



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO REPORT

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES:

Understanding Women's
Participation and Empowerment

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trócaire

Acknowledgements

Trócaire envisages a just and peaceful world where people's dignity is ensured and rights are respected; where basic needs are met and resources are shared equitably; where people have control over their own lives and those in power act for the common good.

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Abbreviations

CARG	Association for Rural and Agricultural Advice and Management in Seke Banza
CDJP	Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace
CEDAW	The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CLD	Local Development Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ETD	Decentralized Territorial Entities
GCD	Business and Development Group
GBV	Gender Based Violence
MONUC	United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
SNEL	Société Nationale d'Electricité (national electricity company)

Executive Summary

A mapping of Trócaire's international programmes in 2012, indicated that the majority of Trócaire's work supporting women's participation, happened at the grassroots level and focused on supporting community mobilisation through organising and training. This reflected the common perception amongst staff that the barriers for women to participate resulted from women's lack of confidence and their low skill-set and knowledge. However, these presumptions were not grounded in evidence, and academic literature on the subject was found to inadequately address women's own experiences, or the impact of participation programmes at community level. In response, Trócaire designed and implemented a 3-year multi-country research project to deepen understanding of participation and empowerment at the community level in order to improve policy and practice, especially related to women's participation in decision-making spaces, and in particular around decision-making that affected their own lives. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was selected as a case study country for the research.

The report defines participation as the creation of new opportunities for citizens to gain the power to influence decisions that affect their lives, at community and national levels. This typically involves the inclusion of excluded individuals and groups in decision-making forums to influence issues that affect their lives, and giving access to power for those who are so often marginalised. The process, experience and nature of citizen participation varies widely between different communities and within a variety of spaces. Empowerment is understood as a process of pushing against the boundaries of power to shape new fields of possible action; it is also the outcome of this process which sees shifts from oppressive power relations to more fluid power relations, where changes can occur and power can be negotiated through the increase in the power within individuals, and their collective power when they work together.

In DRC, most of the women that participated in this study were members of 'invited spaces', that is, spaces that were created by an external organisation in which people are invited to participate. The women used those spaces primarily to meet to discuss local issues affecting their lives over which they wanted to affect change. Using the established local governance routes, issues raised at these participatory fora were channelled to the appropriate local leaders. The spaces also provided training courses and education for women on civil rights, governance structures and literacy. In the case of literacy centres, one of the three invited spaces studied in the research, the findings reveal that while they were initially intended to be a stepping stone into the other invited spaces, few of their participants had

made that transition. Nevertheless, some of the centres had started raising money to open sewing centres and had been places of training and education, demonstrating that even where participatory fora do not reach their intended goal, their activities might still have a positive impact on women's empowerment and material well-being. While the research was conducted using a relatively small sample size, in a selected number of geographical areas, and the results are therefore not intended to be representative, they are nevertheless indicative of trends in regions that are similar contextually, and lessons learned can be extracted for use across the country and beyond.

The journey towards women's empowerment in DRC:

The research looked at women's progress along an 'empowerment journey'. Women might begin their empowerment journey in their home, and the first step in that journey might simply be to leave their home. Over time, they gain new skills and knowledge and may participate within community structures; they may lobby government bodies for services and support, and may even become leaders within community structures.

All of the women that participated, reported some type of empowerment as a result of their participation and their stories provide us with an overall model of the process of empowerment as a result of their participation. The women's stories showcase that the trajectory of women's participation and empowerment is fluid and varied, and - as development practitioners - our supports must be fluid and varied in response.

In the research sites in DRC, it is not unusual for women to be actively engaged in activities outside the home, as leaving the home and entering into public spaces is embedded in the social norms and roles of women. The experience of accessing public spaces and participating gives them a degree of confidence and experience sometimes denied to women in other cultural contexts. However, despite their presence in public life, they are still excluded from decisions regarding community issues.

The invited spaces helped the women to gain the confidence to break the cultural taboos preventing women from being leaders or addressing authorities. Gaining knowledge and experience helped many of the women to feel able to speak out and confidently express themselves in meetings. Using the confidence, knowledge and experience they acquired in the invited spaces and initial grassroots organisations, some of the women then move to actively participate within other grassroots spaces, with many taking on new leadership posts. However, only around 15% of the research sample

had been elected to leadership posts within mixed male/female organic or invited spaces. Around 70% of participants transitioned from participating within community spaces to actually lobbying the appointed Chiefs for improved access to services and basic needs for their communities, and they experienced a number of successes as a result of their advocacy, which meant that they have become known in the community. This increase in status has supported their confidence and belief in their ability to take action. When undertaking advocacy on community wide issues such as water and electricity, the women from the citizens' committees have tried to mobilise other women to support them, through protests and petitions, for example. Mobilising others has strengthened the women's power when undertaking advocacy and has enabled women not involved in an invited space, with an opportunity to express their needs to the authorities. However, this comes at a cost in some cases, as it risks adding to women's existing burdens (with childcare, domestic duties, or with a new expectation from extended family or community members that the woman can help them obtain material benefits as a result of their participation in community activities) or by contributing to tensions at home. At the same time, for some of the women their new knowledge and experience combined to raise their awareness of the oppression they experience as women, specifically in relation to the unequal division of roles within the home. Many have then individually started to demand changes in their homes and familial relationships.

Barriers encountered

The report extracted a number of key barriers and enablers affecting women's participation and empowerment to make decisions affecting their own lives and that of their communities. The barriers included:

1. **Taboo of women in leadership in mixed decision making spaces** resulted in constant resistance from men in community associations to women's leadership and opposition from male family members to their involvement in family decisions. The taboo remained even where women worked hard to prove themselves as equal leaders.
2. **Illiteracy and low levels of education**, for some women, prevented them from taking on leadership roles; for others, they lacked confidence in their roles and felt unable to perform properly. Literacy programmes directly responded to this barrier. However even amongst participants that were literate, some were still self-conscious about their low level of education and this impeded their participation

and their confidence.

3. **Unequal division of labour** prevailed with all women undertaking all domestic duties and the majority of responsibility for child care. The women did not perceive the unequal division of labour as a barrier because they had fully accepted that it is part of their natural duty. In many cases, they have added the burden of participating to their existing workload and employ various coping strategies to ensure that they can still participate.
4. **Internalisation of gender norms** did not just affect confidence but shaped thoughts about what constitutes a barrier. The internalisation of gender norms is so pervasive that there was complete acceptance of the unequal division of labour between men and women.

These barriers stem from the unequal power relations between men and women that exist within the society; roles and responsibilities within the community and household are traditionally rigidly divided by gender, and begin in childhood.

Enabling Factors Encountered:

1. **Overcoming a lack of self-confidence** opened up opportunities for participation. The lack of self-confidence, in contrast, stops women from participating, from putting herself forward for leadership positions, approaching the authorities, and from overcoming other barriers.
2. **Training on human rights** allowed women to learn that the unequal balance of power between men and women was not just nor legally mandated. This awareness strengthened their power within by liberating them from feelings of inadequacy so they could confidently express themselves in front of men and take on leadership positions within grass roots organisations. For some of the women, this knowledge also supported them to feel that they had the right to participate in family decisions or enforce their rights regarding divorce, their children's education and inheritance.
3. **Peer support** from fellow participants, helped women overcome male resistance, problems within their families and a lack of self-confidence.
4. **Access mechanisms for the women to access the authorities**, allowed women in the sub-committees to

feed the issues that have arisen in their grassroots organisations into the citizens' committees. This access enabled them to advance in their empowerment journeys because they were part of a collective community effort to address issues. They gained power with others through protests, petitions and for some women, direct advocacy with local authorities.

5. **Economic wealth and freedom of movement** resulting from financial independence, meant that some women were not reliant on their husbands or families for money to attend meetings.

6. **Literacy** is not a requirement for a leader but the women felt unable to carry out specific tasks whilst illiterate, demonstrating the connection between literacy and self-confidence.

7. **Family support**, and in particular the lack of tension around women's participation, had the indirect impact of creating space for a shift in gender norms within a family. However, individual acceptance does not signify that women's participation in general, is accepted as a right.

Impact of participation:

Women are now participating to address community issues, even though women's participation in community decisions is traditionally not socially accepted. Only through either a critical mass of women or a woman holding the most powerful position in the committee, did the women in the research report feel equally able to influence decisions.

Advocacy on community issues is happening but limited by a lack of citizen power. The once closed spaces of the local chiefs are now open. The women in the citizens' committees and others from the sub-committees and even the literacy groups, have been able to exercise their power to demand change. However, despite these successes, the women note that one of the major barriers to their work is the lack of power they have to hold the authorities to account.

The creation of citizens' committees and women's sub-committees has established a mechanism to filter citizens' demands and bring them to the state authorities. Given the absence of clear rights and accountable duty bearers this is an important success. Previously the women had never had any interaction with chiefs and now they are able to access them; the door is now open rather than closed. The advocacy undertaken has resulted in better access to vital needs such as water and electricity. Power still ultimately lies in the hands of the chiefs but the women, as part of the citizen committee, have been able to use their power in different ways such as mobilising the community through protests and petitions.

Ultimately, decisions in relation to provision of services lie in the hands of the local chiefs, and the women have no power to ensure that their requests are granted. There are no official accountability mechanisms for the women to hold the authorities to account over decisions; when the chiefs do not deliver there is no official follow up action the women can take. Through the citizens' committees, the women have challenged the power balance and the space is no longer fully closed as the chiefs do accept meetings with the citizens' committees but those meetings are dependent on the willingness of individuals rather than any legal rights and ultimate control over decisions still lies with the state officials.

Power is not devolved from citizen committees to women's committees either, and thus, women members of the sub-committees are not part of the actual decision making. Even amongst women-only committees, these hierarchical structures replicate themselves, with (albeit limited) power being concentrated in the hands of executive committees. Thus, to achieve an impact, women need to take seats on the executive committees of mixed organisations, and within women only organisations, a diversity of women need to take a seat at executive committees.

Representing others remains a challenge. Given that there is a very low level of interaction between the local authorities and the population, the latter may perceive the citizens' committees as having special powers that they do not have. This position means that the citizens' committees then end up walking a tightrope; they must be seen to be open and supportive of the authorities to gain influence, but must avoid the perception that they can address community wide problems, over which they ultimately have no control. Given the high levels of corruption and mistrust between citizens and the state, if the women are perceived to be part of the local governance structure, they risk losing the trust of the community.

Ultimately, the research shows that, among the groups and spaces surveyed, inclusion does not equate to influence and wider gender norms that underpin women's exclusion from decisions, have not been addressed through programmes that focus on participation. Thus, effective work on participation requires a whole-of-community approach. At the same time, the legitimacy that women have gained by being members on committees, has led to a slight change in gender norms as women are now part of meetings and their voices are heard.

Key recommendations

- Precede empowerment programmes with an analysis of the political landscape, social norms and gender equality/power relations to select spaces that meet women's needs on a personal, legal and social level. Use this analysis to select spaces to work in/with and what the starting point for engagement should be.

- On the basis of the context analysis, design pathways to influence within existing spaces or through new ones. Create opportunities at all levels of this pathway, including public representation/advocacy for those that are empowered to take on this role, and collective sharing of experiences or communal protests for others.
- Support collective action that focuses on advocacy & lobbying, mutual support and peer to peer learning, and that is based on a variety of advocacy/participation tools to meet the individual needs of individual women. Support strategies aimed at mobilising the wider population.
- Design programmes that respond to the specific practical (as well as social) needs of all women within the community, and ensure that no group is excluded from participating due to practical reasons.
- Support literacy and education for women, as part of a wider approach to strengthening their self-confidence and resilience.
- Support training and awareness raising programmes to build women's confidence and empower them with the tools they need to resist disempowerment in the private and public spheres.
- Consider providing some material support to women to allow them to attend decision-making fora, either to support them with transport costs or to alleviate the pressure associated with childcare.
- Accept that change is gradual, and empowerment is a long term process. Tailor targets and indicators to reflect that true empowerment happens continuously and takes many years to fully realise.
- Be clear about the limits of what women can achieve or deliver within participatory spaces, and ensure that this is known and understood within the wider community.
- Identify protection risks and incorporate strategies for these risks to support women to counteract the negative consequences.
- Actively engage men before and during participation programmes.

This report is supplemented by two additional country case study reports, one on India, and one on Nicaragua. The findings emerging from these three studies were further analysed and the overall findings are presented in an overview report, "Pushing the Boundaries: Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment."

1. Introduction to the research



Christine, Director of CDJP Matadi, planning for data collection. Photo: Emma Newbury

1. Introduction to the research

From 2012 to 2015, Trócaire conducted a multi-country research project to deepen understanding of participation and empowerment at the community levels. The research project aimed to improve policy and practice around participation and empowerment, especially related to women's participation in decision-making spaces and on decision-making that affected their own lives. It did this by interrogating assumptions regarding women's empowerment, including the perception that the barriers for women to participate resulted from women's lack of confidence and their low skill-set and knowledge.

1.1 Background to the research

Gender Equality and Governance and Human Rights represent two of the five strategic programme areas under Trócaire's 2012-2016 Strategic Plan. Both programmes address issues of citizen participation as key to empowerment, but they conceive the relationship between participation and empowerment in different ways. For the Gender programme, empowerment is the end goal, while for the Governance programme, empowerment is the mechanism to achieve participation. Against this background, in 2012, Trócaire initiated a three year research project in order to better understand programming on women's participation in decision making structures at community level and how it interacts with empowerment and political engagement across the two programme areas.¹ The project was to focus on women's participation in decision making spaces in three selected countries: India, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Nicaragua, with a view to informing future programming and policies with evidence based research findings and robust analysis.

An initial literature review of available secondary research on women's participation was conducted to identify the gaps in existing research and this review provided the basis for building the analytical framework for the research. The review explored the key concepts of participation, empowerment and the spaces where individuals participate at community level, and it identified two overriding issues

around participation. Firstly, women's voices were largely absent from the literature, and their perspectives and views not adequately captured; and secondly, existing research looks predominantly at participation in formal political structures, particularly at the national level.

Far less evidence or research was available regarding the promotion of women's participation within their communities.² A 2015 review of literature and learning on these topics from the Overseas Development Institute, concluded that the process through which women's participation becomes meaningfully able to influence decisions, is still a 'black box' with limited understanding of what happens in informal spaces and how this is of value to women and gender equality agendas (Domingo, 2015).

A mapping of Trócaire's international programmes revealed that the majority of Trócaire's work supporting women's participation happened at the grassroots level and focused on supporting community mobilisation through organising and training. Staff surveyed, reported a perception that the barriers for women to participate, resulted from women's lack of confidence and their low skill-set and knowledge. Correspondingly, a core assumption prevailed that working to address these issues would enable women to participate and exercise influence over decisions affecting their lives or that of their community. Broadly, the causes of women's marginalisation in political processes at all levels, were perceived by staff to be rooted within the women themselves.

Against this contextual background, the research focused on what enables women to participate and exert influence in informal community decision-making spaces. A participatory methodology was designed to prioritise women's views and experiences to understand how participation happened, how this supported women's empowerment, and how empowerment enabled more effective participation.

1. This research did not look at other gender mainstreaming strategies or gender as a cross cutting issue. Instead, it looked at three programmes – two of them dedicated Governance and Human Rights Programmes and one of them a dedicated Gender Based Violence Programme, as the main focus was on ensuring a better understanding of participation in decision making structures and how Trócaire and its partners understand and support 'empowerment'.
2. Notably, in the time that has lapsed since the research started, new materials have been published by Oxfam and the Institute of Development Studies regarding the importance of working with and listening to women at community level, to understand the complexity of their lives. See Overseas Development Institute (Pilar Domingo et al), "Women's voice and leadership in decision-making Assessing the evidence," March 2015, available at <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9627.pdf>; Duncan Green/Oxfam, "The Raising her Voice Global Programme," January 2015, available at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-raising-her-voice-global-programme-338444>.

Figure 1. Research sites



The following section (1.2) provides an overview of the analytical framework within which the research was conducted, by explaining the understandings of participation and empowerment employed. Section 1.3 provides an overview of the research methodology and background information regarding Trócaire’s work in DRC. Section 1.4 describes the context in which this work takes place. Sections 2 & 3 present the key research findings, and consider the relationship between participation and empowerment by looking at the women’s individual journeys and the barriers and enablers they encountered. Finally, the findings consider the collective experiences of the women within the spaces. Section 4 analyses these findings to draw conclusions regarding how power is manifested and changed within participatory programmes, and the extent to which it can be transformed. The findings of this report, along with those of two other country reports, contributed to an overview report entitled “Pushing the Boundaries: Understanding Women’s Participation and Empowerment.”

1.1.1 Objectives of the research

The purpose of the research was to bring women’s voices and experiences to the fore to inform, in a usable and practical way, the issues to be addressed in programming for women’s participation and empowerment. The research aimed to deepen understanding of participation and empowerment at the community levels in order to improve the policy and practice, especially related to women’s participation in decision-making spaces, and in particular around decision-making that affected their own lives.

Specifically this research aimed to:

- Map and understand the spaces where women were able to participate and their purpose for the women and the wider community;
- Explore the barriers and enabling factors for women’s participation in public decision making spaces at the community and local/district arenas;
- Investigate Trócaire’s strategies to enable women to participate in decision-making spaces, to

capture learning and identify good practice and the challenges in Trócaire’s programmes;

- Explore the effects of participation in these spaces on individual women’s lives and the communities they live in, including understanding better how empowering it is and what changes it enables for women.

1.2 Analytical framework: Participation, Space, Power & Empowerment

The research was specifically interested in how participation contributes to processes of empowerment and the reduction of oppressive power relations between men and women, and between citizens and the state. The initial literature review on women’s participation identified multiple, and sometimes vague, definitions and understandings of participation and empowerment. Thus, an analytical framework was developed to guide this research, which defined three core concepts: participation, space and power.

Drawing on the work of Gaventa (2004) and the concept of ‘citizenship participation’, an approach that reflects Trócaire’s rights based approach, participation is understood as the desire to create new opportunities for citizens to gain the power to influence community decisions. The goal is “the collective and participatory engagement of citizens in the determination of the affairs of their community” (Dietz, 1987). Citizen participation creates opportunities for participation to support empowerment by involving typically excluded individuals and groups in decision-making forums to influence issues that affect their lives, and giving access to power for those who are so often marginalised. The process, experience and nature of citizen participation varies widely between communities and is determined by the women and men in each different context.

To situate participation within lived experiences, the research draws on Cornwall’s (2002) seminal work on ‘spaces’. This theory regards participation as a spatial practice that occurs in bounded yet permeable arenas. Cornwall’s taxonomy of spaces provides a framework for the research to explore what concrete opportunities there are for participation: where the space is and who created it, what rules govern each space and how these rules affect access to the space, who can participate, and who makes the decisions within each space.

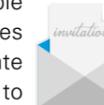
The taxonomy divides spaces into three types, which provides a tool to map the different spaces in each context and understand where participation can take place, and who has the power to control the space and set the rules for who may or may not join, speak and be heard.

- **Closed spaces:** these spaces are difficult to enter. The rules ensure that only specific actors can enter

the spaces, often because they hold a specific role or have a particular type of experience. Within these spaces decisions are taken only by the actors allowed access to these spaces, and are made behind closed doors (for example, the law courts, cabinet, boards of trustees). They are established within Government machineries or by specific professions or organisations.



- **Invited spaces:** these are spaces created by agencies external to the community (such as local or district government or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)) in which people are invited to participate; the rules are set by the agencies that create them. They are often constructed to be open and to include people usually excluded from more formal closed spaces; they are designed to give new opportunities, often to women, to participate in decision-making (for example village planning committees, parent teacher associations, water user groups, women’s groups).
- **Claimed/organic spaces:** these are spaces created by the people themselves, often to build unity and to challenge power holders; they are united around a common cause. These are collective and popular spaces run by people themselves, where the rules of entry and behaviour are set by them. They can be open to all or focused on specific groups such as refugees, the elderly, women or youth groups. They can be ad hoc or established, long or short term (for example lobbying groups, protest groups, self-help groups addressing urgent service gaps).



Some spaces are fluid: they may begin as organic and later be transformed into invited spaces, especially when outside agencies begin to support the work. They may start as invited spaces and later become more organic, such as when projects come to an end. Closed spaces are usually much more fixed in nature.

Recognising that participation does not occur in a vacuum but as part of the social world, where power dynamics shape the boundaries of action, the analytical framework drew on debates about the ubiquitous and complex nature of power and domination. These debates facilitate an understanding of the potential that spaces, and women’s participation in these spaces, provide for influencing decision-making and supporting the transformation of power relations. Four types of power were identified:

- **‘Power over’** is the most commonly discussed form of power and refers to domination, control and repression to varying degrees. This form of

power is regarded as a negative force that controls the oppressed person’s ability to take action.

- **‘Power within’** is the internal capacity that all humans possess; without this all other types of power are not possible. Self-confidence and self-worth are regarded as measures of ‘power within.’
- **‘Power to’** refers to the unique potential of every person to be able to take action to influence their world and can be considered as the visible manifestation of ‘power within.’
- **‘Power with’** refers to the power created through collective action, where the whole is greater than the sum of the individuals.

Power is understood as complex, negotiable and responsive to peoples’ actions, although the pervasive nature of ‘power over’ in relation to both male and female relations and relations between the citizen and the state is recognised as real and often resistant to change.

The research defined empowerment as a process rather than a state of being: “a political and material process which increases individual and group power, self-reliance and strength” (Ferguson, 2004, 1). Empowerment is understood as a process of pushing against the boundaries of power to shape new fields of possible action; it is also the outcome of this process which sees shifts from oppressive ‘power over’ relations to more fluid power relations where changes can occur and power can be negotiated through the increase in the three forms of transformational power (power within, power with and power to).

One might envision a continuum of power relations on which domination forms one end-point. At the opposite end would be the fluid power relation defined by social boundaries that are understood by all participants and that allow the maximum possible space, not only for action within, but also effective action upon the boundaries themselves. (Hayward, 1998, 21)

This analytical framework allows for an exploration of how far participation promotes women’s empowerment and contributes to a decrease in exclusive male and state domination (power over) to a situation where power can be negotiated by and with women to address their immediate and long term needs.

There are different purposes and objectives associated with promoting changes in women’s power and it is important to clarify where the current approaches to women’s empowerment, within Trócaire and the NGO sector, sit. At one end of the spectrum, proponents of empowerment argue that if women can be brought in to participate in existing structures, through making changes to both external and internal constraints, then they will have the power to influence decisions that directly affect their lives

and interests. This approach aims to improve women's lives by integrating them into existing decision-making and other structures from which they have previously been excluded. The purpose is to increase their access to services, resources and decisions by building their confidence, self-esteem and understanding. At the other end of an empowerment spectrum, it is argued that to achieve transformational change, women need to do more than work within existing structures; they need to be aware of, understand and challenge the causes – not only the symptoms- of their inequality and exclusion. Transformational change requires challenging existing social norms and the structures of inequality that disempower them, at every level, from the household to the national. It requires confidence and self-esteem but also an understanding of the structural causes of their exclusion and working to address these through collective action. Women's inequality is understood to rest as much in structural barriers as in women's lack of confidence and self-belief.

These concepts provide the conceptual structure for the report and enable the analysis of the very different experiences of the women in the three diverse research contexts. While the aims of different empowerment programmes may differ and sit in different places along a continuum - from working within the status quo to pushing the boundaries - in practice, the work shares many methods and approaches. While each end of the spectrum is rooted in very different understandings of empowerment and each has different overall goals and often uses different methodologies, there are nevertheless commonalities between them in practical programming.

1.3 Methodology

A qualitative methodology, that places emphasis on listening to women's voices through participatory tools, was developed for this research to ensure that women, communities, local organisations, Trócaire and the wider development sector would learn from the research process as well as the overall findings.

A researcher and external advisor were appointed in May 2012 to ensure that the research was carried out with the necessary analytical rigour. The research process was a collaborative effort between Trócaire country staff, chosen local organisations and Trócaire technical programme teams in Head Office. Data collection and analysis were conducted in each of the three case-study countries by local partner organisations with the support of the Trócaire country office and the Research Officer. This approach aimed to ensure that the research encouraged reflection and change within programmes. It also provided local partner organisations with an opportunity to build their capacity in conducting participatory research, which would in turn strengthen their organisations and increase their understanding of the

communities and women with whom they work.

1.3.1 Sample selection

Partner organisations that were part of Trócaire's 'Governance and Human Rights' or 'Gender Equality' programmes were chosen to participate in this research, and within these programmes, a sample of communities and women programme participants were selected to take part.

Country selection

Trócaire country offices interested in participating in the research submitted expressions of interest and a short list of 6 countries was selected based on the following criteria:

- Representation of Trócaire's geographical spread;
- Diversity of strategies on increasing women's participation;
- Representation of Governance and Human Rights and Gender Equality programmes;
- Commitment to undertaking research.

While the original research plan intended to research four case study countries, financial constraints meant that, ultimately, researching only three countries was feasible. In addition to the criteria outlined above, the research team considered practical barriers/enablers associated with potential case study counties, including commitments within the country, resources available to undertake the research and availability of programme staff.

DRC was particularly interesting because it was the only country on the short list implementing an integrated gender and governance programme. While in most countries in which Trócaire works, it operates separate 'gender' and 'governance and human rights' programmes, in DRC, a joint gender, governance and human rights programme was initiated in 2010. The programme aimed to improve the responsiveness of local government to grassroots citizens' needs and priorities in the Bas-Congo³ and Ituri provinces of DRC. It aimed to achieve this by strengthening the capacity and knowledge of both citizens and local government officials on civil and political rights and promoting dialogue between them to ensure that the plans, budget and services of local government better represent the needs of the population. The programme specifically focused on increasing women's participation and voice in the institutions, policies and plans of the Congolese State at local and national level. It ended in 2015 in Bas-Congo and continues in Ituri as part of an integrated programme.

Local partner organisations

Trócaire works in partnership with organisations indigenous

to the countries and communities in which it works. For the purpose of this research, a local organisation was selected for study on the basis of the following criteria:

- Ongoing implementation of strategies to encourage women's participation in decision making spaces at the community level;
- Commitment to participatory principles;
- Demonstrable belief that programme strategies will provide learning for other programmes;
- Willingness to dedicate time to conducting the research;
- Regular engagement with target communities.

Final selection of partners that met the above criteria, was also guided by logistical and financial constraints and opportunities. The Gender and Governance programme in DRC was implemented in both the Bas-Congo province in the west of the country and the Ituri province in the east of the country. Both financial and human resources were insufficient to include local organisations from Eastern DRC. Thus, the project concentrated on the Bas-Congo region. Within that region, only one organisation met the above criteria, namely CDJP Matadi.

Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace (CDJP) Matadi was formed in 2001 under the direction of the Bishop, and has been implementing Trócaire supported projects addressing citizens' participation and women's participation in Matadi City, Kinzau Mvueté town and the Lufu region, as part of Trócaire's Programme in DRC.

These projects aimed to improve participation by training local government officials and citizens on their civic and political rights, and organising the population into committees. Citizens' committees were established to provide a platform through which to bring the needs and priorities of citizens to local authorities' attention. The projects planned to work alongside the new local councils. However, local elections were postponed, and these committees have instead worked with the local (administrative and traditional) chiefs. Two sub-committees were set up that feed into the citizens' committee: the market sub-committee and the women's sub-committee.

- The market sub-committee aims to promote transparency in the governance and management of local markets, particularly with regard to the collection of illegal taxes.
- The women's sub-committee was established to focus on issues of importance to local women. By liaising between the literacy groups (see below) and the citizens' committees, they were designed to ensure the needs and concerns of women were given a voice. The group also raised awareness in the community on decentralisation, local elections and

civic and political rights, particularly those of women.

Literacy centres were also created to support women's participation, and address the barrier of illiteracy by providing literacy and rights training. Through participation in the centre, learning to read, and developing an understanding of women's rights, women were expected to be enabled to gain the confidence to enter other invited spaces.

A number of assumptions were made within the programme, including that if women know their rights they will be able to claim those rights, that one of the biggest barriers to participation is literacy, and when women are more numerous in decision making spaces they will better be able to take actions.

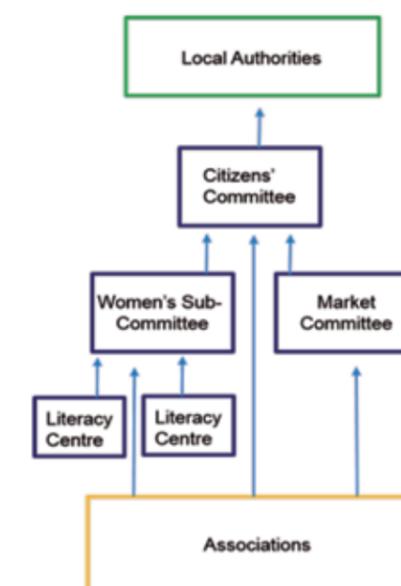


Figure 2. Committee structure

Working with local partner organisations had both strengths and weaknesses. Some of the key strengths observed during this research included the following:

- Data was interpreted with knowledge of the local situation;
- Trust existed between the staff and the women involved in the research;
- Continuous data collection was possible because it was integrated into the project intervention;
- Data collection was less costly;
- The research process itself strengthened staff capacity in research skills that support more effective programme design and evaluation;

3. Officially called Kongo Central since February 2015, this province was known as Bas Congo during the timeframe in which the research was carried out. For that reason, the term Bas Congo is used throughout the report.

- CDJP Matadi utilised the findings to refine its methodologies and internalise the data, ensuring that the research had practical applications for the programme.

Some of the key weaknesses included the following:

- Staff members were not trained researchers and thus required support and accompaniment to build these skills;
- Inherent bias, however minor, regarding project interventions is assumed to exist;
- Some staff members had limited knowledge and experience of working on gender equality;
- Some of the staff members were men, which can compromise the willingness of female participants to fully disclose their feelings and experiences.

Communities

Two geographical communities, in which CDJP Matadi and Trócaire’s programmes operate, were selected for review within the research study, in partnership with the staff of CDJP Matadi. These communities were selected based on a stratification exercise of the three locations that CDJP Matadi works in, based on a ranking on socio-economic factors and regional contexts, including: access to infrastructure, levels of violence, unemployment rates, migration and quality of education. The two areas selected in DRC were Kinzau Mvueté and the City of Matadi. A key strength was that local staff members have been working in the community for a number of years, and thus they have a robust knowledge of the local context and how it compares to other locations within their target area, which is important given the dearth of statistical data at the community level.

Participants

As detailed above, CDJP Matadi had created spaces within each of the research communities, by establishing citizens committees, women’s sub-committees, market sub-committees, and literacy groups. Following a mapping of these spaces, three spaces from each of the two communities were selected for study (coming to a total of 6 spaces), and women members of each of these groups were selected as participants for this research. The three selected spaces were: citizens’ committee (including women members only), women’s sub-committee (including all members of the women’s sub-committee, with the exception of the president who was already included in the citizens’ committee group by her membership in that), and the literacy centre. Each of these spaces were invited spaces (which is explained in section 2.1).

Each of these research spaces/groups comprised six to eight women. The women were approached by staff members from CDJP Matadi, who provided an overview

of the research project and invited them to participate. Consent was obtained from participants at the outset.

As noted below, the research took place over two phases. The second phase of data collection focused on individual experiences of women and a smaller sample was selected to facilitate this approach. To select these women, CDJP Matadi conducted a ranking exercise of the women in the research groups, based on the following criteria:

- Membership in grassroots organisations
- Positions held in grassroots organisations
- Position held in women’s sub group or citizens’ committee
- Ability to express themselves
- How active they were within the project

Two women were chosen from each of the two research groups in each community: one which scored high according to these criteria, and another with a low score.

1.3.2 Data collection

Data collection was conducted over a 14 month period in two phases between August 2013 and November 2014, by the staff of CDJP Matadi with supervision from either Trócaire’s programme staff in DRC or Trócaire’s Research Officer.

The first phase reviewed four focus areas (spaces, barriers, performance, and successes) and was conducted with the selected groups of women using participatory tools. This data was collected in three rounds to minimise the strain on the partners existing workload and facilitate accompaniment by Trócaire staff. Each round was preceded by a period of training and piloting, in pilot communities, followed by an intensive period of data collection.

The second phase dealt with two focus areas (changes and what participation means) from the perspective of individual women’s lives. This data was collected over a period of six months after an initial training with partner staff. During phase two, two women from each of the research groups participated.

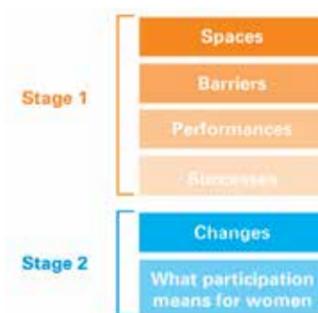


Figure 3. Research framework

Data collection training included a suite of tools and the principles of participatory rural appraisal (PRA). CDJP Matadi then selected suitable tools to explore each focus area for their local context. These were as follows:

Thematic Area	Tools	Description of the tool
Phase One		
Spaces	Community mapping	Participants were asked to draw a map of their community, detailing all of the different decision making spaces in which they felt it was important to participate.
	Paired ranking	This tool was used to ascertain in which spaces - in the women’s opinions – was it most important for them to participate. They were asked to compare each space with one another and discuss which one was more important.
Barriers	River of life	The river of life tool was used to discuss the barriers and enablers that had helped women to participate within the different spaces. They described the barriers that they had previously overcome and the barriers which presently prevented them from achieving their goals.
Performance	Trendlines	Trend lines were used to assess how women’s performance within the spaces has changed over time. It reviewed how key elements of their participation, such as expression and involvement in decisions, had evolved since their inclusion within the project run by CDJP Matadi.
Successes	Timelines	The different successes that the women had experienced, as a result of their participation, were mapped out and the factors that facilitated success.

Phase Two		
Changes	Voice dairies, photo voice, Interviews	Participants were given cameras and asked to take photos reflecting particular themes in their lives. The women used these photos to reflect on actions that they had taken as a result of their participation and what change this had brought to their lives.
What participation means to women	Voice dairies, photo voice, Interviews	Voice recorders were used by the women to record diary entries about specific themes that partner staff chose relating to the women’s participation.

Each of the tools within the first round was run with the six research groups across both communities. During phase one, CDJP staff members explained the purpose of the activity, asked the women for their permission to take photos, notes and an audio recording of the session, and presented a brief demonstration of the tool. After each session the women were invited to provide reflections on the tools. All of the women reported that they enjoyed being able to draw and decide what they wanted to discuss in each of the activities. In Kinzau Mvuetete, the women reported that they did not find the river of life activity helpful, as it was conducted using natural materials which they found more difficult to apply to the concepts in the methodology than paper and markers.

During phase two, CDJP Matadi staff were trained in conducting semi-structured interviews, photovoice and voice dairies. The staff chose to use all three tools with the women selected from the citizens' committees and the sub-committees, while they used interviews only with the women from the literacy centres, having noted that these women had less experience of participating in the different spaces. The women involved in phase two, reported feeling personally enriched by using these two methodologies and (despite concerns from staff members of CDJP) were able to understand and manipulate the technology easily.

I love the recorder. It is so easy, I was thinking that we should be able to keep them and then for our radio shows we could interview people with the recorders.
Participant, Training session, Kinzau Mvuetete

1.3.3 Data Analysis

The data collection activities were recorded using voice recorders, after seeking permission from the research participants. These were then transcribed and translated into French by a local translator, and then translated into English by translators based in Ireland. The data was then analysed by the lead researcher using the qualitative analysis software, "Nvivo", through a coding and categorisation process. The first phase data was also analysed by CDJP staff members who used their own process of coding and categorisation. Their results were included in the analysis to ensure local contextual meaning was adequately represented.

1.3.4 Challenges & Limitations

A number of challenges that affected the data collection process in DRC:

- Staff turnover: In May 2014 the member of staff, who had been leading the data collection, was given a temporary promotion following the departure of one of their colleagues. Therefore another staff member was brought into the research team, to assume some of her responsibilities.

- Language: The lead researcher did not speak French so translation was required for all training and accompaniment.
- Translation of data: The data had to be translated from Kikongo to French, and subsequently from French to English. Financial constraints meant that it was not possible to have the translations done by one translator only, thereby affecting the overall consistency of the translation.
- Accompaniment: Due to financial limitations, it was not possible to contract a local consultant in DRC. Thus, all accompaniment was done by either the Trócaire staff based in Kinshasa or the Trócaire researcher. This limited the amount of time spent on accompaniment.
- Sample size: The sample size surveyed was small, and it covered only two urban areas in one region of DRC. Thus, the results are not representative of the wider DRC population. They are nevertheless indicative of trends in regions that are similar contextually, and lessons learned can be extracted for use across the country and beyond.
- Diversity of participants: Women with young children (and that therefore had greater domestic responsibilities) were entirely missing from the decision making spaces that participated in this project (as a result of their workloads). Instead, the women in the citizens' committees and the women's sub-committees were all middle aged and had no young children.

1.4 Socio-Political Context

This section provides a brief overview of the socio-economic context in DRC, and specifically the Bas-Congo province in which this research was conducted, to help contextualise the experiences of the women in decision making spaces.

The biggest challenge that DRC has faced in the last few decades has been internal conflict and its effects. Since independence in 1960, the country has struggled to implement democratic rule. For 31 years the country was ruled by the authoritarian dictator Mobutu whose corruption squandered the wealth from natural resources and impoverished the country. The First Congo war overthrew Mobutu in 1997 but led to the Second Congo war, which continued until 2003. Despite the official peace deal, ongoing conflicts in the east of the country have contributed to destabilise the fragile country. This history of dictatorship, coups and war has had a significant impact on the political structure, economy and society of the country, which in turn affect the opportunity for participation in decision making spaces.

1.4.1 Political structure

In DRC, the space for citizen participation within government decisions is very limited. Due to the historical

political situation, there has only been two general elections since 1960, which were held in 2006 and 2011. There have never been sub-national elections. Local, urban and municipal elections were scheduled in 2009, as part of the decentralisation process, but have been continually delayed.

The country is divided into provinces, which are run by the Governor and Vice Governor and the Provincial Assembly. Each province is divided into territories and further subdivided into territorial decentralised entities (ETDs), which should be run by an elected council⁴. However as the roll out of decentralisation in DRC has stalled and no elections at the ETD level have taken place, a political system of appointed leaders thus exists in place of elected representatives. In urban areas, the ETDs are organised as follows:

Thematic Area	Governor & Vice-Governor/ Provincial Assembly
District	District Commissioner
Territories	Territory Administrator



Figure 4. Government structure

The Mayor and the Bourgmestre are appointed by the central or provincial authority; the Quartier Chief is generally appointed from within the political hierarchy (Gaynor, 2013). The chiefs at the cell and avenue level are generally appointed by their superiors. At this Sub-ETD level in Bas-Congo, there is a mixture of appointed Chiefs and Traditional Chiefs, but Gaynor argues that "appointed or not, lineage, status and traditional power relations play a vital role in accessing and reproducing power" (Gaynor, 2013, 14). In most cases, chiefs are designated according to local customs, usually by successions. The complex interplay between traditional power and legislative responsibilities complicates the application of legislative provisions regarding the responsibilities of the authorities. This situation means that in reality, there are no elected authorities at the local level and there is weak representation of state authorities in people's everyday lives.

The "Strategic Framework for the Implementation of

Decentralisation" published in 2009, provides a legal basis for citizen participation to be implemented during the roll out of decentralisation. Its objective 10 is "to promote a new culture of citizen participation, involving the populations at all levels, in all sequences of local development and the management of public affairs" (DRC, 2009). However, the framework has not yet been implemented and the research did not find any official spaces for citizen participation.

The population has limited experience of democratic governance and due to the decades of dictatorship under Mobutu, there are low levels of trust between the population and authorities (Gaynor, 2013). Given that there are no functioning official spaces for citizen participation, most people have no experience of interacting with authorities or an understanding of what right they have to be involved in decisions regarding their communities. There are no formal participatory governance spaces and the women in the research have little or no experience of the concept of participatory governance:

*Question: Do they also come and see you to ask questions or consult your opinion?
"I've not heard of that unless it's to inform the population"*
Participant, Spaces exercise, Kinzau Mvuetete

1.4.2 Economic

Due to the troubled political history and decades of instability, DRC has consistently remained 186 out of 187 countries in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2014). It is rich in natural resources, which are of significant economic value. The untapped deposits of raw minerals are widely cited to be worth in excess of US\$24 trillion. The country also possesses an estimated 50% of all Africa's forests and scientists have calculated that the Congo River could provide sufficient power for all of sub-Saharan Africa's electricity needs. Despite these potential resources, Congolese people have received little benefit from the extraction of resources. In the east of the country, armed groups profit from the mineral trade by directly exploiting and exporting from artisanal mines or levying illegal taxes. It is estimated that over half of the artisanal miners in eastern Congo, work in mines where armed groups are present (IPIS, 2014). Therefore, the revenue from natural resources does not benefit the local population, poverty remains rife and income has stagnated since the 1990s; "per capita" income has plummeted from US\$ 821 in 1980 to US\$ 617 in 1990 to US\$ 250 in 2000 (UNDP, 2011, 28). In 2012 it stood at US\$ 220 (World Bank, 2015).

1.4.4 Women's rights

DRC is the largest country in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the factors discussed above affect the population as a whole, it is useful to consider the specific socio-economic situation within Bas-Congo.

4. Since the time of writing some additional changes have been made to the political structure at provincial level, due to decentralisation, which has resulted in the subdivision of provinces and the disappearance of districts.

Bas-Congo Province is the smallest Province of the country. It has a population of approximately 4.5 million. It borders both Angola and Congo Brazzaville and is home to the country's biggest sea port and rich in natural minerals. The province produces a large amount of wealth and is one of the largest contributors to the national budget. It is the country's only oil producing province and also has limestone and bauxite mines. Despite the apparent wealth, poverty is rife in the province with an overall poverty rate of 63% in 2012 (World Bank, 2015). In fact in Muanda, the town where the oil is extracted, the unemployment rate stands at 95% despite 30 years of petroleum extraction (Petitjean, 2014).

Political instability has continually affected Bas-Congo since the fall of Mobutu. Internal conflict has however been relatively stable since the end of the Second Congo war, compared to the east of the country. The only notable incident of armed conflict has featured the separatist movement Bundu dia Kongo (Kingdom of Kongo) who have campaigned for an independent state of Bas-Congo. The culmination of this struggle occurred in Matadi in 2008, where the group clashed with police. Many civilians were affected by this violence and a United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo reported potentially serious human rights abuses by the state. The movement has achieved a high level of legitimacy locally despite the violent tactics often employed although Provincial officials claim it is no longer a threat as they have successfully absorbed its leaders into the Provincial administration (Tull, 2010). However, given the proximity to both Angola and Congo Brazzaville the province is still vulnerable to external political turbulence if relations with either nation sour as they have done in the past. The irregular shape of the border between DRC and Angola has caused numerous disputes and is an on-going area of tension between the two countries, especially over the issue of maritime borders and rights to oil (Misser, 2014).

The research sites

Matadi is the capital of the province Bas-Congo, situated on the bank of the Congo River. Approximately 350,000 citizens live in Matadi within the populated area of 224 km². Much of the local economy revolves around the seaport, which supplies goods and equipment to other cities in the DRC, as well as to the capital Kinshasa. Kinzau Mvueté is a town about 70 kilometres north of Matadi. It has an estimated population of 18,676. It is at a crossroads, and is a centre of trade for the territory with large urban centres such as Muanda, Boma, Matadi and Kinshasa.

1.4.4 Women's rights

Women are particularly likely to be economically, politically and socially marginalised in DRC.

Economics

Women are more likely to be involved in the informal labour market than the formal market and occupy only 30% of salaried positions (African Development Bank, 2012). Within rural areas, women are equally as involved

in the agricultural economy as men. They account for 75% of production in the subsistence economy and it is women who sell agricultural produce in the local markets. Despite their economic contribution, 10% more women than men live beneath the poverty line (Matundu Mbambi & Faray-Kele, 2010).

Politics

Congolese women have equal rights in relation to political participation. They have the right to vote and be elected, and are as entitled to fulfil all administrative and political functions. However, women are still inadequately represented in the country's main decision-making bodies. Only 9.4% of parliamentarians are women and the number of female candidates running for parliament decreased from 13.8% in 2006 to 12.1% in 2011 (DFID, 2013). Some steps have been taken to address this issue: gender parity must be taken into consideration by political parties in establishing electoral lists and at the time of writing, the Parity Law, providing a quota for women at all levels of political representation, was under debate in Parliament. However, social norms still regard men as leaders and decisions makers, and these legal provisions have not yet been translated into reality.

Education

Access to education for children and adult illiteracy are issues that disproportionately affect women in DRC. The literacy rate for men is 76.9% and only 57% for women (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). Figures suggest that the Congo wars have destabilised education in DRC, especially for women. In 2007, only 53 per cent of 15-24 year old Congolese women were literate compared to 63 per cent in 2001 (UNESCO, 2015). Education is a persistent problem in DRC with 7.3 million children out of school of which 53% are girls (UNICEF, 2013).

Health

In general, the access to health care in DRC is limited. Less than a quarter of people have access to healthcare (DFID, 2012). Maternal health is a particular concern with a maternal mortality ratio of 730 in 2013 (WHO et al. 2013). Poverty remains a barrier to healthcare emergency procedures: a procedure such as caesarean section costs approximately \$60 but women earn less than \$0.50 per day. (Medecins Sans Frontiers, 2014).

According to UNAIDS, HIV prevalence is 1.1% and infection rates nationwide are increasing among female teens and young women (Save the Children, 2014). Moreover, DRC has very high rates of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. The official government estimate puts the mother-to-child transmission at 37% (IRIN, 2012).

Accurate information regarding prevalence of Gender based Violence (GBV), is difficult to obtain. A lot of evidence about sexual violence in conflict exists but this is specific to the east of the country. A number of studies suggest that it is prevalent and one women's organisation in DRC described

it as "so prevalent that it is considered normal" (RFDP 2012 cited in Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2012).

Legislation

While article 14 of the Constitution calls for "the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and ensure[s] the protection and promotion of their rights," the Family Code of 1981 still retains many discriminatory elements as the husband is regarded as the head of the household, which has implications for control over resources. This law is under revision and some newer legislation has overturned elements of the Family Code, but currently women are denied the same legal rights as men. Furthermore, according to the DRC's latest report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2011, family relations are built on an "underlying inequality between a man, the husband and father who is head of the family, and a woman, the wife and mother who manages the household" (CEDAW, 2011, 20). The Property Act provides men and women with equal rights regarding ownership but norms still play an important role in the ability for women to enforce these rights. For example, by law, married women can inherit as long as the marriage was legally registered, but tradition dictates that men will inherit, leaving many women reluctant to claim this right. Moreover, many marriages are not legally registered, leaving women without inheritance rights.

2. Research Findings: Where & how women participate



Women of the women's group Kinzau Mvuete, conducting a paired ranking of the most important spaces to participate. Photo: Emma Newbury

2. Research Findings: Where & how women participate

The research findings present the overview of the various opportunities for women to participate in the research sites (2.1), and consider the relationship between participation and empowerment by looking at the women's individual journeys (2.2) and the barriers and enablers they encountered (sections 3.1 & 3.2). Finally, the findings consider the collective experiences of the women within the spaces (3.3).

The findings refer only to the individuals, groups and communities that participated in the project, and are not intended to be a representation of the wider DRC context. Nevertheless, important lessons can be drawn from the findings to inform planning and programming within this wider context.

2.1 Types of spaces available for participation

The research found many different spaces for participation within the communities, the majority of which were organic. It is important to remember that spaces are fluid, they may start off as one type and be transformed into another.



Figure 5. Spaces identified by the female research participants by type

The particular landscape for participation can be explained by the political context and history of DRC. According to an analysis conducted by Trócaire's staff in DRC, the prevalence of organic spaces can be explained by the country's political history. Authoritarian rule during the Mobutu years, led to the rise in community based organisations created to fill the gaps in the non-functioning governance system. As the

plans for decentralisation have not been fully implemented, there are no official spaces for citizen participation. Women traditionally have no decision making authority in the appointment of chiefs and it is therefore difficult for them to vote them out of office if they are unhappy with them. The Chiefs tend to take decisions in meetings that are traditionally closed to the general public, especially women.

2.1.1 Organic spaces

There are multiple organic spaces within the community in the form of grassroots associations and every woman surveyed was involved in one or more. A large proportion of these associations were religious, part of the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Churches or Islam. These associations were concerned with either religious matters including choirs and church events or were designed to provide a social service net for women in the event of illness or bereavement. A number of other associations focused on agricultural production and functioned like cooperatives. There were very many spaces and consequently limited shared experience between the women, who attended different grassroots groups. As there was no collective experience of these spaces, the research chose to understand these spaces by exploring how women's participation within these spaces, has changed since participating in the invited spaces set up by CDJP Matadi.

2.2.2 Invited spaces

The distinction between invited and organic spaces is sometimes blurred because many women did not know the origins of the space they were part of and the spaces are not static. However, the spaces created by the partner, CDJP Matadi, were undoubtedly invited spaces (the women's subcommittees, the citizens' committees, and the literacy centres).

The citizens' committees were designed to be the space of interaction between citizens and the local authorities. It is a mixed space involving women and men. Between 30-50% of the members are women. The committee is run by a president with the support of a vice president. Women are intended to participate jointly and equally within the group. One committee is led by a woman president and two have women vice-presidents. The members were invited by CDJP Matadi to join as they were already recognised as

leaders within their communities through their participation within the organic spaces of grassroots associations. The committees meet to discuss community issues which have arisen in grassroots organisations or the women's sub-committee. The issues are prioritised and an appropriate solution is sought. The committees decide which authority to approach depending on the issue, for example they contacted the Mayor to lobby on an issue affecting the entire town of Matadi, and the Chief of the Avenue when the issue was more locally relevant. When an issue arises, a meeting with the appropriate authority is requested or other advocacy initiatives such as petitions are undertaken.



The women's sub-committees were set up as a women-only space, with 6-8 members per group, where members could bring issues from women's grassroots organisations and the literacy centres for discussion. Issues were then taken by the president to the citizens' committees. The women's sub-committee members were also provided with training on civic and political rights and governance structures by the partner organisations. Members are expected to take this learning and raise awareness by disseminating it through the communities and the literacy centres. The committees include an executive committee comprising a president, treasurer and secretary. The president chairs the meetings and minutes are taken by the secretary. The groups meet once a month and are supported by the partners, through training and accompaniment, but it is the members that initiate the meetings. The president is also a member of the citizens' committee and she is the link between the women's committee and the citizens' committee. The members were invited by CDJP Matadi to join as they were already recognised as leaders within their communities, through their participation within the organic spaces of grassroots associations.

The literacy centres provide literacy classes for adults, mainly women, and the centres also provide civic and political rights education. The programme identified literacy as a barrier to women's participation and therefore saw it as essential for women to gain literacy skills to be able to participate. The teachers are volunteers and classes are run twice a week. The classes contain between 10-20 women and sometimes a small number of men. Some of the centres have also started raising money to open sewing

centres. It became apparent over the course of the research that the literacy centre was not a space where decisions are made, nor was it a stepping stone into the other invited spaces set up by CDJP Matadi, as the project had intended. In fact only one woman in the research sample has made the transition. The research then considered the changes in the women's lives as a result of participating in the literacy centre and how this related to their participation in grassroots associations.

2.2.3 Closed spaces

Within the research sites, all of the appointed sub-ETD chiefs, from Chief of the Avenue to Mayor of the City, were reported to make decisions in closed spaces. The research is concerned with women's participation in decision making spaces and therefore did not analyse these closed spaces as standalone spaces. Instead it looked at the interactions that the women have with the Chiefs as part of their participation within other spaces.

2.2 Empowerment Journeys

This section explores the women's experiences within these spaces by specifically looking at their individual journeys of empowerment as a result of their participation within them. All the women report some type of empowerment as a result of their participation. The different parts of the empowerment journey are not steps in a linear model, each stage interacts with the others in the journey; some women may skip steps and others may take additional steps; others still may only reach the first. However, their stories provide us with an overall model of the process of empowerment as a result of their participation. The overall model helps us to identify and understand the barriers and enablers to women's participation and how this affects their journeys.

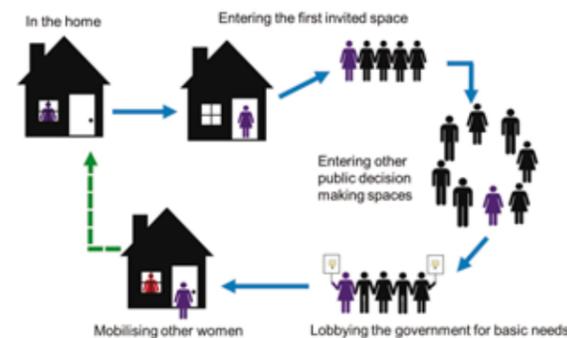


Figure 6. Women's participation and empowerment journey

The sections that follow describe the trajectory of women's participation and empowerment in theory, while the following section showcases through individual stories that this trajectory is fluid and varied in practice.

2.2.1 Overview of the journey

Leaving the home

In the research sites in DRC, it is not unusual for women to be actively engaged in activities outside the home, as leaving the home and entering into public spaces is embedded in the social norms and roles of women. The research areas are peri-urban or urban places where women are involved in agriculture work, sell produce in the markets or have salaried jobs in shops, schools, and offices. They are thus accustomed to accessing public spaces. Additionally the proliferation of grassroots associations means that most women have some experience of participating in public meetings. The experience of accessing public spaces and participating, gives them a degree of confidence and experience sometimes denied to women in other cultural contexts. However, despite their presence in public life, they are still excluded from decisions regarding community issues. Women are typically excluded from leadership roles in grassroots organisations unless they are women only groups or have a narrow religious mandate related to church matters.

The woman was a long way away, she did not participate she did not even have the power to speak, which is not the case today.

Participant, Success exercise, Kinzau Mvuete,

Additionally, women are excluded from political life; there are virtually no women appointed to the position of Chief, at any level, and women are not traditionally included in meetings where political matters were discussed.

In the villages, in decision-making circles of the village Chiefs, we didn't know that women could take part and share their ideas in these spaces. We women didn't realize this because people would say that we were nothing but "women". Men would make decisions.

Participant, Performance exercise, Matadi.

Entering the first invited space

The women have a degree of experience of participation as they were all part of grassroots organisations before joining CDJP Matadi's project. The women in the citizens' committees and the women's sub-committees were all selected to be part of the committees because they were already leaders in these grassroots organisations. However, the women reported lacking the confidence to speak in front of men or male authorities, take on greater responsibilities or stand for leadership within mixed associations. The invited spaces set up by CDJP Matadi, helped the women to gain the confidence to break the cultural taboos preventing women from being leaders or addressing authorities. Gaining knowledge and experience helped many of the women to feel able to speak out and confidently express themselves in meetings.

At the start, I was afraid to speak, but thanks to Women's sub-committee I can now even talk in front of men, and

what I say is accepted.

Participant, Barriers exercise, Matadi,

For some of the women, their new knowledge and experience combined to raise their awareness of the oppression they experience as women, specifically in relation to the unequal division of roles within the home. Many have then individually started to demand changes in their homes and familial relationships.

Since I joined the citizens' committee through training that I have received, we have learned the constitution and through the articles and provisions of rights; all of this led me to advocate for the divorce for my daughter.

Participant, Photovoice, Kinzau Mvuete

Some women may never go beyond their first invited space, it may provide what they personally need and they may have no interest in greater levels of participation. Others might be prevented from moving beyond this step by a number of barriers. Approximately 80% of the literacy centre participants did not enter other spaces following their participation within the invited space. Gaining knowledge about literacy and some rights training, provided by volunteers and, in some cases, by women from the other invited spaces, did not generally translate into participation that supported empowerment.

Entering other public decision making spaces

Using the confidence, knowledge and experience they have acquired in the invited spaces and initial grassroots organisations, some of the women then move to actively participate within other grassroots spaces, with many taking on new leadership posts. Through this leadership, they gain greater confidence and experience of negotiating and debating their ideas with others. Approximately 65% of participants emerged as leaders although it is important to remember that this might be due to the vast number of organic spaces, which increase the opportunity to be a leader, and the fact that many of the women were already leaders before joining the project.

When I started to attend meetings of the women's subcommittee, I became smart, I have no shame and I'm not afraid anymore. So, through this training, I became more courageous ... and I started directing Women and I became President of the Kitchen Gardeners Association.

Participant, Matadi, Voice Diary Entry

However, only approximately 15% of the research sample had been elected to leadership posts within mixed organic or invited spaces. Resistance to women's leadership within mixed spaces was still prevalent and prevented many women from becoming leaders in these spaces.

Lobbying authorities on basic needs

Approximately 70% of participants transitioned from participating within community spaces to actually lobbying the appointed Chiefs for improved access to services for

their communities. These services are generally related to basic needs such as water, electricity and roads. The majority of lobbying was conducted by the citizens' committees but some women in the other groups have also directly engaged with the Chiefs as part of their work in grassroots associations. It is the members of the citizens' committees that have undertaken advocacy directly, as part of a delegation. However, women from the women's sub-committees and the literacy centres have been part of protests or signed petitions, even if they have not directly engaged with the Chiefs. The women have experienced a number of successes as a result of their advocacy, which have meant that they have become known in the community. This increase in status has supported their confidence and belief in their ability to take action.

We became the eyes and mouth of the population.
Participant, Voice Diary Entry, Matadi

Mobilising other women

The women of the sub-committee have been actively engaged in raising awareness within the community through the literacy centres and their grassroots associations. The act of mobilising others through raising awareness, has supported the development of confidence and reinforced their new status within the community.

So, since joining the women's sub-committee, I have become more competent, and I can do what I couldn't do before, because, at the start, I couldn't talk on the radio. Today, I can talk on the radio programme and raise awareness about early marriages in schools.
Participant, Barriers exercise, Kinza Mvute

When undertaking advocacy on community wide issues such as water and electricity, the women from the citizens' committees have tried to mobilise other women to support them. They have organised protests and petitions, and women from the other invited spaces and some women from the organic spaces joined them. Issues brought to the citizens' committees are intended to come from the grassroots organisations or other invited spaces. As a result, the women have been able to easily approach the members of these spaces to mobilise them around issues, especially if the issue originated from concerns raised by members of that association. Mobilising others has strengthened the women's power when undertaking advocacy and has enabled women not involved in an invited space with an opportunity to express their needs to the authorities. It is important to note that the women did not always mobilise others to support their advocacy. Sometimes the mobilising that women mentioned, referred to encouraging others to make financial contributions to resolve an issue rather than lobbying the authorities to address the situation.

In our area the current is low. I got involved to see an officer of the SNEL (state electricity company) to solve the problem. He told me he had to buy a cable and had

to make contributions, I have begun to mobilize the locals.
Participant, Performance exercise, Kinza Mvute

Although groups of women were mobilised around specific issues at specific moments, these groups have not been sustained, as the actions have been limited to a particular event or action. Mobilising others to address a community issue has also increased the women's confidence and belief in their own abilities.

Because of my participation in the citizens' committee and CLS, I have become an example to the others, and I have started teaching the others. I have gained their trust.
Participant, Voice Diary Entry, Kinza Mvute

2.2.2 Case Studies

The overall steps provide a model but each woman's experience is unique, particular to her life experience and affected by those around her. The individual case studies that follow, illustrate how participation and training enabled women to move between different spaces; how some become empowered enough to take on leadership or advocacy roles and what enables or prevents movement from one space and level to another. The first two case studies are of the individual experiences of two women from the women's sub-committee and the citizens' committee. The second two case studies are representations of the two different types of journeys experienced by the women in the literacy centres.



Figure 7. Relationship between participation and empowerment

Case study 1

Bibi Aicha, Matadi Photo: CDJP Matadi



Bibi Aicha, member of the women's sub group, Matadi

Bibi lives in Matadi. She is 40 years old and married to the Chief of the Avenue in their area; they have 3 children aged 7-17 years old. She has a secretary's qualification. She is the president of the Ngombe Matadi women's association and a branch of the Miriam Lutelo Foundation, and the Provincial Secretary in the Islamic committee.

Leaving the home

Bibi Aicha is an active member of the Muslim community and has always been involved in religious associations. Despite this, her husband was traditionally the only decision maker on household matters. Prior to her involvement with the participation programmes, she did not reject the perception that women are not intended to make such decisions and she believed that men and women had different rights, for example regarding access to education. Despite participating within the Muslim Association, she lacked the confidence to express her views or take on leadership roles.

At that time I was scared and I could not speak in front of people. Then I could neither accept responsibility nor speak in front of people.

Entering the first invited space

For Bibi, the training on women's rights that she received from CDJP Matadi, in the women's sub-committee, was very important within her journey as it opened her mind to new possibilities and sparked a critical awareness about the reality of inequality between women and men.

We received the first invitation to the Islamic church from CDJP. At the first meeting, we followed the training on the "rights of women." In the past I did not know what the 'rights of women' meant. I completely ignored that education was important for girls and boys. I did not know all that. But thanks to the training we were taught the law, the rights of women. It seems that women had rights. If something happens 'the woman has the right to react,' they said. Yet we did not know that. These courses made us smarter and developed our mental faculties.

The knowledge and confidence she gained through participation in these groups, gave Bibi the confidence to challenge the status quo in the community and her home.

All the themes developed in the trainings were renewed in our meetings. They said "do you know your rights? We were told "if you have something to say, you can say it and you will get the solution." Because we also live under our marital roofs and if our husbands did something wrong, we say nothing. During training, we realized these things and that made us intelligent. We did not know these concepts before. Thus I became brave and I manage to speak and if it is my right I speak up, even in the house if there is something.

These changes in Bibi's confidence, her new found expression and belief in her ability to take action, have not been well received by her husband.

The women's sub-committee opened my mind. I enrolled with zeal as I get to express myself. I talk a lot now and even at home although my husband is tired of me, he said "you talk a lot! You want to be the head of all!"

Bibi is still speaking out at home because she feels that it is her right to do so but this has caused increasing tensions in her marriage.

Entering other public decision making spaces

The new knowledge she acquired from participating in the women's sub-committee, gave her the confidence that she had the right to express herself even in mixed meetings.

Today through training organised by the women's sub-committee, I am not afraid. So I can speak in front of people. I can raise an idea in front of people and they listen and take it into account. Today I am able to accept responsibilities and I can even hold meetings. Before I could not do that but the women's subcommittee helped me to have the intelligence, it opened my eyes and mind, and it took away my embarrassment and has taken away the fear of talking to people. I get to decide where meetings are held, I attend in the company of men and women. I get to speak and the others listen to my idea and can adopt it.

Bibi has enjoyed participating so much that she has established another grassroots organisation, a branch of the

Milene Lutelo foundation, providing women with another space to participate within the community. The foundation aims to support the re-election of a local politician, Milene Lutelo and provides women with social support through small grants.

So I myself knocked on the door of the Honourable Milene Lutelo. I myself educated moms from the 5 avenues. Through this foundation, I told them, we will get to help people and take care of many things. Myself, I knocked on the door and Milene said, go and select women from different avenues. So I picked these women. After trying to find one that would become president, there was no one there. Everyone was afraid to speak. It was just me talking. So they said, "you talk with zeal and courage, we do not see who can lead this foundation, the foundation Milene Lutelo, we have chosen you". Look at the benefits that CDJP offered me. So I started to lead and to stand before the women in different age groups. There are those who are older than me. I started talking and when I talk, they listen to me and we find solutions. Look at what the women's sub-committee has given me.

As Bibi continued participating and her belief in her own power grew, she became interested in taking on more leadership. Within the association 'Ngombe', Bibi moved from having a role related to public relations to become the president. The association aims to provide love and support to the women members. As president she is in charge of the decisions of the group.

I'm the president, so I'm the one who makes the decisions, and then I call the committee meeting. At the meetings, I discuss it, because I chair the meetings. I'm the head, so I make them. You see, they are afraid and don't want to talk. They always ask me to talk. It's because of their jitters. So, I say to them "the day that I'm not here, you'll do nothing at all".

The pressure of leadership places a heavy burden on Bibi. She has tried to resign from some of her positions but the members refused to allow her.

Q. *If she asked you to look for another president in the event of an impediment or a trip, how do you react?*

A. *This will be a problem. I do not know yet among the mamas (women) who will be able to undertake the burdens assumed by Bibi Aicha. The mamas would refuse. They would go first to attack her husband. Her absence would frankly be disturbing to the mamas.*

Interview with Female member of Milene Lutelo Foundation

It also places further strain on her relationship with her husband who complains that she has too many responsibilities.

He'd like me to leave some of the things. That creates tension at home. What I would like to change, is his way of pressing me to drop some of my activities. I'd like him to stop.

Despite these pressures, when asked about her dreams for the next five years, Bibi responded that she would like to *"be a leader such as the community or town hall advisor"* because she likes helping others and feels that she has been given the courage, which has opened her mind to see injustices.

Lobbying authorities on basic needs

Bibi's new confidence has given her the strength to feel that she can lobby the authorities.

Today they (women in the association) are still afraid of the Mayor but I say "I'll take his number." They say "were you not afraid" but I took his number and I called and all is well.

As part of her role with the Ngombe Matadi women's association, Bibi lobbied the authorities around the issue of thieves in the neighbourhood.

We were insecure in our neighbourhood, Ngombe Matadi, because of bandits. These bandits, armed with machetes, attacked people every day and very early in the morning, around 4:00 or 5:00, in order to rob them of their property or their money. Because of that I intervened and I reported these facts to the Mayor of the municipality of Nanza. My husband as Chief of the Avenue, had summoned the big sister of one of them (the bandits). My husband told her that if they continued to live in the neighbourhood, it would not be good but I told my husband, 'Give me this file.' So I was in charge of this case. I called the Mayor and had spoken with him. The Mayor had taken note and after two days the police came and arrested them. Unfortunately, now a grudge exists between us and their families. But always the courage that the women's sub-committee gave me helps me with the authorities.



Women of the Milene Lutelo foundation meeting during a Photovoice activity, Matadi. Photo: Bibi Aicha

Mobilising other women

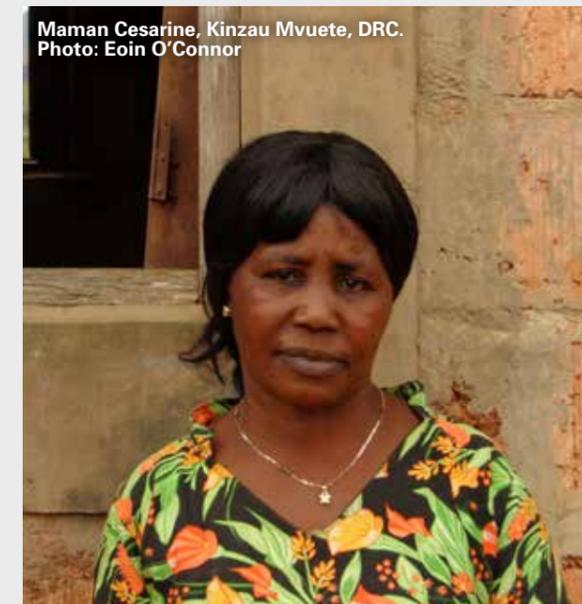
Bibi established the branch of the Milene Lutelo Foundation specifically to mobilise other women in the community, to support the Politician Milene Lutelo and to secure financial benefits. She originally organised 50 women to create the branch, which now comprises 140 members. Bibi shares her knowledge on women's rights with the women in the Foundation and the Ngombe Matadi women's association.

One of the members of the Foundation said that the training on women's rights was the most important element that Bibi brings as president.

Knowledge on women's rights; let me tell you that while women of the association were in the process of supervising the work on the stairs [a local project], the engineer wanted the mamas to blindly follow what he wanted to impose, but the mamas said, thanks to her training, "No it is our right. You will not impose your plan. You will follow what we say if you stop your work we will look for someone else." The mamas are able to claim their rights. That's why many mamas seek membership in the association, it is thanks to this.

Interview with female member of the Milene Lutelo Foundation

Case study 2



Maman Cesarine, Kinzau Mvueté, DRC. Photo: Eoin O'Connor

Césarine, citizens' committee, Kinzau Mvueté

Césarine is 55 and lives in Kinzau Mvueté. She has two adult children who no longer live with her and she looks after her brother's son and daughter. Césarine is involved in many organisations in the community and is the most active woman from the research cohort. She is a member of the business and development group (GCD); the secretary of the local development committee (CLD); a member of the association for rural and agricultural advice and management in Seke Banza (CARG); and on the water committee. She is also the president of the women's subcommittee and a member of the citizens' committee in Kinzau Mvueté. She is involved in a number of religious associations: the Nzola choir and the legion of Mary.

Leaving the home

Césarine always had a desire to participate, even when

she was at school. When she joined the programme run by CDJP, she was selected because she was already a leader in grassroots organisations. However, Césarine recalls that at the beginning, rather than actively seeking leadership, it was thrust upon her within the Local Development committee.

Some people put me forward as a candidate for election... Regarding involvement, at the start, when I was selected, I didn't do much supervision. If my tasks were taken from me, it didn't bother me.

She was unsure of her role and was afraid to speak in public, especially in front of men as she lacked confidence and felt inferior due to her lower education levels.

The biggest thing that I had to improve in myself was being able to speak in public. I was fearful of speaking in front of... mainly men who had a higher intellectual level than me, why? I felt a complex about my inferior education as a woman.

Entering the first invited space

Through her experiences within both the citizens' committee and the women's sub-committee, Césarine has been able to gain knowledge and confidence that has supported her to confront the feelings that undermined her confidence.

I felt inferior as a woman. This feeling has lessened with responsibilities in different grassroots organisations and especially through the training given by the CDJP Matadi on Civil and Political Rights of Women, and the Women's Leadership.

Césarine has also been able to make changes in her personal life as a result of the new skills, knowledge and confidence she has gained by participating. She fights for her rights within the family and she now believes that it is vital that both girls and boys receive an education.

Regarding our participation in the women's sub-committee and citizens' committee, in fact, we go to our grassroots organisations for restitution, but our own base is our families. So my first child is a girl, in 2012, she became pregnant at the age of 16 and her father wanted her to be married to the father of the baby but I didn't want our daughter to go into marriage so soon. I said: 'I cannot send my child into marriage.' Then her father became furious, I said 'my daughter cannot go live in a fake marriage because it is a distraction. Let her get big, let her give birth, after birth, she will return to school.'

Césarine fought for her daughter to take back up her place in school after she miscarried a pregnancy and this caused further tensions in her relationship with her husband. Césarine's husband stopped paying her school fees because he believed their daughter did not require an education, and Césarine had to raise the funds alone. Their relationship ended, but her knowledge of rights gave her the capacity to

recruit a lawyer to enforce her rights regarding the children.

Miss Christine (the head of CDJP Matadi) told me the first thing is to be dynamic. You do not say anything until the lawyer comes. 'Do you have something to add?' the judge asked me, I told him: 'I have nothing to say. I'm a woman and I have my rights, I will not plead with him, it is the lawyer who will advocate for me.' Then everything went well and he himself lost his case.

Césarine has also pushed to be included in family decisions which traditionally would have been made only by male family members. Césarine's insistence on being included in decisions, has been met with resistance and caused some tensions within the family but she has continued and slowly attitudes are starting to change.

Now when they speak, if I am not satisfied I tell them "No, it's not like that, it's more like this," then the cousins began to say "and you, you have become chatty! How did you become so talkative? You were not chatty before!" And I said "Yes I became talkative because before you didn't take us seriously! Now we have opened our eyes" Our eyes are open now, you will no longer dominate us"...Because people are not used to seeing women speak up in front of men they thought that I had become rude. Some said, "You are too high-mighty, how is it you compete with men like that!" So in our families, some people began to think it was negative. But when they saw what I started to do, sometimes they noticed that I added some wisdom, they themselves did not have before, because of this, they began to understand. They know what I am like, the eldest of our family, before doing anything, he tells me first and foremost. They come to us (her and her sister who teaches adult literacy) if there are problems, they first ask us for information.

Although Césarine is happy that she has gained respect in her family, her new social status has also caused family members to expect things from her because of her connections.

Others want me only for money. They believe that when I travel for business, I deal with a lot of money, and they call me "business woman"...Given the way I've changed, if they see me dressed well and always with organizations, they think I am a business woman. 'I have the money' they think. They seek me for financial reasons. But the closest family they see clearly what I do and in fact, the sense of responsibility is innate in me.

Entering other public decision making spaces

Her confidence from participating and gaining knowledge about rights has increased so much that she actively sought out leadership roles, rather than being thrust into them. When the next election came round for Local Development Committee, she actively fought to hold her position in an open competition with men.

For the second mandate, as I already knew my rights, I put myself forward. There were three candidates, two men and one woman. I sent in my application straight away, before the men even sent in theirs.

She was elected to the post but still faced resistance from some men in the committee who did not respect her leadership but Césarine was able to overcome this by using her knowledge on rights.

During my first meeting on planning, the men commented that I was the only woman amongst all of the administrators. When I'd speak, I'd notice that the men weren't entirely convinced. They even had a song that they'd sing about me to show how they felt, but, I stood up to them by quoting articles from the Constitution. I'd say to them "Refer to article 14, which says that there should be no discrimination. I have the right to equal representation. We have the right to equal representation in every institution. Article 23: Women's right to expression". After I said that, there was silence.

As part of her role in the committee, Césarine has managed to lead a number of projects, including one called Papassa which supported the members to sell their manure in Kinshasa. Given her experiences with leadership, she is now interested in leading every organisation of which she is part.

I don't like it any more when I'm put in the background as someone else's advisor. So, in our association, that's not the role that I want.

Lobbying the authorities for basic rights

Through her participation, Césarine has gained the confidence to express herself in front of the authorities and as part of the citizens' committee, Césarine has been involved in lobbying the authorities on a number of community issues.

Since I became a member of the citizens' committee my way to expose my problems to the authorities has improved. In the past, before I joined in the citizens' committee I could speak with the authorities, but it was hard when there were interviews in the association. But since I'm at citizens' committee, it's leaving the way open. Even this is not the way I did it before. That is why I have no fear of the authority. However we have respect for him to find a compromise on the solutions we seek.

Césarine is no longer held back by insecurities regarding her level of education. She has even addressed a Minister when he came to visit the women's sub-committee.

They asked me to come because the Minister and Mfuka Lonzola were coming to deal with the insecurity in our area. I was told that 10 women were needed there. I said that we needed to go to show that we women of Kinzau Mvuete are competent. I was afraid, but I had to go and get involved.

When we got there, I was aware of their level of education. When I took the floor, I created the sense that I was a powerful woman from Kinzau Mvuete. I spoke in front of the Minister, saying that the situation was not good enough.

Mobilising others

Césarine has been involved in raising awareness of rights and governance issues within the community both as part of the women's sub-committee and within her grassroots associations.

She briefs us on the notions that she has already learned in the meetings.

Interview with the Vice-President of CLD.

When the citizens' committee has undertaken advocacy campaigns, Césarine has mobilised women from the sub-committee and the community to join in protests and sign petitions. However, one of the barriers to this, in her opinion, is that people have not gone through a process of consciousness-raising that the women in the sub-committee have experienced.

Everything we learn in the women's subcommittee, we use to support them in their problems. However, they are still in the fields, always out in the fields. So there is no way for them to follow what we 'women' say. We are already active and we have already awakened our consciousness. However, if the other friends do not realise, then the work we do is a waste of time, this will always be a vicious circle.

Literacy centre case studies

The experiences of the women in the literacy centre were all unique, but can loosely be categorised into two types of journey: approximately 20% of these participants reported altering their participation with grassroots associations as a result of the training in the literacy centres, while the remaining majority reported no change in their participation but, for the most part, saw changes in their personal lives. These different experiences are presented as two case studies; these are not of individual women but of the collective experiences representing these two trajectories.

Case study 3

The first case study presents the experiences of the women who have not reported big changes in their participation within different spaces as a result of their involvement in the literacy centres.

Leaving the Home

The women within this group, like all of the women in the research sample, were already participating in grassroots organisations before they joined the literacy centre. The organisations that these women were part of, tended to have a religious affiliation and dealt with issues related to religious events or provided support in times of crisis

to members through loans or crisis funds. They are often women-only groups or governed through the church hierarchy. Although they might be involved in these groups, most are not influencing the decisions made within them.

Entering the first invited space

The women are participating in the literacy classes and have gained confidence by learning to read and write. For some, increased confidence has translated into an ability to make suggestions within their grassroots organisations.

I also offer advice in the choir; I say to them for example, "The way we worked today wasn't what it should have been. We have to change that so that there is more harmony"

Participant, Interview, Matadi

Their suggestions have been focused on specific issues related to the narrow mandate of the organisations such as buying food or clothes for an event. For many participants, increased confidence resulting from their literacy skills, has not translated into changes in their participation within the grassroots associations. Many are still just physically attending meetings and not expressing themselves at all.

Facilitator (F). *Who makes the majority of the suggestions that get put into practice at Unafecod? Where do these suggestions come from?*

Woman participant (W): *They come from the presidents. There is only one president and there are the vice-presidents. In fact, it's the members of the committee who decide what we are going to do.*

F. *Can you tell me now about a suggestion that you've made that has been followed through on by the committee?*

W. *I have never made a suggestion*

F. *So for these 3 years, you have never made a suggestion?*

W: *I have never put forward an idea.*

Participant, Literacy Centre, Matadi

For these women, the main impact of their participation within the literacy centre has been their achievements in learning to read and write and the personal impacts around confidence and self-esteem.

F. *Have there been changes in your life as a result of being in the literacy centre?*

W. *The centre has helped me to overcome my fear.*

F. *Why were you afraid? What were you afraid of?*

W. *I was afraid because I couldn't read.*

Participants, Performance exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

Their developed literacy skills have allowed them to make changes in their personal lives and to have the confidence to take on new tasks, such as bargaining in the marketplace, reading receipts or better supporting their children's education.

I didn't know how to help the children with their homework, but now I can.

Participant, Barriers exercise, Matadi

Additionally, by gaining knowledge about civic and political rights, the women have been able to assert their rights within the families and personal lives.

My husband wanted to sell our land, I vetoed this following the knowledge received in the centre, I was opposed and to this day the house has not to be sold. If it had happened whilst I was ignorant, as I was before entering the centre, our land would already be sold.

Participant, Barriers exercise, Matadi

The women also learnt about different rights for women and the functioning of the local government chief system through the literacy centre. This new knowledge has not led them to approach the authorities; it has just given them more knowledge. For example, most of the women in this group could easily describe the Chiefdom structure but the majority of those have never gone to see any authority.

I know that there are Quartier Chiefs and Avenue Chiefs but I have never sought them out because I haven't had any problems.

Participant, Performance exercise, Matadi



Women in the literacy centre in Matadi, completing a social mapping exercise. Photo: Emma Newbury

For these women there has not been a process of consciousness raising that has led to a desire to challenge the status-quo and they accept the current reality. Some of the women still only see the chiefs as conflict arbitrators rather than duty bearers.

I have never been because I have never done anything wrong.

Participant, Spaces exercise, Kinzau Mvuet

Case study 4

Approximately 20% of the women from the literacy centres have emerged as leaders or strengthened their leadership

within grassroots organisations as a result of participating in the literacy centres. Only one woman has transitioned to participate in the women's sub-committee.

Leaving the Home

All of the women represented in this case study were part of grassroots associations but very few were leaders of these associations. Many women reported fear of taking on leadership positions within associations because they could not read or write.

I stayed away from all positions because I couldn't read or write.

Participant, Performance exercise, Kinzau Mvuet

Those that were in leadership posts, had been elected even though they lacked the desire to take on leadership roles.

Regarding access to leadership, I remember that the vote was being organised in the association and I said that I wouldn't take the job because I wouldn't be there. But, they chose me in my absence as president. Even so, I refused, because I had told them that I couldn't read or write, but they insisted and said that it didn't matter. They had already elected me, and that was that. That's how I became president.

Participant, Performance exercise, Kinzau Mvuet,

Entering the first invited space and entering other public spaces

As a result of participating in the literacy centre, these women report gaining the confidence to take on leadership roles because they are able to read and write.

Today I am able even to be treasurer, as I already know how to count money.

Participant, Performance exercise, Kinzau Mvuet

Many of those that were already leaders, report performing their functions better because they are literate.

I'm a member of the folk group Kintueni Etoile. As treasurer, I was in charge of collecting subscriptions. At first, I refused to do it because I couldn't read or write. But today, I can do it.

Participant, Barriers exercise, Matadi

Some have even been able to enforce their rights against injustices being perpetrated by state officials because of their new knowledge.

Regarding the water well, people came from the State to collect money from us, but they spent it on themselves. So, when they came to dig, I said to them that they couldn't anymore, because the well was on my plot.

Participant, Performance exercise, Kinzau Mvuet

Lobbying the authorities on basic needs

Through their interaction with the citizens' committee, some of these women have also engaged with the authorities through protests and petitions.

W. For example in the case of SNEL's (state electricity company) demands for payment, the electricity supply problem we met with the Chiefs.

F. How do you organise yourselves?

W. We go in a group, sometimes with as many as 20 people, and before leaving we plan who we are going to address and how.

Participants, Spaces exercise, Kinzau Mvuet

Mobilising others

The women did not report mobilising others but the training about women's rights has led to them to decide to become involved in elections by voting for female candidates.

I remember that we used to be foolish. Sometimes, we'd see our female friends put themselves forward, but we didn't vote for them. We only voted for the men. We'd stand back without knowing that we were doing it.

Participant, Performance exercise, Kinzau Mvuet,

2.2.3 Summary of case studies

The four case studies provide examples of different women's experiences and how different experiences alter women's journey. Each case study presents a specific type of experience:

Bibi-Aicha and Césarine are both leaders and they are representative of the majority of women from the women's sub-committees and citizens' committees. Before joining the Trócaire programme, these women were leaders in grassroots organisations. Through participating, primarily in the spaces created by CDJP Matadi, they have gained confidence and knowledge which supported increases in their 'power within.' This internal power enabled them to strengthen their leadership and take on new leadership roles. They also increased their 'power to' take action to claim their rights. Some have directly lobbied local authorities regarding community issues, others have advocated with non-state actors such as NGOs, politicians and companies to avail of development projects or enterprise initiatives and some have done both. Many of these women have also personally taken action to claim their rights or rights of women in their family regarding issues such as divorce, inheritance and education. Naturally, within these stories there are differences which reflect the various barriers in their lives. Even those women that are leaders in all the spaces that they participate in, most likely, play different roles in different spaces. In the spaces set up by CDJP Matadi, most of the women are not leaders and play a more supportive role in actions.

This is the case for the women from case study 3, who were only found in the literacy groups. These women report changes to their confidence and an ability to undertake daily tasks better but their participation remained passive, they are not actively contributing to decisions within their grassroots associations and have not taken action through their participation.

Case study 4, also representing women from the literacy centre, represents the story of the minority of women from the literacy centre and a minority from the women's sub group. These women have supported the development of collective voice within the organisations. They have attended protests and signed petitions, providing the leaders with necessary backing to make decisions on their behalf.

3. Research Findings: Barriers & enabling factors



Women of the citizen's group Matadi, conducting a river of life activity to look at the barriers to their participation. Photo: Emma Newbury

3. Research Findings: Barriers & enabling factors

This section analyses the barriers the women face along the journey and the enabling factors which support the women to have greater power within their individual lives, drawing on the case studies and wider research data. The majority of barriers stem from the unequal power relations between men and women that exist within the society. The research found that roles and responsibilities within the community and household are traditionally rigidly divided by gender:

- Women are responsible for the domestic and childcare duties within the home,
- Men are in charge of decisions within the home, the extended family and the communities. They are regarded as the bread winners, even if women do have their own income.
- This division of roles starts early on; boys are treated differently to girls, particularly with regard to education. As girls are going to get married and leave the family, it is generally believed that investing in academic education is not required, as it will have no tangible impact on the family. This has led to high rates of illiteracy amongst adult women.

These social norms impede women's participation because they undermine women's confidence, access to knowledge and legitimacy within decision making spaces. These norms are then internalised by women and men, strengthening the force of these barriers over women's lives.

3.1 Barriers

3.1.1 Taboo of women in leadership in mixed decision making spaces

The women mentioned different forms of resistance from men to their participation. Traditionally, women are not involved in decision making about family or community matters and are not meant to speak in front of authorities.

Women had no voice. They were ordered not to speak. If a woman spoke there will not be an answer.
Participant, Performance exercise, Matadi

Before the existence of the citizens' committees, only 'wise men' were consulted by the Chiefs. Others would have to solicit meetings with these local authorities. There were no 'wise women' and women would either not be received by the Chiefs or ignored.

'The snake and the human avoid each other when they meet. Each one flees the other.' This Yombe proverb is used to say that authorities avoid the women as much as the women avoid them.

Participant, Success exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

The women reported constantly facing resistance from men in community associations to their leadership and opposition from male family members to their involvement in family decisions.

This resistance is an impediment at every stage of the journey. Césarine, like the other women elected to lead mixed organisations, had to prove herself as a leader using the knowledge she gained through her participation in the citizens' committee and women's sub-committee to actively counter the resistance she experienced. Despite some successes, the taboo has not disappeared; it is still very unusual for a woman to be in charge in mixed grassroots associations, and those who are, report having to counter male members' resistance.

She is a woman. We can't have a woman telling us what to do, giving us instructions and preaching to us.

Participant, Kinzau Mvuete

3.1.2 Illiteracy and low levels of education

Many of the women in the literacy centres specifically mentioned illiteracy as a barrier to their participation. For some, it stopped them from taking on leadership roles; for others, they lacked confidence in their roles and felt unable to perform properly.

I was chosen as Secretary and I was anxious because I didn't know how to do calculations. I remember once I was chosen to collect money, but I couldn't calculate it, so I just wrote down any number.

Participant, Kinzau Mvuete

For many of the positions within grassroots associations, there is no requirement to be literate, but illiteracy affects the confidence of the women to participate and how they are perceived by others. However, it is not just illiteracy that impedes women's participation. While all of the women in the sub-committees and the citizens' committees were literate, some were still self-conscious about their low level of education and this impeded their participation and their confidence.

3.1.3 Unequal division of labour

The issue of workload was not mentioned explicitly as a specific barrier by most of the women. However, this does not mean there is equal division of labour within the household; the women interviewed in the research study, undertake all the domestic duties and the majority of responsibility for child care.

If I'm at work and one of the children comes down with a fever at home, he'll do nothing. He says that it's my job. It's a woman's job to look after a sick child.

Participant, Interview, Kinzau Mvuete

The women did not perceive the unequal division of labour as a barrier because they had fully accepted that it is part of their natural duty. No woman mentioned the possibility of changing their heavy workload or getting support from their partner. In many cases, they have added the burden of participating to their existing workload and employ various coping strategies to ensure that they can still participate despite this. The women reported getting up earlier in the morning or preparing things the night before, so they were still able to participate in different meetings.

If I know that I've a busy day ahead, I get everything ready the night before, for example, the food has to be prepared in advance, so that I won't have much to do when I get home, except eat and rest.

Participant, Interview, Akenda, Matadi

However, many of the very active leaders are in three or four different associations. They must find time to earn a wage, undertake the domestic work and still participate in their different associations. Even if the women manage to make this time, it places a heavy burden on them and some reported struggling with the strain of their many responsibilities.

My biggest problem is the compliance time by members, most of us do not respect the time of meetings. We all work in the fields, and some women will work up to 15km away.

Participant, Barriers exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

Additionally, the women in the citizens' committees and the women's sub-committees who participated in the research, were all middle aged and had no young children. Women with young children and therefore greater domestic responsibilities, were entirely missing from these decision making spaces, potentially suggesting that they were unable to add the burden of participating to their existing workloads.

3.1.4 Internalisation of gender norms

All of the women reported feeling a lack of 'power within' when they first started participating; they were afraid to speak in public, especially in front of men, lacked an awareness that men and women had the equal right to

participate, and were reluctant to take on leadership roles. These fears manifest as a lack of confidence and self-esteem.

Before, we were victims of discrimination by men; it caused fear in us to introduce ourselves where there were men and most of all, to express ourselves in their presence.

Participant, Success exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

The lack of confidence results partly from the traditional perception that women should not be involved in decisions, but also from feelings of inadequacy due to a low level of education.

We women in general have an inferiority complex. In general, we are inferior, and that is the inferiority complex. We women have to suffer that.

Participant, Performance exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

This lack of self-belief is one of the biggest barriers that women face because, without this self-confidence, it is impossible for them to tackle the other barriers. It is important to note that even the women selected to join the women's sub-committees or the citizens' committees, precisely because they were supposedly grassroots leaders, reported this fear and lack of confidence. Although many women reported overcoming their initial fears, some still lack the confidence to address a chief or government official, and only the women in the leadership group have gained sufficient 'power within' to be able to speak in any forum.

As illustrated above, the internalisation of gender norms does not just affect confidence but shapes thoughts about what constitutes a barrier. The internalisation of gender norms is so pervasive that there was complete acceptance of the unequal division of labour between men and women. This entrenchment could explain why gender based violence was not raised as a barrier despite the prolific rates within the country.

3.2 Enabling factors

In order for women to progress in their journeys they must be able to claim greater power. The following enabling factors support women's power by giving them greater power within, power to and power with to challenge the power that patriarchy has over their lives.

3.2.1 Self-confidence

Increase in self-confidence was the most reported change that women had experienced as a result of their participation within the partner created spaces and the most important enabler for progression along the journey. The women attribute the changes to their increased knowledge, specifically around women's rights. A lack of self-confidence stops women from participating, from putting herself

forward for leadership positions, approaching the authorities, and from overcoming other barriers. The case study of Bibi, demonstrates the difference that women can achieve when they have self-confidence; the other members of the Lutelo Foundation do not have the confidence to take decisions and express themselves in front of the authorities whereas Bibi is happy to 'knock on any door.'

3.2.2 Training on human rights

The knowledge gained from training was the most frequently mentioned enabler by women in the leader and supporter categories. In the past, it was generally accepted that men made decisions and women followed them.

We were in the shadows of the men, because they told us what to do.

Participant, Performance exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

The training on civic and political rights focused on the rights laid out in the constitution and topics relating to governance structures in the country and advocacy techniques. The citizens' committees and women's sub-committees received initial training on these topics when they were set up in 2009 and subsequently attended two-day training courses over the course of the project. The women's sub-committees discuss the contents of training frequently as they are expected to deliver rights awareness training to the literacy centres and the communities. There were two constitutional rights that particularly resonated with the women and were repeatedly cited as the impetus of their new found confidence to express themselves publicly: the right to expression and women's equal rights.

Thus, men and woman are equal because we are governed by the same Constitution and the same laws.

Participant, Kinzau Mvuete

The women became cognisant that the unequal balance of power between men and women was not just nor legally mandated. This awareness strengthened their power within by liberating them from feelings of inadequacy so they could confidently express themselves in front of men and take on leadership positions within grass roots organisations. For some of the leaders like Césarine, this knowledge also supported them to feel that they had the right to participate in family decisions or enforce their rights regarding divorce, their daughter's education and inheritance. However, for the majority of women that were part of the literacy centre, training on rights was not an important enabler in their journey, only a few women reported changes in self-confidence because of knowledge about rights but they did have a better understanding of the governance system. For most of these women, the training had not supported women to challenge the cultural prohibition on participation and leadership.

3.2.3 Peer support

To help overcome men's resistance to women gaining power a number of women reported the importance of alliances with other women.

The first obstacle, it is hustle between men. So there is a need to have an alliance with strong women capable to defend parity.

Participant, Performance exercise, Matadi



The alliances that were particularly important in supporting women's empowerment journeys, were those between the women in the groups created by CDJP Matadi. When many of the leaders faced barriers to their participation, they turned to their peers within the women's sub-committees and the citizens' committees for support.

I am president of a CLD. Initially, in all CLDs presidents were only men. The president had resigned, I was then unanimously appointed to take over for the ensuing term, it was hard at first, not everyone agreed with the decision. However, I am always encouraged by our secretary mama Césarine who always tells me "my sister, stand firm!"

Participant, Barriers exercise Kinzau Mvuete

This power with others helped them overcome male resistance, problems within their families and a lack of self-confidence.

3.2.4 Access mechanisms

As there are hardly any official citizen participation spaces currently functioning in DRC, it is not easy for the women to access the local chiefs. Women are further marginalised as their voices are traditionally entirely excluded from decisions. The citizens' committees provide a mechanism for the women to access the authorities.

For many problems, we find solutions with the help of citizens' committee. It is for example thanks to the citizens' committee that the Bourgmestre has got involved in the eradication of the nocturnal vagrancy of minors in Kinzau

Mvuete.

Participant, Success exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

Even those that are not members of the committee can now indirectly access the authorities. The women in the sub-committees feed the issues that have arisen in their grassroots organisations into the citizens' committees via the president. It is the citizens' committee that then takes action on these issues. In both research sites, the women from the sub-committees have taken a number of issues to the citizens' committee. The women from the sub-committees report that this has been a positive relationship, and that they feel that their ideas have been heard and addressed by the citizens' committees.

We have a good relationship with the citizens' committee because the women's sub-committee is a branch of the citizens' committee. Correspondence from the women's sub-committee goes to citizens' committee and citizens' committee deal with it. Participant, Barriers exercise, Matadi

This access has enabled them to advance in their empowerment journeys because they have been part of a collective community effort to address issues. They have gained power with others through protests, petitions and for some women direct advocacy with local authorities.

Previously I felt ashamed to stand before the authority to express my concerns but since I joined the citizens' committee I am uninhibited. Through the training I received, I now know what to do and in what way I can see the authorities for me to get the answer to my concern.

Participant, Kinzau Mvuete

3.2.5 Economic wealth and freedom of movement

Most of the women in the sample worked outside of the home and had their own income. In the second stage, the women interviewed, all had their own income which they controlled alone, which is not typical for women in the research sites. These financially independent women were not reliant on their husbands or families for money to attend meetings, and all but one of the women interviewed in the second stage were able to travel freely wherever they wanted. All of these women regularly travelled outside of their communities and had no barriers in visiting family members, attending meetings or going to government offices. It is important to note that CDJP Matadi provided women with transport money when they were engaging in activities related to the citizens' committees and the sub-committees, which might have also acted as an enabler for women's participation and progress within their empowerment journeys.

3.2.6 Literacy

For the women in the literacy centres, the most commonly

cited enabler to their empowerment journey, and the one credited with having the greatest impact, was gaining literacy skills. This changed their ability to conduct their personal and civic responsibilities. Many of these women felt unable to take on leadership posts whilst they were illiterate and those with an interest had taken on leadership positions once they had gained literacy skills.

I came to learn to read and write because they always insulted me by calling me "illiterate"... now I can handle the difficult tasks that I have to fulfil as president. If I have a lot to do, it doesn't scare me. I can do it. As I already know how to read, I can succeed at whatever I do. Participant, Performance exercise.

Literacy is not a requirement for a leader but the women felt unable to carry out specific tasks whilst illiterate, demonstrating the connection between literacy and self-confidence.

3.2.7 Family support

The women were not generally stopped from attending meetings by their families. In fact only one of the women reported being prevented from attending. The acceptance of women's participation by their families may be specific to their particular demographics or may be a wider cultural phenomenon. Although women were not stopped from participating, for many, their participation caused tension within their families. Therefore having a supportive family was an important enabler.

They are happy with what I do, because they see that their mother is working for the sake of development. Participant, Voice Diary Entry, Matadi

However, often their participation is supported because of the benefits it brings to the family rather than because gender norms have shifted. Individual acceptance does not signify that women's participation in general, is accepted as a right.

They say 'It is a common fact for our big sister to take responsibility. It's still good because the things she brings help us.' However, they say it would have been better if I had been created a man, 'why were you created a woman?' So apart from my contribution and all that I bring them, they think I should have been the man rather than the woman. Participant, Kinzau Mvuete, Photovoice,

3.3 Collective experiences of women within the invited spaces

This section explores women's effectiveness within the spaces.⁵ As there are no official spaces for citizen participation, there is a limited opportunity for citizens to influence the authorities. The citizens' committees and

the women's subcommittees were specifically designed to support male and female citizens to be able to claim their rights from the local authorities. As demonstrated above, the women have gained more power through their participation in these invited spaces, supporting their individual participation and empowerment journeys. However, the creation of new spaces is not in itself sufficient to empower citizens to push the existing boundaries that prevent them from influencing decisions affecting their communities. Participation within the spaces can support the transformation of power dynamics or it can reinforce existing divides and hegemonies. This section presents the collective experiences of the women within the invited spaces in order to understand the factors that constrain and support them to push the boundaries between the state and citizens to have greater influence over their community affairs.

3.3.1 Women are now participating to address community issues

CDJP Matadi implemented specific strategies to address the problem of women's participation. They created the women's committees to ensure that women were able to identify their problems and bring them to the citizens' committees as well as to sensitize the population about women's rights. The citizens' committees were set up to have equal representation of both men and women; if there was a male president, there would be a female vice-president and vice versa. Both men and women had the capacity to advocate with authorities and both would receive training about women's civic and political rights.

As discussed above, women's participation in community decisions is traditionally not socially accepted. Within the citizens' committee, the male members have come to accept women's participation but this change has been a battle. At first, when there were only a few women within the citizens' committees, the women found it was hard to have influence. However, the contribution that women can make has been increasingly recognised.

For example we found that when there were few women in the citizens' committee, we had less influence. When we saw this, we convinced them to increase the number. Today there are seven women, but before there were only three. What maman Césarine said is what happened. Women have their say at the citizens' committee. Since the number of women at the citizens' committee increased, even the men see how valuable our contributions are. Participants, Barriers exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

The election of a woman to the top position at citizens' committee Nanza was a success, because the promotion of a woman proved that a woman can lead as well as a man. There are more collaborations between committee members because the men's opinions used to dominate and greater transparency regarding finances. Participant, Success exercise, Matadi

Despite these changes, the women in the sub-committees felt that it was necessary to have a specific space for women because of the negative attitudes that men in general hold towards women's participation.

With regards to the women's sub-committee being reserved for women only, only a small number of men understand that they need women to form part of an association, many do not want to support us women and it causes a standstill if they refuse us. That is when you associate yourselves with men but when there are only women, you are always going forward. There are many men, even you Guylain, many say "Oh! Tika Makambu wana "(drop these ideas)," Mwasi AKOTIKALA KAKA Mwasi" (" A woman will remain a woman "). So because of such people, as the association is female led, we would like it to continue as such. Because when other women listen to the argument "A woman will remain a woman", they no longer have arguments to push. But as we already know, I will not shut up. Even if you are ten men, I will always speak.

Participant, Photovoice, Kinzau Mvuete

As noted in the section above, male resistance to women's leadership and participation in decision making spaces, is still an on-going concern. Thus, the women value a female-only space. Even within the citizens' committee, despite the strategies of the partners to ensure the equal participation of women, male domination affected the women's ability to equally participate in decisions. Only through either a critical mass of women or a woman holding the most powerful position in the committee, did the women in the research report feeling equally able to influence decisions.

3.3.2 Advocacy on community issues is happening but limited by a lack of citizen power

Even though the women were part of grassroots associations, they were not participating in actions to address community issues before they joined the invited spaces created by CDJP Matadi.

Before joining the citizens' committee, the women's involvement was very low. Our involvement in community problems was very low, even those in associations.

Participant, Performance exercise, Matadi

The citizens' committee and women's subcommittees are the spaces where community issues are discussed and advocacy plans are implemented. Since joining the committee, the women's relationship with the authorities has completely changed and women now feel that they have a good relationship with the authorities and can access them when necessary. This change has been supported by extensive work with local authorities both to promote citizen participation and women's rights. However, this change has been incremental because their previous interaction was very limited.

5 Data was collected on women's 'performance' using a specific tool – the trend lines – as referred to on the tools table in section 1.3.2. The tool looked at how women's participation, such as expression and involvement in decisions, had evolved since their inclusion in the project.

It's important to note that it wasn't easy for us to access the authorities when we had problems. But, thanks to the training, we learned how to make pleas, and how to lobby, and how to send petitions to the authorities. All of that helps us to more easily access the authorities.

Participant, Photovoice, Matadi



Part of a Photovoice activity showing women getting water at the fixed tap. Photo: Henriete Akenda

There have been a number of specific issues that the women have brought to the citizens' committees, which the citizens' committee has then approached the authorities to address. One of the issues in both Matadi and Kinzau Mvuete that the citizens' committees addressed, was water.

I chose this picture because we did a lot of advocacy in our neighbourhood through the citizens' committee. Our neighbourhood, was suffering from water scarcity but through our advocacy with the authorities, we have water again in our neighbourhood, Nsaka maketo. This is good for the women because they were walking long distances to fetch water but now anyway, there is water flowing. It is also beneficial for our organisation because through it, we have won the trust of the people of Nsaka Makili who know they can raise their problems and then find solutions.

Participant, Photovoice, Matadi

Another one of the issues that the women recall in detail, is the cleaning of the market place.

We had a problem with the lack of hygiene at the market where we sell vegetables every Saturday, and we brought this problem to the citizens' committee. This is when the president had the idea to choose three people to go see the Bourgmestre in order to submit this problem. When we arrived, we introduced ourselves because he did not know us. We spoke with him, but that day there had been no initiative, he just told us to leave, promising he would do something. Then, he held a meeting with his staff and we were recalled and now they have organised themselves. There are now rickshaws and trucks that remove the rubbish that is discarded. A solution was therefore found to this problem.

Participant, Success exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

The citizens' committees have worked very closely with the authorities not just to claim rights for the community but to support the government to collect taxes from the market place.

Since we were with the President of the market sub-committee of Nanza citizens' committee, we wanted to accompany the market inspectors, because we saw that the tax returns were very small compared to the number of sellers at the market. The authorities were very happy with our work.

Participant, Photovoice, Matadi

The successes that the women report, demonstrate that the citizens' committees have been able to push the boundaries between the state and citizen. The once closed spaces of the local chiefs are now open. The women in the citizens' committees and others from the sub-committees and even the literacy groups, have been able to exercise their power to demand change. However, despite these successes, the women note that one of the major barriers to their work is the lack of power they have to hold the authorities to account.

One of the barriers to the citizens' committee is the misunderstanding of the authorities, and even more of their associates who can stifle the activities of the citizens' committee especially in relation to accountability and traceability, so the citizens' committee must develop lots of strategies to get round this difficulty.

Participant, Barriers exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

As there are hardly any official spaces to engage with the authorities, the citizens' committees must operate in a way that ensures the chiefs are happy to receive them. They have therefore adopted strategies to placate the authorities and maximise their influence.



Women in the literacy centre in Matadi, completing a barriers exercise. Photo: Emma Newbury

When I look at the work we do, I see that we are not infringing the law, but we are operating within the framework of the law. We advocate for taxes. So we know what the law means. Now when we have a problem, we always act in accordance with the law, we must tread carefully. In all, we keep him informed. So where he spoke of our information

in any case, he receives us because other times when you bring them work but he tells you that it is not possible. You go find him, he is there but he tells someone to tell you that he's not there. He refused to receive you. But he knows us, if only he hears it is the citizens' committee or Women's sub-committee, in any case, he welcomes us.

Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry

In the absence of any official power, they must find the balance between independence and influence, which is challenging. Supporting the collection of taxes from the market sellers, without being able to influence how that money is spent, is a risky strategy. Despite their influence and good relationship, there are still tensions between the women and the local Chiefs, particularly with regard to accountability and transparency.

We are on good terms. For example today we spoke for a good while. But we still have some difficulties because now for example, with regards to budget control, we had requested an invitation for us to meet them but until now they cannot fix anything.

Participant, Barriers exercise, Kinzau Mvuete

3.3.3 Representing others

The citizens' committee was designed to represent the needs of the wider community. The women argue that it has become the 'voice of the people' and they are recognised for this. As noted above, providing women with access to the authorities has helped the women in their empowerment journeys and slightly altered the power balance with the authorities. The women in the citizens' committees and some of the women in the sub-committees, report that their social status has increased in their communities as a result of their advocacy work.

Since starting at CDF, people think that I work in Law or Politics, because I know my rights. Everybody consults me when they have a problem. And, because they follow my advice, they now call me "Maman Advisor". People say that I could even be a supervisor in the future because of the way that I manage to deal with people who are difficult.

Participant, Voice Diary Entry, Kinzau Mvuete

However, given that there is a very low level of interaction between the local authorities and the population, the latter may perceive the citizens' committees as having special powers that they do not have.

Others even think that we have a share or maybe the power to solve their problems. It's like for a while, there were positive responses to their concerns and problems, so they think we can solve all their problems. So they come to disturb us to ask their problems.

Participant, Voice Diary Entry, Matadi

This position means that the citizens' committees then end up walking a tightrope; they must be seen to be open and

supportive of the authorities to gain influence, but must avoid the perception that they can address community wide problems, over which they ultimately have no control.

If they have other problems, we know they will raise their problems with us and we are expected to find solutions. As the authorities give us credibility but the authorities have still to respond positively in their favour.

Participant, Photovoice, Matadi

Some people have even misunderstood the relationship that the women have with the authorities, thinking that they are directly employed by the state or that they are secretly working with the authorities.

Yet others come to raise their problems. Indeed there are those who envy us and asking us to get them things. They say "bring us there too!" In time they ask, "How can we be in your organization?" "Is there no way to find a place for me (hiring)?" They ask because they think we may be employees. At times they even think that we are a kind of hidden hands of the authorities because we are always ready to judge the problems of the population and we get access to the higher levels. This produced envy as well as admiration of the people.

Participants, Voice Diary Entry, Matadi

Given the high levels of corruption and mistrust between citizens and the state, if the women are perceived to be part of the local governance structure, they risk losing the trust of the community. Within this difficult situation, the women's agency is constrained by being representatives of a wider group, whose membership may only be interested in their individual problems rather than the collective needs of women or strategic needs that address underlying power imbalances.

4. Analysis of the power dynamics within the spaces



Women of the literacy centre Matadi, participating in a reflection exercise about the research data collection. Photo: Emma Newbury

4. Analysis of the power dynamics within the spaces

There are no official citizen participation spaces in DRC and instead the citizens have to creatively open the closed door of chiefs to have any influence over decisions. However, the question still remains as to how participation within the different spaces can be transformative and not just reinforce the status quo: The following section uses the women's experiences of participation detailed above and their collective empowerment journeys to answer this question by understanding the purpose of the space, who makes the decisions and who participates within the space.

4.1 Who decides?

4.1.1 Power is not devolved from the state to citizens

Ultimately, decisions in relation to provision of services lie in the hands of the local chiefs, and the women have no power to ensure that their requests are granted. The regulations for the official functioning of the sub-ETD chiefs have not been fully implemented and the structure is a hierarchical system of gatekeepers, where women must negotiate with one chief to the next. The issues raised are not necessarily issues that the Chiefs are mandated to address because their official portfolio of responsibilities are interpreted by a complex interplay of customary rules and official policies, which has led to confusion.

There are no official accountability mechanisms for the women to hold the authorities to account over decisions. The women through the citizens' committees, have challenged the power balance by using petitions, protests and face to face meetings. The space is no longer fully closed as the Chiefs do accept meetings with the citizens' committees but those meetings are dependent on the willingness of individuals rather than any legal rights and ultimate control over decisions still lies with the state officials.

Precisely because the women in the citizens' committee recognise the power imbalance, the citizens' committees have adopted 'carrot' as well as 'stick' strategies, such as supporting tax collection, to ensure the authorities are responsive to their demands. These strategies may be necessary but without real power to influence decisions, there is a risk that the women become or are perceived to be co-opted by political elites.

4.1.2 Power is held by the citizens' committees and not by the women's subcommittees

The women's sub-committees discuss various issues that have emerged within their grassroots organisations,

and through the president, these are taken to the citizens' committees. Ultimately, the women's sub-committee is not a space that challenges governments; it is merely a conduit for the citizens' committees. **The women members of the sub-committees are therefore removed from the actual decision making.** However, they do report feeling heard by the citizens' committees. They are not directly involved in challenging governments to deliver rights but they are able to utilise channels to engage with the Chiefs.

4.1.3 Quotas enable critical mass but don't address structural causes of gender inequality

The citizen committee exists in the context of existing unequal gender power dynamics of the society. Just because women are actively invited into the spaces, does not mean they are able to equally participate, given the underlying power dynamics that cause women's marginalisation. The women specifically mentioned the struggle they encountered in influencing decisions in the citizens' committees, which comprised only a small number of women, illustrating the effects of this power imbalance. **Now, the women in the citizens' committees feel that their voices are equally heard because there are more women members and women hold posts of responsibility, suggesting the importance of a critical mass of women.** The increased numbers of women may have changed the acceptability of women in the citizens' committee and increased their influence over decisions but the **focus has been on claiming rights without an awareness of whose needs it addresses.** There is no separate analysis of women's needs within the committee and no evidence that CDJP Matadi have supported women to think about their needs as women.

4.1.4 Hierarchical structures in grassroots associations concentrate power

The grassroots organisations have very hierarchical structures. Generally, the executive committee makes all the decisions, with little or no input from other members. Some of the women entering these positions have then replicated this structure. This structure prevents greater numbers of women from being able to actively participate in decisions and creates an elite group of women at the top with little or no room for new leaders to emerge.

4.2 What is the purpose of the space?

The purpose of the space has an impact on the participation within that space as it defines the opportunities for participation and in turn shapes the opportunity for that

participation to support empowerment. For example, if the space has a very limited mandate then participation within the space is not necessarily going to support women to gain power. Additionally, as invited spaces are created by external actors, they may be set up to achieve a purpose that runs contrary to the goals of empowerment. However, spaces are not fixed entities; they are shaped by experiences and their membership. Therefore it is important to understand both the purpose of the space and whether, in the women's experience, it is achieving that purpose.

In the research the spaces can be divided into three different categories:

1. Challenging the state to deliver rights- these spaces are designed to allow citizens to demand that local authorities fulfil their duty to uphold citizens' rights.
2. Questioning gender norms- these spaces are trying to change the power dynamics between men and women by challenging the existing norms.
3. Improving access to material resources – these spaces are generally filling gaps in the social system because the state has failed to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, but they might also be supporting women and men to improve their financial situations.

4.2.1 Challenging government to deliver rights



Intended purpose of the spaces in this category

In the absence of official spaces for citizen participation, both the citizens' committee and the women's subcommittee were designed as a space to support citizens to challenge the government to deliver on rights by addressing community issues and advocating for them to be addressed with the Chiefs. To understand how these spaces have been affected by these power dynamics, requires an analysis of the extent to which the women have been able to exercise their power over duty bearers, and whether this has created opportunities for inclusion and accountability, allowing them to challenge the state to deliver their rights.

Is it achieving this purpose?

The creation of citizens' committees and women's sub-committees has established a mechanism to filter citizens' demands and bring them to the state authorities. Given the absence of clear rights and accountable duty bearers, this is an important success. Previously the women had never had any interaction with Chiefs and now they are able to access them; the door is now open rather than

closed. The advocacy undertaken has resulted in better access to vital needs such as water and electricity. Power still ultimately lies in the hands of the Chiefs, but the women, as part of the citizen committee, have been able to use their power in different ways such as mobilising the community through protests and petitions.

The lack of any official space for citizens to participate in decisions affecting their lives, is the governance reality in DRC and, at a minimum, the citizens' committees are an organised voice of the population that has been able to bring solutions to issues in the community. However, given all the limitations, the extent to which participation within a disempowering framework can be empowering, is questionable.

4.2.2 Questioning gender norms



Intended purpose of the spaces in this category

Both the citizens' committees and the women's sub-committees are designed to challenge gender norms by providing women with the opportunity to participate and to educate other women and men about women's civil and political rights.

Is it achieving this purpose?

Not addressing underlying gender norms. The women's sub-committee has become a space for questioning gender norms through the women's awareness-raising about rights in the community. This is the main activity that the women discussed when describing their successes. The project has only focused on increasing the number of women participating through raising awareness on civic and political rights. The women members have undertaken activities to share this knowledge with the community and a number of women have been able to use this knowledge to make changes in their lives. However, many of the women still report resistance in the community and their families to exercising these rights, or undertaking leadership positions; suggesting that the underlying beliefs that cause inequality between men and women are still present in the community and the awareness raising has not filtered into the wider community. **Wider gender norms, that underpin women's exclusion from decisions, have not been addressed.**

Legitimacy through membership of the citizens' committees. The findings show that the women in the citizens' committees have found the authorities, in general, open to meeting with them, as members of the citizens' committees. **The legitimacy they have gained by being**

members on this committee, has led to a slight change in gender norms. As women are now part of meetings and their voices are heard. The women in the citizens' committees are now regarded in society as leaders and their views are sought out, although there is still resistance to women holding decision making posts in mixed organisations.

4.2.3 Improving access to material resources



Intended purpose of the spaces in this category

The grassroots associations are varied in their purpose. However, the majority were generally focused on providing economic support in times of hardship. CDJP Matadi intended that the women involved in the invited spaces, would be able to strengthen these organisations and mobilise a stronger civil society, which would support them to lobby the authorities for access to basic services.

Are they achieving this purpose?

The majority of the grassroots associations are not addressing community wide needs, but rather allowing their members to access resources and there is little evidence that other issues are discussed. Some of the women have sensitised the members about civic and political rights but most women involved in the research were unable to concretely name any changes they have introduced to their associations, in relation to rights. Many of the women from the citizens' committees and the women's sub-committees, feel personally empowered to demand change in their own lives but the limitations of the mandates of grassroots spaces mean the 'trickle-down effect' of participation is not successfully working, as sensitisation has not translated into critical consciousness. **These associations have the potential to become sites of organisation and resistance to the status quo but currently they are hierarchical and inward focused.**

4.3 Who participates in the space?

In the invited spaces studied in the research, specific people were chosen to participate, making these spaces closed for others in the community. The project works in semi-urban and urban areas. The women selected to join both the citizens' committees and the women's sub-committees, are not the most marginalised in society. All of the women are middle-aged or older and generally, are more educated than the rest of the population, with access to more resources. These spaces were not set up to encourage the most marginalised to participate because CDJP Matadi wanted the men and women to be able to bring the voices of a

wider group to local authorities. The citizens' committees have been able to successfully create space for women and men's voices to be heard by the chiefs; in doing this they have become representatives of the population. Therefore an enquiry into who is being represented then becomes important.

4.3.1 Issues of representation

In any representative space, especially where people are selected by external actors, not by those they are meant to represent, it is possible for the chosen participants to become gatekeepers of power, excluding the views of others and reinforcing social divides. It must not be assumed that those on the committee necessarily represent the views of the wider community. Those participating within them are not the upper echelons of the elite but they are also not the poorest and most marginalised and there is no reason that they will necessarily represent the concerns of marginalised groups. There is no mechanism to check that they are bringing demands from the grassroots and given the hierarchical nature of the associations, it is likely that the views are not necessarily representative of marginalised groups, including women. **Given the representative nature of the invited spaces, and the change in women's status because of their participation within them, there is a risk that they become an unelected vanguard that believes it represents the population but actually only represents elite concerns.**

4.4 Pushing the boundaries of possible action

The boundaries of action are defined by the existing power dynamics within societies. Therefore, within societies where the boundaries are very narrow, pushing them will not result in a total shift in power dynamics to more fluid and equal relations.

4.4.1 Between Citizens and the State

In DRC, the very act of creating space for communities' concerns to be raised, through the citizens' committees, has pushed the boundaries. But the relations between the women and the state are still limited by unequal power relations. Decisions are ultimately taken by the local authorities not citizens. The closed spaces where the Chiefs make decisions, are part of a disempowering governance framework, where citizens are unable to influence the decisions that affect their lives. Without addressing this fundamental lack of power, participation within these closed spaces will always be disempowering until citizens have legal rights and a mechanism to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Due to the lack of official space, the women must negotiate their relationship and influence with the Chiefs. Therefore some of their actions actually reinforce the existing power imbalance. They have supported the collection of taxes from market sellers. Although this initiative is the women's own, and Trôcaire's

partner organization has worked with market sellers and authorities on the importance of paying tax and providing public service, the women's tax collection serves a state function without necessarily giving them greater control over how those resources are spent and potentially eroding their independence as citizens.

push the boundaries of action within their families. They have taken action to claim greater power over decisions, changing the power balance between men and women. Although it is clear that this has not been accepted by all the family members, the women have been able to claim rights which would previously have been denied to them because of their gender. This individual action has not

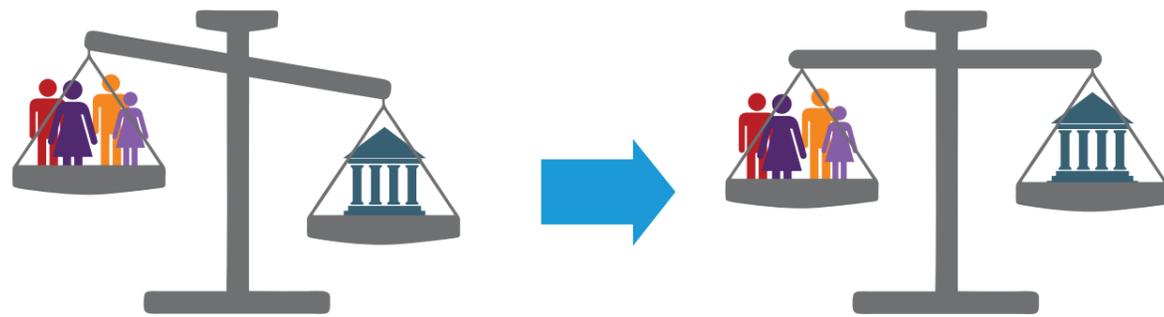


Figure 8. Power imbalance between citizens and the state

4.4.2 Between men and women

Due to strict gender norms, women in DRC have traditionally been excluded from holding leadership posts in mixed organisations and have set roles within the home regarding domestic and reproductive tasks. Through civic and political rights training and participation within invited spaces, the majority of women have been able to gain confidence to express themselves publicly and take on leadership posts, some even in mixed organisations. However, these women have not often challenged the ways these structures function; instead they have reinforced the hierarchical rules of these structures. The women are clearly exercising greater power but have not opened up the possibilities for the other women's participation to support empowerment.

turned into collective action to change the unequal laws that place women as subordinate citizens but has made small in-roads into norms dictating women's role in society. The women developed a critical awareness of women's roles, which are not fixed, but as no comprehensive work on gender norms has been done in the community or with the women's families, any woman that starts to challenge these norms is placed at risk of resistance, violence, being ostracised or family breakdown. Pushing the boundaries between men and women should not be left solely in the hands of women; men must be engaged in this process.

Individually as a result of their new knowledge, confidence and experience, some of the women have started to

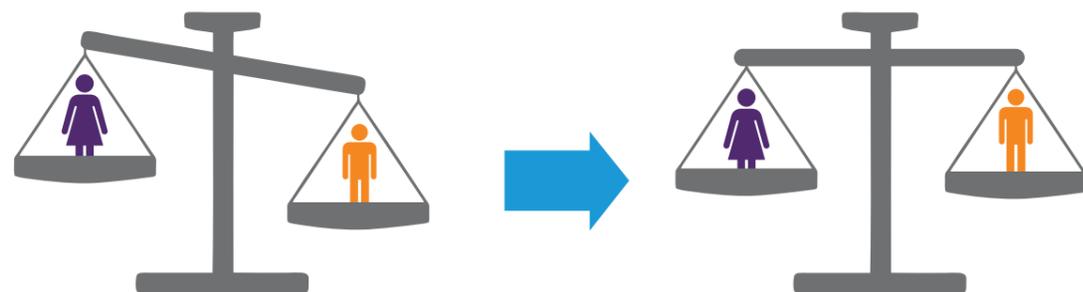


Figure 9. Power imbalance between men and women

4.5 Conclusions & Recommendations

This section includes a summary of the key learning outcomes of the research process and suggests recommendations to address these issues.

1. Understand the context in which women live: In DRC, it is not unusual for women to be actively

engaged in activities outside the home, as leaving the home and entering into public spaces is embedded in the social norms and roles of women. Despite their presence in public life, they are still excluded from decisions regarding community issues: they are excluded from leadership roles in grassroots organisations unless they are women only groups or have a narrow religious mandate related to church matters; and, they are excluded from political life, as there are virtually no women appointed to the position of Chief, at any level, and women are not traditionally included in meetings where political matters were discussed. There needs to be an appreciation of where women start from in their journeys and what it is possible to achieve given this. Not all the women can become leaders but a heavy reliance on supporting small numbers is unlikely to generate transformational change.

- Precede empowerment programmes with an analysis of the political landscape, social norms and gender equality/power relations to select spaces that meet women's needs on a personal, legal and social level. Allow this analysis to inform which spaces to work in and what the starting point should be.

2. Support the creation of access mechanisms to reach community decision makers: As there are no official citizen participation spaces currently functioning in DRC, accessing formal decision makers and local chiefs is challenging. Women are further marginalised as their voices are traditionally entirely excluded from decisions. The citizens' committees provided a mechanism for women to access the authorities. Now, the women in the sub-committees feed the issues that have arisen in their grassroots organisations into the citizens' committees, and this is communicated to authorities via committee leaders. This access has enabled women members of sub committees to advance in their empowerment journeys because they have been part of a collective community effort to address issues. They have gained power with others through protests, petitions and, for some women, direct advocacy with local authorities.

- On the basis of the context analysis, design pathways to influence within existing spaces or through new ones. Create opportunities at all levels of this pathway, including public representation/advocacy for those that are empowered to take on this role, and collective sharing of experiences or communal protests for others.

3. Support collective action & community mobilisation: When undertaking advocacy on

community wide issues such as water and electricity, women leaders mobilised other women to support them, through protests and petitions. This strengthened the women's power when undertaking advocacy and enabled women that were not involved in an invited space with an opportunity to express their needs to the authorities. At the same time, many women felt that they were able to raise awareness about rights in the community but this awareness has not turned into community mobilisation.

- Support collective action that focuses on advocacy & lobbying, mutual support and peer to peer learning, and that is based on a variety of advocacy/participation tools to meet the individual needs of individual women. Support strategies aimed at mobilising the wider population.

4. Support inclusive programmes: A heavy workload for women, challenged their ability to participate in community decision-making. This was especially prevalent for women with young children, who had greater domestic responsibilities and were entirely missing from these decision making spaces, which needs to be addressed. Further, when selecting programme participants, there should be clarity on where the programme stands on the scale of including the 'most marginalised' or those who are 'influencers and catalysts'. An overemphasis on hierarchy within community structures should be avoided, so that all women can participate in decisions. By working directly with these spaces, the project will be better able to support community mobilisation.

- Design programmes that respond to the specific practical (as well as social) needs of all women within the community, and ensure that no group is excluded from participating due to practical reasons.

5. Support literacy training and education: For many of the positions within grassroots associations, there is no requirement to be literate, but illiteracy affects the confidence of the women to participate and how they are perceived by others. At the same time, the limits of literacy training as an empowerment tool should be acknowledged, as it only serves to address one step on the journey.

- Support literacy and education for women, as part of a wider approach to strengthening their self-confidence and resilience.

6. Support training and awareness-raising on human rights and equality: For some women, knowledge about their rights from participating in training and awareness-raising, led to empowerment

within their domestic sphere and supported their empowerment in the public sphere. In the domestic sphere, their new knowledge and experience raised their awareness of the oppression they experience as women, specifically in relation to the unequal division of roles within the home. In response, many started to demand changes in their homes and familial relationships. In the public sphere, by gaining knowledge about civic and political rights, they were able to seek accountability from state officials. The training helped the women to gain the confidence to break the cultural taboos preventing women from being leaders or addressing authorities.

- Support training and awareness raising programmes to build women's confidence and empower them with the tools they need to resist disempowerment in the private and public spheres.
7. Consider providing tangible supports: Financially independent women who were not reliant on their husbands or families for money to attend meetings, encountered less challenges to do so and were more likely to be able to travel freely wherever they wanted.
 - Consider providing some material support to women to allow them to attend decision-making fora, either to support them with transport costs or to alleviate the pressure associated with childcare.
 8. Accept that change and empowerment is gradual and varying: Using the confidence, knowledge and experience they have acquired in the invited spaces and initial grassroots organisations, some of the women began to actively participate within other spaces, with many taking on new leadership posts. This gave them greater confidence and experience of negotiating and debating their ideas with others. Many participants transitioned from participating within community spaces to actually lobbying the appointed chiefs for improved access to essential services and infrastructure for their communities. The women experienced a number of successes as a result of their advocacy, which have meant that they have become known in the community.
 - Accept that change is gradual, and empowerment is a long term process. Tailor targets and indicators to reflect that true empowerment happens continuously and takes many years to fully realise.
 9. Manage expectations and respond to community initiatives where possible: In some cases, the improved social status of the women has also caused family members to expect support from

them, such as material support or job opportunities. Expectations should be managed from the outset and the women should be supported to respond to these requests, particularly when they are not in a position to respond positively.

- Be clear about the limits of what women can achieve or deliver within participatory spaces, and ensure that this is known and understood within the wider community.
10. Protect women from the negative consequences of participation: Supporting women to challenge gender norms can put them at risk of violence – psychological as well as physical.
 - Identify protection risks and incorporate strategies for these risks to support women to counteract the negative consequences.
 11. Engage men and the wider community: Individually, women start to push the boundaries of action within their families and/or communities as a result of their new knowledge, confidence and experience. However, pushing the boundaries between men and women should not be left solely in the hands of women; men must be engaged in this process; in their capacity as individuals and as members of families and communities.
 - Actively engage men and the wider community before and during participation programmes.

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Annex

CITIZENS' COMMITTEE



WOMEN'S SUB-COMMITTEE





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