governor and the *Maliks*, it was evident that men would rather the CDC women forgo the 30% of the NSP budget allocated to women's CDCs, so there would be enough money for a community project such as the construction of a bridge or a well. The NSP representative in Kabul also expressed dissatisfaction with the projects proposed by women's CDCs. According to him, the specific allocation for women-specific projects would not be exercised, as he viewed these projects as unsustainable. Instead he felt the money should be spent on a project that serves the entire community and not a specific group.

Women can make demands but do not have the means to hold Government to account

As some of the women in Zimbabwe and Ghana pointed out, the decision makers are unable to respond to everything and are also subject to Central Government control and impediments. Local Governments have some autonomy over certain development areas, usually infrastructure and roads but not the provision of education and health services for example. Local Government budgets change year on year and longer term planning and investment is difficult in such a context. There were certainly examples of women raising issues and sometimes repeatedly doing so in Ghana when the District Government had not taken any action, but the women had little means to hold decision makers to account beyond reminding them that they committed to specific actions. For example, the market women had organised a protest about the size of the sheds the Government was building and had offered to contribute some money to increase their size, but the District Coordinating Executive was unable to respond because it is the Central Government which sets the guidelines for the shed sizes.

In Zimbabwe, while the women were able to get feedback from the Council through the Councillor, they had no power to demand different responses or to object to what they were told. To call for accountability requires the women to have some kind of power or sanction and it was clear that this does not exist. The real constraints on how much power women can have in relation to decision makers, as well as the barriers that decision makers at the local level themselves face, mean that there is no linear relationship between demanding rights and receiving rights. The relationship is far more complex and affected by a wide range of 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.

In Nepal, whilst directives exist from Central Government for inclusion of marginalised groups on decision-making bodies, as well as for budget allocation to marginalised groups, when it comes to final decisions and budgets being disbursed, their demands may be bypassed and there were no clear channels for holding the Government to account on its promises. There are some efforts to invite Dalit representatives onto different structures but even for those women who are literate and more confident and clear about their role and who

are able to speak up and make demands, the results can be disappointing. Some Dalit women spoke about receiving less money than they expected for their communities, others said that at the last minute, a decision could be taken by members of a Ward Citizens' Forum to spend the money on a road instead of the proposals put forward by Dalit women.

"I am the only Dalit on the WCF and feel sometimes the others make decisions in their favour. I was there when the relief material came. If I had had a say, I would have suggested that the economically weakest Dalits should get support but they made the decision themselves so everyone just got one tent, 10kg of rice and 15,000 Nepali Rupees from the Government for everyone whose house was destroyed."

(WCF member as well as founder member of Parijat DWG and member of FEDO Kavre District Board, Nepal)

In Afghanistan, the women CDC members who do come together with men CDC members at the District Level meetings feel sidelined by the men and, while some benefits arise from their inclusion in the spaces (i.e. greater overall confidence), they do not participate in the systems as fully as men do and do not make demands of decision makers. Women reported that they do not propose, manage or monitor projects but feel their presence in meetings is mostly 'symbolic' at the request of specific individuals and NGOs.

Even where there are existing laws on political participation, these are not necessarily enforced. Women in all the countries do not have access to District budget figures, even in contexts where this information is supposed to be available and cannot challenge final decisions, especially when the feedback is often that the Government does not have the resources. Ultimately, if a political structure does not have the will to respond to women, no matter how many women are members, nothing will come of it, because power lies with the decision makers. It is also important to remember that the women who go into different decision-making spaces are in a minority in these spaces; this can be very different from speaking out in the NGO created spaces which are women-only or in which they are a majority. Women are often not well respected in these public forums, often coming up against more powerful voices, vested interests, political agendas, risks of harassment, and even violence.

Factors that enable more accountability

In some contexts accountability is a concept difficult to operationalise, because the women and their communities have little power to leverage a response, let alone a positive response. In others, some enablers do allow for more accountability in the relationships between citizens and the state:

- decentralisation laws and allocated budgets for community use;
- openness and transparency about budgets and plans;
- the ability to challenge the decision makers through the courts, something seen by other Womankind partners not directly involved in the research in Ghana and Kenya;
- the use of accountability tools, as developed by FEDO in Nepal.

The legal, policy and judicial frameworks all affect how far women, who often lack the power or tools to demand accountability, can make demands of decision makers and challenge decisions they dislike. When working in this area a much clearer analysis of the power relations, what opportunities there are to challenge those controlling resources and decisions, what mechanisms can be used to strengthen the women's voices such as the use of media, courts and resort to higher authorities, need to be well understood. The barriers and enablers for securing both responsiveness and accountability need to be analysed, explained and addressed rather than assuming that women, once they know their rights and mobilise and use their voice and agency, can bring about major shifts in resource allocation and decision-making.

Political nature of the work

This work is highly political in what are often very politicised contexts and political tensions can flare up and create problems for the work on women's political participation, as was encountered during the selection of locations for the research in Zimbabwe and Nepal. Engaging in political participation often means joining or working with political parties, which may not prioritise women's equality and women's rights and these may get subsumed into party political agendas. Women can be used to support political candidates in a context like Zimbabwe, where women's spaces built to support a female Councillor to help her to raise women's voices, may be co-opted by that Councillor for political ends. The group can stop meeting when the candidate elected changes. In

Ghana, the women who were members of parties which were not the party in power in the District received less support from the elected male decision makers to stand for election. In Afghanistan, men and women were generally subject to existing power structures despite the introduction of the CDCs in their communities. *Maliks* became heads of CDCs and their female relatives became the female heads of women CDCs.

Yet project documents and frameworks, as well as discussions around the work are often more technical than political in their language; governance work is often defined as technical, while work to promote women's rights and gender equality is often understood as more political.¹⁷ The real challenges caused by where power lies, and the relative powerlessness of women in the villages and peri-urban areas in relation to decision makers, are implicit rather than explicit in this work. Partners recognise the usefulness of undertaking a clearer analysis of the political environment at the start of such projects, including which political party is in power, where alliances lie, for example, whether the local Councillor and the Council and the MP in Zimbabwe or the District Coordinating Executive and MP in Ghana share a political allegiance or come from different parties. There is also usually an understanding of corruption and the highly contested allocation of scarce resources and how lines of accountability actually work in practice, though these are not always recorded for security reasons. Understanding more about who the decision makers are, their interests and the interests of their party and how to enable women to frame issues in order to get the results they want may be done by partners but rarely made explicit.

The picture is complicated where donors come in and fund Local Government responsibilities, as in Zimbabwe where the dire economic situation forces many local level organisations, councils and ministries, to rely on external donors to fund basic projects. It is not at all clear what the lines of accountability between donors who fund projects in the rural areas and the women lobbying for resources could or should be. How would women even access these donors to influence their decisions or funding patterns? It is hard for women in Ghana and Zimbabwe to access e.g. the mines and to influence the way they undertake their responsibility for providing e.g. roads or water, or for women in Nepal to access donors who are involved in the earthquake reconstruction efforts.

17. These contrasts are well discussed in the Trócaire reports - Newbury, E and Tina Wallace (2015), *Pushing the Boundaries: Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment*, Trócaire.

The lack of discussion around these complex political realities – which is very understandable in these contexts – means that the projects appear at times to be working in a vacuum rather than highly politicised, resource poor environments. This can serve to limit meaningful discussion with the women about what is possible in the context and what other approaches might be tried. Although partner staff have these discussions internally these are not often reflected in project documentation or the training delivered. Yet without taking clear account of the local political and economic realities and working with the women to find ways to address them can leave women open to disappointment or political manipulation.

Lack of solidarity/shared interests in some groups

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 essentialises women as all being the same in their needs and priorities, something that is not appropriate in many contexts. This research showed the wide range of women's aspirations and needs in the different locations and their different priorities around their rights. In some places there was more solidarity and unity around shared interests than others.

In Nepal, women did come together with a unified voice around their needs as Dalits. They share the experience of deep marginalisation and poverty as a result of their caste position and come together to try and access Government entitlements. Their focus is on their common interest as Dalits, though some of their work is around improving their position and condition as women within the society. In Ghana the women who came together with the decision makers represented different groupings within the community and women who were traders often developed a shared agenda around their need for better markets and so did speak 'as one' on issues around marketing and trading. Other groups were less articulate and forceful but did have shared interests around their livelihoods. Some of the associations in Ghana such as the dressmakers and fishmongers met to agree different priorities for their leaders to take to the quarterly meetings. In Zimbabwe, 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. From the role-plays it was clear that the women find it hard to prioritise together and each one lobbies for the most urgent needs of her village; the Ward Coordinator may try to highlight the most urgent issues but not everyone will always agree. Often it is the Councillor who prioritises the issues, in one Ward for a bridge on a major road for example and the nurses' house that will allow the newly built clinic to be opened. When women are brought together from different communities it can be hard to find a common agreed shared interest, and while Community Action Plans are developed these are done early on in the group process and there is limited time to discuss and agree shared priorities.

In Afghanistan, women were more interested in their own personal circumstances and those of the women they live closely with, not surprising given that most of the women were from the same family and were linked by family interests; few women serving on the CDCs demonstrated understanding of the CDC's function and, by extension, their own roles and responsibilities as CDC members and there was not a focus on promoting a collective voice or lobbying for shared objectives.

Solidarity cannot be assumed because they are women. Time is needed to build a shared position and understanding and in some contexts this coalesces around caste-discrimination or economic activity, in other places it is harder to develop. Women do not all share the same concerns or priorities. While many issues do bind them together such as their concerns around their poverty, their domestic tasks, their lack of rights especially in marriage, over children and resources, and their need for greater voice and participation in places where decisions are made that govern their lives, they do not easily or automatically speak with one voice.

Sustainability and follow-up

In the research sites there were different levels of follow-up support to the women or the groups that had been formed and in some contexts this was minimal. A lot is invested into the women during the process of the project but once the funding or the training cycle ends there are no resources provided for either follow-up visits and training or for financial support for women to carry out their own meetings in communities or travel to meet each other or with decision makers.



Elanor Jackson

Above: Women participants of the quarterly meeting space in Atwima Mponua, Ghana.

This is a cause of concern. The women in Zimbabwe, for example, said they need more training and support and the one group where the training has recently finished said it is hard for them to cover the costs of meeting and they would like to meet with WiPSU again in future. They enjoyed the contact and benefitted greatly, but feel they need more support to do the political work.

The situation in Nepal is different because the concept of follow-up is not so relevant in the context of a social movement, where women are engaged in these processes as part of their daily lives and the DWGs themselves continue to meet as the monthly savings activity is embedded in their routines. The savings and loans element is a key factor in sustaining the groups and bringing the women's husbands and wider families on board. Not only does this provide women with some financial security, it also provides them with a justification to meet together, which is approved of by their families. Women are motivated to continue meeting so that they can maintain their savings and access loans when needed. They have

used the loans to help the household with support to family businesses, school fees, medical costs etc. and other members of their households appreciate this. The women's husbands are involved in paying back the loans and were clear about the value of the group. There is evidence from FEDO's work throughout the country that these groups continue to be sustained for years without being tied to any specific project intervention. One of the research groups has been operating for seven years outside of any project framework, the other for two years. However, the FEDO Kavre District Board members that meet with the DWGs in the District and follow up with them, struggle to find the time to support the groups they work with and lack the time and financial resources to support as many groups as they would like to.

The spaces created in Zimbabwe, Ghana and Afghanistan, in contrast, will be difficult to sustain beyond the Womankind supported projects. The continuation of the WCFs in Zimbabwe depends on the women continuing to run the WCF or with the female Councillor, and while WiPSU knows of some examples where the groups do continue,

the data remains limited; how many groups survive is not known. Women do not have the resources to fund meetings and to travel and the lack of success of some requests to the Council may become discouraging; the absence of on-going learning or training support may mean that some groups lose motivation and fade away. If the Councillor does not get re-elected it is also likely that a new Councillor would not engage with the women in the existing WCF, because they are perceived to be partisan. The women are certainly keen to keep the work going but many challenges were raised in the focus groups that may affect long term sustainability.

In Ghana, both the women and decision makers who attend wanted the quarterly meetings to continue. In one District the Government staff suggested that they could build in the cost of the meetings into the District budget, in the other District, the Government did not have this sense of ownership or responsibility for the space, in spite of it helping the Government carry out its commitments to consultation which it had to demonstrate to secure some of its annual budget funded through donor support. Furthermore, regular shifts of District Government officials from one District to another, creates challenges in creating ownership and commitment from Government staff.

In Afghanistan, the incentive for the women to attend the group is the hope that there will be some material benefit at the end and without the presence of AWRC staff the groups are not meeting regularly, nor do they meet with other women in the community to hear their concerns. Several aspects fundamental to the NSP may have positive intentions but the research highlighted that in practice women's participation in these structures was unlikely to continue. For instance, establishing a category of women's projects was no doubt intended to ensure that women received some recognisable level of authority in project planning processes in the community; however, in reality these projects had been denigrated to initiatives for a small handful of women in limited fields such as embroidery, until they were eventually discarded as priorities altogether.

These findings reflect those reported elsewhere around relying heavily on women's unpaid time for the continuation of projects. The challenge of 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.¹⁸

There is an expectation in Ghana and Zimbabwe that women will be motivated and will get returns from their lobbying work and work with women in the community that will keep them engaged. But the response of Local Government is patchy and often negative, gains are hard won and frequently take a long time, and women have urgent needs to secure an income and keep their productive and domestic work going. The barriers to gaining 'easy wins' or getting a good response from local decision makers are many and not easily scaled, and it takes time to organise and run village meetings, so it cannot be assumed that the women will be able to continue and sustain the work.

The other benefits of the training and groups may continue well into the future as individual women have new skills, confidence, new networks and ideas about how to address problems in their communities, and the evidence from Zimbabwe, Ghana and Nepal was that once women have learned skills and raised their self-esteem, they can continue to work as individuals around e.g support for HIV work or support to women experiencing violence. Others feel able to participate in or take on leadership roles in other forums such as forest, water or school management or neighbourhood committees. This work may involve lobbying for better services and resources or mobilising communities to help themselves.

18. Beardon, H and Eva Otero (2013) Women's Right to be Heard: An evaluation of Oxfam GB's "Raising Her Voice" Portfolio. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/womens-right-to-be-heard-an-evaluation-of-oxfam-gbs-raising-her-voice-portfolio-301544>.

Section 3: Conclusions

The research has contributed to better understanding the ways that different spaces for political participation at village or District Levels are used by different women, their meaning, what happens in them and the range of diverse expectations and purposes around these kinds of spaces, as well as the kinds of achievements that can be expected. It has highlighted the complexity and diversity that characterises working with women in different contexts and the range of changes taking place for women, often changes that fall outside the partner's or project's original purpose and framework. In some places simply enabling women to meet and leave their homes is a significant change, for others enabling women to speak out in front of men at public meetings and to take leadership positions mark a major advance. The research has shown that when trying to understand change it is useful to start from women's realities and measure changes in terms that have meaning for them, taking into account their contexts, opportunities and the specific barriers they face.

Coming together with other women was critically important. Many women gave examples of raised confidence, of having learned information important for themselves, of being able to do new things.

The research process, as the work itself, was constrained by lack of time, something often heard but rarely addressed in development work. While much was achieved, some of the potential to enable women to go further and address some of the root causes of their marginalisation was lost because of the lack of time and resources for partners to work more intensively with women over the longer term. Much of the work focused on promoting women's participation to increase the provision of and access to services and better infrastructure, issues which enable women to improve the condition of their lives and is important. However, other aspects which require longer term and often more intensive work, such as raising awareness and knowledge around tackling violence against women, promoting girls education, challenging norms that keep women as

second class citizens, working on enabling women or their daughters, to access better work or land, while touched on, usually did not get the attention they require in order to enable women to start to challenge their position in the community and wider society.

Nevertheless, the research showed that women are using the spaces to make important incremental changes that are challenging some of the social norms that uphold gender inequality and carving out new roles for themselves and gaining respect for it. This work, addressing gender inequality, is often overlooked in the way political participation projects are currently designed, implemented and assessed, where the focus is on how women participate in order to achieve increased service provision and/or achieve policy change around this. Important learning around how women can and do challenge their situation and status is currently often left unrecorded in project documents.

The research supports some findings highlighted elsewhere in the literature, but it also raises some new issues often not discussed seriously around women's political participation such as the need to monitor changes that fall outside of the project frameworks, the issues of follow-up and sustainability, what support women really need in each context, the challenges of lobbying and working with decision makers and securing accountability, as well as the value of this work to women themselves.

The value of women-only spaces

The research has confirmed the findings seen in some of the wider literature, but often questioned currently in development, that women's only spaces have real value for women. They provide safe spaces that are important for building women's confidence, self-esteem and agency. Women meet other women, learn, share, make friends and start to do things together; men usually allow them to go to women only spaces and women enjoy this interaction. They value the knowledge and skills they are offered, they learn from each other and stimulate new ideas. ODI's evidence review affirmed the importance of women organising with other women around shared interests, which builds their capabilities for voice and influence.¹⁹

19. Domingo, P, Rebecca Holmes, Tam O'Neil, Nicola Jones, Kate Bird, Anna Larson, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Craig Valters (2014) Women's voice and leadership in decision-making- Assessing the evidence, ODI.

There was no doubt from the women consulted that coming together with other women was critically important. Many women gave examples of raised confidence, of having learned information important for themselves, of being able to do new things. In all of the countries, except Afghanistan, some of the women spoke of being empowered to take action to address problems in their communities and others felt inspired to contest leadership roles, or take on greater responsibilities in existing spaces. Women's self-belief as well as their belief that they have a right to engage, participate and make change happen was very evident in the discussions and role-plays; many women felt able to go out and talk to decision makers and speak in front of men, something they were afraid of doing before. They were able to challenge the norms that said that women should not be heard – or even seen - in public meetings.

Women's participation in local level decision-making processes is crucial

Womankind's partners stress the importance of working with women at the local level, because this is where women have the most opportunity to influence the decisions that affect their lives. The women themselves confirmed that they were concerned about local level issues affecting their communities, their work opportunities, the health and education of their children. They used the spaces to help them to identify and access the decision makers who have immediate control over key services and resources and also to raise the awareness of other women around issues such as violence, child protection, the need for women to acquire documentation such as birth and marriage certificates or identity cards, make wills and take more control over their own affairs. Some of the women were able to influence decision makers to channel resources to tackle problems in their communities and pleased with the results, were inspired to continue pushing for changes.

Local level participation also provided these women with critical opportunities to assume leadership positions in a range of user or service groups, churches, non-Governmental organisations, clubs and community centres.²⁰ In all of the countries, except Afghanistan, some women had taken on new leadership roles in neighbourhood associations, traders' associations, forest and water management groups, school committees and more. Some women who had been too afraid before now put themselves

forward for positions. Their experience and knowledge expanded, their skills increased and some went on to try and enter the political arena. Building women's political participation from the ground up is critical in transforming women's access to and knowledge of different political processes and builds skills that they can use to directly affect their lives.

Legal and technical knowledge, and education more generally, can enhance women's voice and credibility in the community and, therefore, their capacity for influence. Political networks and experience are also key to increasing women's leadership and influence – and women often develop these through gaining experience at the local level, rather than through more conventional formal party politics or political training programmes. This is acknowledged in recent literature where the focus on increasing numbers of women participating in politics has been complimented by a growing recognition that engagement in decision-making at all levels is an essential tool for achieving gender equality.²¹

The importance of understanding the context for women's political participation

This research and the learning workshop with partners highlighted the importance of investing time in understanding the local socio-political, economic and cultural context as well as the political structures, opportunities and constraints, in order to create spaces for engagement which have value for women. The four contexts were very different along many dimensions and what was appropriate in one context could not necessarily work in another. The legal structures and level of political stability varied, women's position within the society was very different between e.g. Ghana where women are mobile and have economic activities to Afghanistan, where women are still largely confined to the home and are economically dependent. Education levels for women were diverse, the openness and transparency of political processes differed making standardised approaches clearly inappropriate when trying to enable women from communities to get into local level decision-making spaces. The ODI review highlighted the critical importance of context and the need to identify different entry points for supporting women, voice and leadership in ways that can be meaningful. Women's capabilities and interests are shaped by their life experiences – and these must be understood as embedded in the specific socio-political, economic and cultural histories.²²

20. Hunt, A (2014) Filling the Progress Gaps in Women's Local Participation: why innovative approaches are needed: <http://www.developmentprogress.org/blog/2014/07/15/filling-progress-gaps-women%E2%80%99s-local-participation-why-innovative-approaches-are>.

21. See, for example: Klugman, J et. al. (2014) Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity, World Bank Group.

22. Domingo, P et. al. (2014) Women's Voice and Leadership in Decision-Making- Assessing the evidence, ODI.



Elanor Jackson

Women members of Kalidevi Dalit Women's Group, Shikapur, Nepal.

Understanding the opportunities afforded by the constitution, laws around quotas and ring-fenced allocations for vulnerable groups, around decentralisation, is critical and partners use their knowledge of legal and political realities to take these opportunities where possible. It is clearly easier to push for demands and accountability in contexts where rights for women and e.g. caste groups are enshrined in law. The importance of drawing on the constitution to uphold women's rights was also a critical tool in some contexts.

It is certainly challenging to find the best approaches for promoting political participation in contexts that are so diverse and where even within one country the different elements will not be the same. A 'one size fits all' approach is clearly inappropriate when working with so many different variables; partners do work with political and social sensitivity in the different contexts, albeit often within quite generic planning and reporting frameworks that often 'iron out' the diversity and complexity of the realities on the

ground. Partners invest a lot on scanning the context and working within the opportunities and constraints of each space they establish, something often overlooked by funders.

The importance of participation for empowering women

The research has highlighted the power of participation for women; women in the groups reported increased confidence and feeling empowered in their households and communities as a result of participation in the different spaces. In Zimbabwe, Nepal and Ghana, women were clear there was power in coming together to learn and share as well as to raise concerns with decision makers. Some groups of women were able to raise issues with decision makers and achieve positive results for women, although there were other instances where they were unsuccessful. In addition, participation also enabled some women to mobilise others to work with them and seek different ways to address their problems.

The importance of mobilisation in bringing about positive change emerged also in the Pathways of Women's Empowerment studies: Cornwall writes that, 'Where women are able to come together and organise themselves to make demands, build constituencies and alliances, they are more likely both to succeed in making changes for other women and also experience for themselves the empowering effects of mobilisation.'²³

At a meeting in July 2014 reflecting on the Pathways of Empowerment research, participants talked about participation for collective action and raising consciousness as being at the heart of empowerment, 'Changing attitudes and values is as important as changing women's material circumstances and political opportunities.'²⁴

Similarly, the ODI reported that the experience of group cohesion and solidarity can contribute to self-affirmation at the individual and collective level.²⁵ In some contexts this has led to women having the power and legitimacy to challenge gender inequality, while in this research the power of participation was more about raising awareness, self-esteem, and confidence in one's right to speak out and learning that women have the same rights as men and take on new roles, even leadership roles. Women were able to push for better services in some contexts. More time will be needed to see major transformations for women at the local level around gender inequality but participation in these spaces has allowed women to take many important incremental steps in this direction. This work at community level is also linked to work at national policy levels undertaken by the partners – those in Africa and Afghanistan are working at national policy level to challenge some core aspects of gender inequality,²⁶ while in Nepal FEDO is active in influencing policy around Dalits and working with the wider women's movement to influence national policies in relation to women's rights gender inequality.

The importance of monitoring and learning from incremental change

Much of the monitoring and evaluation for these projects is numerical and focuses on counting how many women participate, how often they meet with decision makers and what changes occur as a result in terms of increased services or better infrastructure. In those narrow terms the results of this work on political participation is patchy. Some successes have been recorded but the influencing work with decision makers does not easily lead to women's demands being met and many factors

beyond their control affect success – the budgets and flexibility of the decision makers, the political dynamics, the political will to listen and respond. Using only these yardsticks, a great deal of what is changing for women is lost. Their raised awareness and self confidence, their knowledge of the political terrain and where to go for advice and support, their ability to come together to solve their own problems and mobilise other women in their communities to learn and share, the changes they feel able to make within their own households, their ability to use their agency and voice in public meetings are sometimes overlooked and perhaps undervalued. Yet these steps are critical for changing their position in the community and enabling women to challenge the norms that keep them marginalised and unheard and need to be recognised and built upon to embed the gains made from this work.

The power and potential of the work is sometimes curtailed because of lack of time

It was clear in Ghana, Zimbabwe that the potential of the work to bring about changes in women's lives, their agency and their participation in new arenas was significant. However, the lack of time was limiting what could be achieved in terms of understanding the local context, the power relations in that context, and listening to the women to develop a joint agenda to ensure their priorities were addressed within the spaces. The challenges of embedding the work to ensure longer term sustainability is discussed below.

The partners are committed to women's rights and promoting gender equality but sometimes the work falls short of challenging women's position, and some social norms that exclude them, because the timelines for these projects are tight. The staff of both organisations in Ghana and Zimbabwe have infrequent contact with the women in the communities because of budget constraints and because this work is part of a wider set of programme activities which they are implementing. In Zimbabwe the training and contact days have been cut considerably from the original model for building local women's participation. Such time and budget constraints mean there are challenges for staff to understand well the different communities the women come from, identify who comes and who is excluded, and understand power hierarchies within the communities and among women themselves. In some contexts, it was difficult for partners to allocate sufficient time to build and sustain alliances with Government and non-

23. Andrea Cornwall (August 2014) Women's empowerment: what works and why?, WIDER Working Paper 2014/104.

24. Hawkins, K and Jenny Edwards (2014) Beyond 2015: Pathways to a Gender Just World, Institute of Development Studies.

25. Domingo, P et. al. (2014) Women's Voice and Leadership in Decision-Making- Assessing the evidence, ODI.

26. In Ghana and Zimbabwe the partners work on tackling gender inequality at the national level through lobbying for laws and the implementation of those laws on e.g. sexual violence, women's rights to inheritance, domestic abuse. In Nepal FEDO works on tackling caste discrimination and gender inequality at the national level.

In all of the countries apart from Nepal, sustainability will depend heavily on individual women's motivation and ability to combine their heavy domestic and productive workloads with long-term volunteering.

Government agencies working in the same locations, yet this is necessary in order to link women to other forms of support and to build stronger voices across a location to influence other development agendas. For FEDO in Nepal due to their structure including community DWGs and District Level Boards, they have more opportunity to link to stakeholders at this level.

The time constraints, often related to funding or staffing constraints, played out in different ways in each context. For some women they would have liked more frequent meetings every year (Ghana), for others they wanted more support after the initial training (Zimbabwe). Some needed more time to understand the local political context and their role within it better (Afghanistan) while for Nepal the District Board members wanted more time to be able to reach a greater number of communities to work with Dalit women.

Importance of sustaining support for women's participation

Much is invested in training and building women's confidence yet the challenges of sustaining these spaces are real and can risk the longer term benefits of this work. There is a lack of resources for follow-up after the projects end or for funding women who continue the work themselves. It is assumed they will continue as volunteers, and while some may, many will not as the demands of their daily lives intrude and their motivation and ability to continue will be affected by lack of money for transport or mentors to give them support when things get difficult. The experience of relying on volunteers for development work is that there are high rates of attrition unless there is continued training and support of various kinds. Even in Afghanistan, although the spaces are part of a wider Government programme, there was an apparent lack of commitment from the NSP officials consulted to promote women's participation in these spaces and this is compounded by women's lack of mobility to be able to attend meetings.

The chances are high that only the Dalit Women's Groups in Nepal, which are not externally driven

but managed by Dalit women as part of an organic movement based on activism, will continue in the long term, given the evidence from the DWGs established with FEDO's support and continuing to meet across the country for several years. Also as more Dalit women are taking on roles in different decision-making structures, they act as an inspiration for younger generations of Dalit girls who benefit from increased access to education and greater mobility than their mothers. Sustainability in the other projects will depend heavily on individual women's motivation and ability to combine their heavy domestic and productive workloads with long term volunteering. The challenges of sustainability were found in the Oxfam 'Raising Her Voice Evaluation,' which stressed the importance of providing long-term support to core activists to enable them to be effective as leaders, change agents and role models.²⁷

These realities raise a number of challenges for both funders and implementing partners: how can continued support be given to ensure women can build on what they have learned? It would seem important to re-examine how funds are allocated over the project cycle and what can be built in for longer-term follow-up, in order to extend and deepen the gains women have made as a result of joining these invited spaces. The projects require a great deal of investment by everyone involved and the need to focus more on ways to ensure the continuation of this work has been highlighted as a critical issue. Few resources for this kind of work currently get spent at the community level and yet it is here that the essential work of raising women's awareness, building their confidence, enabling them to realise they have agency and can become empowered to make changes takes place.²⁸ Women met during this research highlighted their need to receive increased support in different ways, e.g. money for transport and meetings, more contact with partners for deeper learning.

The challenges of accountability

The research highlighted the complex relationship between women asking or lobbying for their needs and rights and those in power delivering on these. While there are achievements there are also many disappointments and setbacks. There is a lack of transparency around plans and budgets, priorities and what drives the allocation of resources in most contexts, and the processes of approaching decision makers can be time consuming, feedback is slow and there is limited recourse to any sanctions if requests are refused.

27. Beardon, H and Eva Otero (2013) Women's Right to be Heard: An evaluation of Oxfam GB's 'Raising Her Voice' Portfolio. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/womens-right-to-be-heard-an-evaluation-of-oxfam-gbs-raising-her-voice-portfolio-301544>.

28. Civicus, 2015 State of world's civil society report.

There is more accountability leverage in contexts where there is a legal framework requiring community and women's participation and where funds are allocated for their benefit, as in Ghana and Nepal, but even in these contexts it is hard for community women to demand accountability from people with more education, power and political influence than they have. They do sometimes find other routes to get their voices heard and good decisions made. In contexts such as Zimbabwe, women may feel that the formal nature of legal remedies may leave them vulnerable hence they do not aggressively pursue legal obligations that the women can call on so they feel very much at the mercy of the decision makers and feel relatively powerless to question why decisions are slow, why the Council does not provide its inputs when the women have provided those requested from them, or how to call people with power to account around how decisions are made and finances allocated. They face some disappointments and their relative lack of power is apparent to them.

The research has highlighted the need for much better understanding and analysis of how policy and decision makers are using their power, how to secure more transparency on what is possible, how to get information on priorities and opportunities and how to build allies when barriers are many. How much energy should be expended lobbying Councils where the funding is very limited, the demands are many and political factors play a part in influencing allocations? What are alternative ways of addressing women's needs? It is important to understand when and how successes are achieved and when they are not. The rather simple equation often heard that teaching women their rights and ensuring they have the skills to demand their rights will result in them receiving their rights is unhelpful in supporting women to navigate complex political environments. The partners know and understand these complexities and need more time to work with women to identify what is going to be possible in each context and to determine different ways of working that might achieve more for women.

Concluding comment

The research contexts were diverse and the issues facing women trying to engage politically at the local level challenging. It did not endeavour to tie the findings up neatly for four such different contexts: women's lives and experiences were very varied, the opportunities were much greater in some places than others, the challenges different in each political context. The constraints women faced through lack of mobility, poverty, limited exposure to public spaces, the social norms around their position, roles and responsibilities played out in different ways in each location.

Nevertheless some clear findings did emerge, including the power of women-only spaces, the real value of participation for women related to their growing confidence and for some their increasing empowerment to speak up and assume leadership roles regardless of how effective these roles were in holding Government bodies and others to account. Women are taking part in political actions and achieving some positive results especially around improving the provision of and access to some essential services. Beyond that, the research highlighted the many different and incremental changes taking place for women that are enabling them to take on new roles, challenge some social norms and speak out for their rights including changes which may not have been considered or included in the original project design but which are vital for change to happen.

The research emphasises the need to pay attention to the specifics of each context and to understand how best to leverage women's agency to address those holding control over key resources. The learning and confidence building takes time and investing more time and resources into the spaces that have been created would ensure the work is fully embedded and can continue over the longer-term, something very important, given the benefits seen in this work that have real value for women and their communities.

Annex 1: Core research questions

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- 1 **Who created the space and who set the rules?** How do these shape what takes place? How often do meetings happen and how are the meetings conducted? The rules? Who is linked in this space?
- 2 **Purpose of the space:** participation, voice, creating leaders, accountability, information sharing, influencing, meeting with decision makers, stepping-stones to access other decision-making spaces etc. Is it specifically aimed at governance changes or other issues?
- 3 **Who attends? Who does not attend?** What motivates women to attend? Which women access/do not access these spaces? How do they work together? Are they developing a collective voice or not? Do they see themselves as representing other women?
- 4 **How is the space structured and organised?** Whose voices get heard? Who does not get heard? How are differences negotiated? Who performs well/less well? How are hierarchies of power managed?
- 5 **What happens in the space – What issues are raised?** What do community women want leaders to attend to? What do leaders want from these discussions? What decisions get made? What actions are taken and what changes as a result? What changes for women members on an individual, family and community level? How are leaders/decision makers held to account?

Annex 2: Research participants

Ghana

108 people in total:

38 women who attend the quarterly meetings in the two research Districts

19 aspiring women leaders from the two Districts

Three Queen Mothers

28 members of different Associations – Fishmongers and Dressmakers in Ada East, Market Women's Association and different Church associations in Atwima Mponua

20 individual interviews including with traditional leaders, decision makers and District Government officials and four women participants in the quarterly meetings

Nepal

81 people in total:

30 women members of two DWGs

13 husbands of members of the DWGs

26 Dalit women from a range of different Ward Citizens' Forums, Forest User Groups and political parties and the Ekata DWG

Five Dalit women leaders (four of them were members of political parties) trained through the FLOW project, based in Kathmandu

Six members of the FEDO District Board in Kavre, the Secretary of the Board is also one of the women leaders trained by FEDO through the FLOW project

VDC Secretary for Banepa Municipality (male Dalit)

Afghanistan

52 people in total:

24 women from 2 CDCs

12 members of male CDC in Istalif

10 women non-CDC members in Kalakan

Four individual interviews with decision makers including *Malik* and Mullah in Istalif and District Governors from both Districts

Two NSP representatives (male and female) interviewed together

Zimbabwe

34 people in total:

28 women from two WCFs including the two Ward Councillors

One local chief of Makoni Ward 20

Three representatives from the two District Councils (two from Makoni and one from Mutasa)

One representative from the Ministry of Gender in Rusape

One representative of the Residents Association in Mutasa Ward 21

This summary of research on women's political participation at the community level in four very different countries – Ghana, Zimbabwe, Nepal and Afghanistan – focuses on work in each context which aims to increase women's political participation and voice. The research focuses on the spaces created for women by the Government or more usually Womankind's partners, to explore what these mean to women. In the interests of learning, all the core findings of the individual country research reports are presented and discussed in this summary.



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