

Quick Guide to Promoting Women's Participation



Why is women's participation important?

Gender mainstreaming is one of the strategies we use to promote gender equality. It is a process of ensuring that all of our work, and the way we do it, contributes to gender equality by transforming the balance of power between women and men. This means ensuring that both women and men are consulted, and their different needs and perspectives considered at all stages of the programme cycle – design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation - to be sure that our programmes benefit women and men equally, do not harm or exclude women, and help to redress existing gender imbalances.



However, women are often prevented from contributing to decision-making in both the private and public spheres. In many communities, men dominate over women, women's opinions are not heard or valued, and decision-making structures exclude women. We need to take concrete steps to ensure that women are included and actively participate in community-level meetings and decision-making bodies, such as those relating to disaster risk management, peace building, water management, grain banks, micro-credit schemes, and school management. We need to be sure that:

- We **understand the issues poor women face**. Decisions and actions need to be based on knowledge of different needs and experiences, which can only be done by talking to both men and women.
- We do not miss out on the **knowledge, skills and experience that women have to offer**, and which have the potential to benefit the whole community.
- We do not **reinforce inequality**. If women's voices are not heard, their issues will remain invisible and we may not meet their basic needs. Our programme interventions may even further disadvantage women, for example by having a negative impact on their workload or security, or by reinforcing men's power.

What does participation involve?

Firstly, you need to **take practical steps** to make sure women can attend meetings and get involved in committees, for example:

- Think about the time of the meeting, and how this fits with women's work and domestic responsibilities. Talk to women to find a time which is most suitable for them, e.g. avoiding mealtimes.
- Many women have childcare responsibilities. Think about providing a crèche or making other childcare arrangements.
- Think about women's mobility and security, and the accessibility of the venue. Consider providing transport and/or covering transport costs.
- Choose a venue that women will be comfortable with: somewhere they would normally congregate, or where women and men are used to coming together, not a venue that is traditionally male-dominated.
- Make sure women know about the meeting and are specifically invited to attend by an appropriate person, e.g. a village elder.
- If the meeting is likely to interfere with women's income generating opportunities, consider whether paying them for their time would be appropriate.
- Bear in mind any cultural considerations, such as restrictions on women and men mixing, and think about how to alleviate these, e.g. through seating arrangements. If men and women really can't sit in the same room, hold separate meetings and ensure that women's views are clearly communicated.
- Consider whether the focus of the meeting is likely to influence who attends. For example, men may be more likely to attend meetings about construction and less likely to attend those about health issues, if they consider this to be women's responsibility.

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However, participation is about more than women being present. You must also take steps to ensure that **women's involvement is meaningful**, that their voices are heard and their viewpoints taken into consideration during meetings:

- Meet with women to explain that their participation is important, and that their views **do** matter; build their confidence so they feel that they have the right to get involved in matters that affect their lives. Many women, such as this coffee farmer in the Dominican Republic, don't believe that they have the capacity: *'It's difficult for women to take part in meetings because we have to do all the housework and look after the children. Many of us are illiterate and we get bored in the meetings. But there are some who can, who know how to write and how to be leaders just as well as the men.'*
- Similarly, meet with men to break down their resistance to women's participation and gain their support. Understand that they may feel threatened, and explain how women's involvement can be beneficial to the whole community.
- Ensure that you have a full understanding of the dynamics, structures, attitudes, beliefs and power in the community, so as to anticipate possible barriers.
- Consider how Oxfam or partner staff will affect dynamics. E.g. the presence of female staff may make it easier to involve women.
- Make sure that the meeting is conducted in a language everybody will understand.
- Find ways to give women the confidence to voice their opinions: for example, invite women to sit together for mutual support; actively invite them to speak; or work in small groups, which may be less threatening.
- Encourage full debate of different viewpoints before decisions are taken; reinforce that there is no 'right' opinion.



A workshop on community protection and risk in Colombia

When we arrived, most of the men had notebooks and pens ready. We said "Actually, today we're not going to take notes - we're just going to have a conversation." With that simple gesture, we made sure that the women - none of whom knew how to read or write - could participate fully. We also ensured that there was continuous translation into the local indigenous language, Emberá, as women are less likely than men to understand Spanish. The men formed one group and the women another, and we asked them to list the risks and dangers that they perceive in their surroundings and everyday life. Although both groups mentioned factors such as „presence of armed actors" and „displacement", there were some differences between the two lists. The women had identified „lack of food" as a higher priority risk than the men had. At first, both men and women found this surprising. One of the participants said "We all eat, so there is no reason why food should be more important to women." But then they realised that the difference was due to women having responsibility for making sure there is food in the house, and that the children and the men are fed.

Tools and resources

- *Gender Sensitivity Checklist*, a checklist designed for HIV and AIDS programmes but containing useful tips on how to promote women's and girls' participation in meetings and activities: http://data.unaids.org/Topics/Gender/genderchecklist_en.pdf
- *Gender: Technical Notes*, guidance on promoting women's participation in PRSP processes, but with ideas that can be applied in other contexts: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPRS1/Resources/383606-1205334112622/5796_annex_i.pdf

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