Pushing the Boundaries: Nicaragua Report

Understanding Women’s Participation and Empowerment

Emma Newbury
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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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Cover: Women in La Bahiona carrying water for a new tourism project as part of the fishing cooperative. The women must find time to do their housework and work for the cooperative which is currently in the set-up phase. Photo as part of Photovoice, La Bahiona, Nicaragua.
Abbreviations

BKS  Multidisciplinary Association for Development

APADEIM  Association for the Integral Development of Women

CAPS  Comité de Agua Potable y Saneamiento (Drinkable Water and Sanitation Committees, or ‘Water Committees’)

CPC  Citizen Power Council

GBV  Gender Based Violence

INDIE  National Institute for Development Information

MINSA  Ministry of Health Nicaragua

NGO  Non Governmental Organisation

PRA  Participatory Rural Appraisal

UNICEF  United Nations Children’s Fund
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.

Nicaragua was selected as a case study country for the research, because it was the only Trócaire country programme which had both a Gender Equality and a Governance & Human Rights programme operating in the same area.

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 gaining access to power for those who are so often marginalised. The process, experience and nature of citizen participation varies widely between 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. While the research was conducted using a relatively small sample size, in a selected number of geographical areas, and the results therefore are not intended to be representative, they are nevertheless indicative of trends in regions that are similarly contextual, and lessons learned can be extracted for use across the country and beyond.

The journey towards women’s empowerment in Nicaragua:

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.

In Nicaragua, prior to their engagement with the local community groups, all of the women that participated in the research reported a general acceptance in the communities that men have the right to control women’s movements. The women had to actively decide to change this situation and choose to participate. This is a step that they must make themselves and they must have sufficient ‘power within’ and ‘power to’ in order to make this move. This step is not a fixed point in time; rather, it is an on-going negotiation, supported by the power gained in the other steps. It may be very fraught and continue throughout their journeys. At first the women all reported feeling very nervous and shy, often attending meetings without actively participating at them. Through gaining knowledge, experience and having a safe place to reflect on their lives the women slowly gained the confidence to express themselves.

Once women have experience of participating it generally leads to more participation. Through their initial experience of participation, the women gained confidence in their abilities to comfortably participate in other spaces. A third of the participants have taken on leadership posts within different organisations and through this leadership have gained greater confidence and experience of negotiating and debating their ideas with others.

Some of the women then progressed from participating within community spaces to actively lobbying the local government for improved access to services for their community, targeting municipal assemblies and local authorities. For some women, the act of lobbying was itself empowering, as it challenged the belief that only men could participate.

Power is a right that I have. Power is to decide, the power to decide, the power lobby, the power to participate. It has a lot to do with participation, I think, because if I do not have the power, that is if I’m not empowered regarding my thoughts, what I want, if I’m undecided I have no power or a sense of myself.

(Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry)

Barriers encountered

The majority of barriers stem from the unequal power relations between men and women that exist within the society. The gender norms are so rigidly entrenched that they are accepted and internalised by men and women requiring vast shifts in power for transformation to occur.

1. Male violence and control over women’s mobility was the most widely cited barrier, stemming from the accepted notion that a woman is a man’s possession, that he holds the power within the relationship, and that he has authority to allow/ disallow her to have agency of any kind. All the women reported a general acceptance in the communities that men have the right to control women’s mobility. At every single stage of the empowerment journey the women must counter this control.

2. Taboo of women in decision making spaces is a result of the prevailing patriarchal systems in each of the communities reviewed. Even though all the women in the research had taken the decision to be involved in at least the invited spaces they faced constant criticism for doing so. At every stage of the journey, the legitimacy of their participation was undermined. Their participation is delegitimized by being recast as a cover for character flaws. This becomes even more problematic when women become involved in lobbying the local authorities as they must physically leave the community to do so. Within the spaces themselves, this resistance inhibits women’s ability to assert influence over decisions when there are more men than women in the space.

3. Unequal division of labour was commonplace. The internalisation of gender norms means that women are seen as care givers and therefore duty-bound to undertake all domestic tasks. When they begin to challenge the existing norms by participating in public spaces, they continue to shoulder the burden of care within the home. The result is a triple burden of reproductive, productive and community work.

4. Internalisation of social norms, which places men as the head of the household and community, with control over women’s movements, have resulted in these norms becoming part of cultural norms and therefore imperceptible as a created and changeable custom. Although this inequality was not considered overtly unjust, it manifested itself in low self-confidence and self-esteem, as a result of the internalisation of inferiority and an understanding that women should not be vocal.

Enabling Factors

For each woman the specific enablers are different depending on their personal circumstances but in general the following were important factors in supporting women in their journeys in Nicaragua.

1. Training on the protection of women’s human rights was cited by all communities as one of the most important enablers. The women did not name specific rights that had supported their empowerment journeys, but referred much more generally to knowing their rights as women. The knowledge the women gained through this training has given them a feeling of self-worth; knowing that, as women, they have rights changes their perception of themselves and gives them strength to take action because they feel entitled to do so. One of the big enablers for women was learning that they were entitled to be free from the control of their husbands in the home. This knowledge strengthened the women’s self-esteem and allowed many to question their husband’s dominance in the home and to further negotiate their ability to participate in different community spaces.

2. The group solidarity that women experience supported them individually to participate in mixed community meetings by enabling them to feel more secure in these (often male dominated) spaces and by allowing them to speak as a united voice, giving them more leverage to influence. These ‘safe spaces’ provided women with the opportunity to meet and discuss issues affecting their lives and build their confidence. Through
exploring these issues within a group environment, the women transitioned from perceiving the violence in their lives as an individual issue within their relationships, to seeing it as a collective issue that was rooted in their gender identities. The bonds between the women also supported those that emerged as leaders, who benefit from the knowledge that they can rely on the support of the women from within the group.

3. Self-confidence. The women in the research that had previous experience of participating were more easily able to progress in their journeys, precisely because they had already gained self-confidence through their previous experiences. As well as a security within themselves and their ability to express themselves, greater self-confidence has helped the majority of the women to develop coping strategies to handle the critiques they receive from the community.

4. Independent economic means, including access to an independent or favourable means of earning money was an enabler for women. However, while an economic component to a project may support women's empowerment, it can also create further tensions.

5. Support from family members that encourage women to participate is also a clear enabler. This is especially true given the heavy burden of domestic work that the women endure. As participating can take them away from the community and their duties, having a partner that will help with childcare or domestic work enables the women to undertake advocacy. These successes demonstrate the importance of engaging men within programmes. The women do not participate in a vacuum; the ‘power over’ women which men possess will be more easily transformed if men and women have an awareness of that power.

Impact of participation

The Nicaraguan case study demonstrated the limited capacity of citizens to influence government decisions that affect the communities. The government has established some participation spaces that can sometimes be tokenistic, as the case described on the Municipal Assembly. Further, although on the surface the community has the power over decisions through the council of family, as in the selection of beneficiaries for various state programmes, beneficiaries in the participating communities were on occasions chosen by external actors of the ruling party.

Within the organic and invited community level spaces, decision making is egalitarian and women have the opportunity to contribute to decision making. Local community structures have become a force to challenge the government to deliver rights. The women have collectively created new spaces in which to exert influence, which has had some limited material benefit but has not contributed to long term change and the women repeatedly faced barriers collectively.

Allegations of lack of transparency, within government and community structures due to politicisation, has led to tensions regarding allocation of resources and decision making responsibility.

Through the training, reflection and sharing of experiences, the women in these groups have started to question gender norms and are taking action to challenge them. All of the women have been able to challenge the taboo of women participating within the public space. Many women have successfully and continuously been able to negotiate their ability to participate with their husbands, challenging male control over women’s movement. However, the women still report high levels of resistance to their participation by some community members. Their participation in public or within their own homes can result in increased risks of violence or conflict with their families and communities.

Many women spoke about the price they had to pay for stepping beyond the existing social norms, and those working with them need to be aware and work with them to mitigate the risks they are taking in participating and travelling this empowerment pathway.

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. In Nicaragua, despite the rhetoric of administrative decentralization and citizen participation, the central government still has a high degree of control. Additionally, gender norms are very rigid and dictate the ‘proper’ behaviour of women and men, making women subordinate to men in practice.

Underlying power differentials remain and women are still not viewed as having the same rights as men. In the domestic sphere, the majority of the women in the research had been successful in gaining acceptance of their participation from their partners. Inequality and violence are no longer accepted by these women as the norm within their personal relationships. The women have also allowed the concepts of gender equality to inform how they parent their children and they have discussed these ideas with extended family members. These discussions are starting to challenge the current dominance of the gender norms which underpin women’s inequality. They may not completely change social norms but could become an enabling process for the next generation.

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.

• Design programmes that work with the existing legal, political, economic and social boundaries of power and influence – working with men and women, communities and households, social norms and legal frameworks.

• Create and support safe-spaces within which women can take the first steps towards empowerment, including leaving the home and building their self-confidence and public speaking abilities.

• Establish programmes and policies that allow women to move at their own pace through their individual empowerment journey.

• Support training and awareness raising programmes to build women’s confidence and empower them with the tools they need to resist disempowerment.

• Acknowledge and celebrate success when it occurs. This has the power to challenge negative social norms regarding women’s role in public life and to further women’s empowerment by strengthening their confidence and power within.

• Support collective action that focuses on advocacy & lobbying, mutual support and peer to peer learning.

• Consider what tangible supports might enable women to participate regularly, effectively and without negative consequence in community decision-making.

This report is supplemented by two additional country case study reports, one on Democratic Republic of Congo, and one on India. 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

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. 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. First, women’s voices were largely absent from the literature, and their perspectives and views not adequately captured; and second, 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. 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.

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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 voices and leadership in decision-making: Assessing the evidence,” March 2015, available at http://www.odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9857.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
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 Nicaragua. 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 processes, 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 Objectives of the research

The purpose of the research was to bring women’s voices and experiences to the fore 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 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

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 and 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 shift 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 for effective action upon the boundaries themselves. (Hayward, 1998, 21)

This analytical framework allows for an exploration of how far participation processes of women’s empowerment contributes to a decrease in exclusive male and state
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Section 1: Introduction to the research

With women’s husbands, community leaders, and local authorities on the issue of GBV.

AMDES

AMDES began working in 1999, when the town of Posotega was devastated by Hurricane Mitch. AMDES works in the areas of community organising, mental health, community development, gender, environment, citizen participation and advocacy. AMDES has two projects with Trócaire. The project within the Governance & Human Rights Programme aims to contribute to strengthened governance and participatory democracy from a gender perspective. To achieve this objective AMDES has implemented a variety of strategies including:

• Supporting women to become organised within the community by providing them with a space to organise and supporting them to address the barriers within the home that prevent them from participating. Through this strategy AMDES created an invited space called the ‘organised women’s group’.
• Training women in areas that will strengthen their ability to address community issues by strengthening their knowledge and confidence. Topics covered in the training included national laws relevant to citizen participation, human rights and women’s rights.

AMDES’ gender project has the same objective and strategies as the project implemented by APADEIM but instead of creating self-help groups, AMDES worked with the existing organised women’s groups. 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;
• The partner organisations utilised the findings to refine its methodologies and internalise the data ensuring that the research had practical applications for the programme.

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 adviser 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 was 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 and 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 they work with.

1.3.1 Sample selection

Sample selection began with the selection of the three case study countries. Within each case study country, partner organisations that were part of Trócaire’s ‘Governance and Human Rights’ or ‘Gender Equality’ programmes were chosen, and within these programmes, a sample of communities and women programme participants were selected for inclusion in the research.

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 each partner’s organisational culture and the potential of the setting within the research to push 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 partner has different overall goals and often uses different methodologies, there are nevertheless commonalities between them in practical programming.

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The Trócaire Gender Equality programme (2010-2016) aims to promote the right of poor Nicaraguan women to live free from gender based violence (GBV). It aims to achieve this through an ecological intervention model working with the women themselves, their partners, their families and community leaders. The strategies focus on capacity building at individual level; training and awareness raising for community leaders and religious leaders and teachers; training for public servants; and political lobbying aimed at decision-makers. A key indicator used within this programme, to demonstrate that women had developed the skills and autonomy to prevent and respond to situations of GBV, is the percentage of women participating in public decision making spaces.

Local organisations

Trócaire works in partnership with organisations indigenous to the countries and communities in which it works. In Nicaragua, two local organisations were 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. Two partner organisations were chosen from the shortlist because they were both working in the same region (in different communities) in the department of Chinandega and they provided a contrast between gender and governance programmes. The two partner organisations that were selected for the research were “Association for the Integral Development of Women (APADEIM)” and “Multidisciplinary Association for Development (AMDES)”. Both are part of the Gender Equality programme. AMDES also runs a project within the Governance and Human Rights programme.

Description of partners

APADEIM

APADEIM started work in 1996 with a number of literacy projects. APADEIM works on the issues of gender-based violence, HIV and disaster management. The project within Trócaire’s Gender Equality programme aims to address GBV by supporting people to relate to each other based on affection and equality. As part of the project, APADEIM formed self-help groups for women in the community where the women received training and support regarding gender equality and GBV using a variety of holistic techniques and spaces for reflection. The self-help group aimed to support women to know their rights and increase their self-esteem so they could take decisions about their lives, participate in other spaces in the community and also support other women experiencing violence. The project also worked
Participants

AMDES has established organised women’s groups within the communities they work in, comprising between 20 and 40 women in each group. The members of these groups in Los Mangiles and Tololar 2 were invited by AMDES to join the research. Between 10 and 12 women were then selected from the women’s group in each community.

APADEIM has established women’s self-help groups within the communities of La Bahiona and Campirano. As with AMDES, the members were invited to join the research, and 8 or 9 group members from each community joined the project.

In total 39 women participated in the first phase of the research (the research phases are described below), and they examined 12 spaces in which they participate at community level. (These spaces are described in section 2.1).

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

For each partner organisation, two geographical communities in which Trócaire Governance or Gender programmes are operational were selected for this research. Selection was based on a stratification exercise of the locations that AMDES and APADEIM work 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 schooling. AMDES selected the areas of Los Mangiles and Tololar 2, and APADEIM selected the communities of La Bahiona and Campirano.

These communities were selected in partnership with the staff of AMDES and APADEIM, and this process featured both strengths and weaknesses which affect the data. A key strength of working with communities selected by partner organisations was their 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.

Sample research group: the women of Campirano:

- 40: the average age of the women from the sample in Campirano; 50% of the sample were aged 30-40, 12% were under 30 and 38% older than 45.
- The majority of women did not receive remuneration for working outside of the home, although many would have supported themselves with agricultural work.
- 25% of the sample had their own income sources from small businesses mainly selling food.
- 38% of the women were married or with a partner, 38% were single and 12% were widows.
- All of the women were mothers and had an average of 4 children.
- 75% of the women had only received primary education.
- Their involvement in the programme varied from 5 years to 6 months.

The second phase of data collection focused on individual experiences of a smaller group of women. All the women in the research group were asked if they wanted to participate in this second phase, and the 28 women that indicated their interest became the research sample. During this phase, interviews were also conducted, where possible, with the husbands of women that had conducted voice diaries.

12 women took part in the voice diaries, of which 9 had partners or husband, and a total of 5 interviews with these men were conducted.

1.3.2 Data collection

Data collection was conducted over a 14 month period in two phases between September 2013 and November 2014, by the staff of AMDES and APADEIM with support and accompaniment provided by a local consultant.

The first phase reviewed four focus areas (spaces, barriers, performance, and successes) and was conducted with the selected groups of women using participatory tools. The data collection was preceded by a period of training on a suite of tools and the principles of participatory rural appraisal (PRA). AMDES and APADEIM then selected suitable tools to explore each focus area for their local context. These were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Area</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Description of the tool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaces</td>
<td>Community mapping</td>
<td>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. This tool was used to ascertain in which spaces - in the women's opinions - was it the most important for them to participate. They were asked to compare each space with one another and discuss which one was more important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>River of life</td>
<td>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 in the past, that they had overcome and the present barriers stopping them from achieving their aspirations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Time lines</td>
<td>Time lines were used to examine how women’s performance within the spaces had changed over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Trend lines</td>
<td>The different successes that the women had experienced as a result of their participation were mapped out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pushing the Boundaries: Nicaragua Report

Each of these research tools was used during the first phase of the research with all of the research groups. Partner organisations’ staff members explained the purpose of the activity, asked the women for their permission to take photographs, 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 process. Trainings of women were more or less improved trend line activity because it allowed them to identify their achievements.

1.3.3 Analysis

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. Two women from each of the research groups participated. For this phase, AMDES and APADEIM staff members were trained in the following tools:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Description of the tool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhotoVoice</td>
<td>The women were given cameras and asked to take a number of photographs on specific topics. The women were given a half-day participatory training where they learned how to use the cameras, practiced taking photos, discussed ethical issues such as asking for consent, and were informed about the aims of the PhotoVoice methodology. After a period with the camera and taking photographs, a reflection session was conducted where women shared their chosen photographs and discussed their meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice diaries</td>
<td>The women were trained on using voice recorders and gave a series of broad questions to inspire them to provide entries about their participation within the different spaces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Time lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Trend lines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The women involved in this stage reported feeling personally enriched as a result of using these methodologies, and despite concerns from staff members of the local organisations, they were able to understand and manipulate the technology easily.

1.4 Socio-Political Context Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, the beginning of a move towards a democratic regime began in 1979 with the armed overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship that ruled the country for over 40 years. Following the revolution, the country was ruled by the Sandinista party and massive changes towards creating a new society began with programmes to improve literacy, health care, education and childcare as well as a programme of land reform and investment in unions and cooperatives. However, shortly after the Somoza dictatorship was overthrown, a 10-year civil war began between the US backed Contras and the Sandinista government. As a result of the civil war and the economic crisis in the late 1980s, the country suffered large economic problems and near collapse. The process of democratisation began in earnest with the 1987 Constitution and the 1990 elections, which brought sweeping changes to the political system. The Sandinista party lost power in 1990 ushering in a move towards a capitalist economic system and a period of reform to political institutions. The Sandinista party regained power in 2007 which they solidified with a landslide election in 2011. The Party now purports to implement values of Socialism, Christianity and Solidarity building on a mixed economy that encourages public-private partnerships.

1.4.1 Political system

Despite the process of decentralisation, starting with the establishment of the municipalities as autonomous political entities in the 1987 Constitution, the process of decentralisation has been limited, slow, and intermittent with an official plan for decentralisation not being officially incorporated until 2006.

Nicaragua is divided into 15 departments and two autonomous regions with a total of 152 municipalities. Municipal councils are made up of elected representatives voted for by popular vote at regular elections. Despite the existence of municipalities administrative, fiscal and political decentralisation has not been clearly implemented through an overall legal framework. There is no singular body or vision to oversee the process in Nicaragua, leading to municipalities administrative, fiscal and political decentralisation remaining patchy and where there is little access to basic services (World Bank, 2014). Additionally, due to low representation of women in local government, in 1997 the Municipal Law intended to clarify the roles of the municipalities, devolving new administrative authority to the municipalities, and placing on the central government’s agenda (Ortega Hegg, Castillo Venerio , & Seligson, 2000). In 2004 a law was propagated to ensure fiscal decentralisation with an end goal of 10% of the national budget being transferred to municipalities by 2010. This was achieved and the 10% percentage has been maintained since then (Association of Nicaraguan Municipalities, 2014). Additionally, due to low representation of women in local government, in 2012 Law No. 786 introduced the principle of gender parity in the election of local authorities, where women should now make up 50% of all elected bodies.

Despite these new laws decentralisation remains patchy and, although the municipalities do manage the affairs of their areas, the overall process is still problematic with some civil society organisations arguing that the municipalities, in the eyes of the government, came to power in 2007 “decentralization has stagnated; it can even be said it has rolled back” (Saldamando, 2011). It is within this context that the commitment to Citizen Participation must be understood.

Nicaragua is often regarded as an economic success in the region, being able to withstand the 2008 global crisis with 4.6% yearly growth to gross domestic product over the last 5 years (World Bank, 2014). Despite this, Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the region after Haiti. The Nicaraguan government estimates poverty levels at 45% of the population, with those living on less than $1 a day increasing from 7.6% to 9.5% from 2012 to 2013 (Agence France Presse, 2014). Poverty is concentrated in rural and often remote areas, where more than 80% of the poor live, and where there is little access to basic services (World Bank, 2014).
1.4.3 Women’s rights

Economics

There is not a vast gender gap between men and women’s informal employment; for example, there is only a 2% difference between the percentage of female workers (67%) and male workers (65%) in informal employment outside of the agricultural sector (World Economic Forum, 2013). However, the unequal power relations between men and women means that women are more vulnerable to poverty. The wage disparity between men and women is high, with one study finding that men’s income was more than twice that of women (Merino, 2012). Poverty is more likely to affect rural communities and the poorest and most vulnerable households are overwhelmingly those headed by women. There are many reasons for this situation but one of the most important causes is unequal ownership and access to resources, both property and income. Despite the legal provision giving equal rights to men and women regarding property ownership, women are much less likely to own assets. According to one study, only 15% of women hold the title to land under their own names, and only 11% of the loans given to support property ownership are received by women (Rural Poverty Portal, 2015). Within the department of Chinandega only 34% of homeowners were women (INIDE, 2005).

Education

Education enrolment in Nicaragua is not a particularly gendered issue. Concern relates instead with overall access, illustrated by the difference between primary and secondary enrolment rate and the urban and rural divide. In 1971 the net enrolment in secondary school was 11.68% for females and 11.96% for males (Index Mundi, 2011). The overall enrolment rate has steadily risen since then but the difference between male and female enrolment rates remains marginal.

In 2014 the net enrolment rate for females in secondary school was 48.9% versus 42.7% for males. Education enrolment in primary schools is significantly higher with a net rate of 94.5% for females and 93.2% for males in 2014. However, in rural versus urban communities, the differences in access are stark, with net enrolment in secondary school urban areas at 57.9% and only 19.1% in rural (UNICEF, 2013).

Health

Access to healthcare facilities is limited within rural areas. This is most evident when maternal mortality rates are considered. 55% of women in rural areas give birth at home (Foundation for Sustainable Development) and Nicaragua has a relatively high maternal mortality rate, although it has been falling in recent years from 90 in 2006 to 64.7 in 2010 (MINSA, 2010). Maternal mortality is highest in poor areas with over 90% occurring in communities with high indicators of extreme poverty. There is a much higher incidence of maternal mortality (2 out of 4 deaths) in rural areas (UNICEF, 2011).

GBV is highly prevalent in Nicaragua; government statistics released in 2007 indicated that 47.8% of women who have been married or in a common-law relationship have been subject to verbal or psychological violence at one point in their life, 27% to physical violence and 13% to sexual violence (National Institute of Development Information). Femicide is an increasingly worrying issue within Nicaragua with one woman dying every four days in 2014 (White, 2014).

Laws

Although Article 31 of the Constitution guarantees women freedom of movement, and Article 27 guarantees the equality of all citizens before the law, and although women have had the right to own property since 1904, some discrimination still exists within legislation. Up until April 2015, when the new Family Code came into force after two decades of debate, the law stated that a married woman must live in the residence of her husband’s choosing. The Family Code also introduced 18 as the legal age for marriage as until then the legal age for marriage for girls was 14, therefore allowing child marriage as defined by the United Nations.

A law regarding GBV was passed in 2012, designed to protect women against any form of violence, including domestic, professional, psychological, physical, and economic, sanctioning more harshly aggression in the private sphere or the household with sentences of up to 14 years. However, regulations introduced in 2014 have qualified the law reducing femicide to only include interpersonal relationships. This qualification and the rationale behind it was criticised by many before and after its introduction and has even been called unconstitutional by some (Schechter, 2013).

Law 779 violence against women No 641 of the Penal Code.

Section 1: Introduction to the research

Children attending the primary school in Tololar 2. This photo was taken as part of the Photovoice aspect of the research to show the women’s involvement in a World Vision project supporting women to save for their children’s education.
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 Nicaraguan 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

While it is important to remember that spaces are fluid, they may start off as one type and be transformed into another, the research found many different spaces for participation within the communities, the majority of which were organic. Using Cornwall’s typology these spaces can be divided into closed, invited and organic spaces. The most common type of space is the invited space. This is unsurprising given the public discourse about citizen participation in Nicaragua. Each community selected 3-4 spaces through an initial mapping and then ranked them based on how important they were for the women to participate in. The following are the spaces that these communities mapped.

2.1.1. Invited spaces

The different invited spaces, that women selected to study in the research, can be divided into two different types: a) those created by the NGOs b) those created by the government.

NGO spaces

The women identified a number of different spaces initiated by NGOs during the research, addressing a variety of issues such as child malnutrition, agro-ecology, tourism and GBV. However, the women only selected the space created by the partners conducting the research, to explore in detail. Due to the interviewer effect there may have been an inherent bias in their selection. However, this does not reduce the insights about these spaces.

APADEIM’s Self-help groups:

These spaces were created by APADEIM in the communities in 2009. It is a woman only space and comprises of 7-10 women in each community. The women were not individually selected to participate; rather they were invited to meetings and those that were interested, joined. The primary aim of the space is to support female survivors of GBV and prevent violence within the community. The programme sees female leadership as an important component of achieving this goal. Therefore, APADEIM has implemented strategies to provide women in the self-help group with the skills to be leaders in government created community spaces, and engage with other self-help groups on issues of violence. They do this through a network and the male self-help groups made up of their husbands or partners.

AMDES’ Organised women’s groups:

The organised women’s groups were established by AMDES in 2010. This is a women-only space with 30-40 participants in each community. It was established to help women to have greater say in decisions affecting their lives. The partner organisations aim to achieve this by facilitating women’s participation within the space. They do this by supporting the women to be able to collectively advocate within government created community and municipal spaces on community management issues, and to be able to undertake leadership positions within the community.

The two spaces created by Trócaire’s partners have the shared goal of working to support women’s individual
empowerment in order to alter the power dynamics between men and women. These spaces also provide women with a voice in community management through participation within government created spaces at the community and municipality level.

**Government spaces for citizen participation**

As a consequence of the Citizen Participation law in Nicaragua, there are spaces at the community and municipal level which provide citizens with the opportunity to influence and control decisions which affect their lives. The three spaces that the research focused on were i) the municipal assembly, ii) the council of family iii) the water committee.

I. The municipal assembly is run by the municipal government. It is regulated through the Municipal Law no. 40 and the Citizen Participation law no. 475. It is mandated to take place twice per year and is open to all citizens of the municipality. The purpose of this space is to provide citizens with the space to influence municipal plans and budgets to reflect the needs of their communities.

II. The Council of Family, Health and Life created in 2012 is the newest space to be created by the government. It was officially incorporated into legislation in the 2014 Family Code, and therefore, for the duration of research data collection, there was no legislation related to this space. The new legislation dictates that the objectives of the Councils are to: promote self-esteem, a community identity and good communication amongst community members; improve the life of the community and apply the values of Christianity, solidarity and socialism. The rules and procedures are not, however, defined within this legislation. When established, the Council of Family was given a large remit around community issues including: health, education, promoting the rights of women and youth, domestic violence, and realising projects for a healthier, cleaner and more habitable community. The Council of Family is also used to manage the distribution of government scheme benefits. The space has been criticised for its partisan nature (Pantoja, 2013). It is run by an official committee of 5 volunteers selected from community members by the community.

III. The water committee (CAPS) is the community space in charge of the water management for the community. The committees are run by an executive committee of volunteers from the community, selected by the community. The Council of Family is also run by an official committee of 6 volunteers selected from community members by the community.

### 2.1.2 Organic spaces

A small number of organic spaces were identified by the women in the initial mapping exercise. These were school committees, cooperatives and health committees. However, only one community, La Bahiona, chose an organic space to explore in the research: the fishing cooperative. The fishing cooperative has predominantly female members and was initiated to bring fishermen/women together for their mutual social and economic benefit.

### 2.1.3 Closed spaces

The women did not mention any closed spaces that exist within the community. The closest level of government is the municipal council and mechanisms for citizens to participate within their decisions exist through the municipal assemblies. However, the municipal assembly was not mentioned in two of the communities; in Posotega, the municipality for Los Mangos and Tolar 2, the Municipal Assemblies did not take place in 2013 and given the remoteness of the communities, the municipal government may in reality appear closed for many women.

### 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 of the women participants reported some type of empowerment as a result of their participation.

The empowerment journey is not linear, and 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 enables to women’s participation and how this affects their journeys.

The paragraphs 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

**In the home**

The first step for all women within the research group in Nicaragua was to leave the home. The women repeatedly reported that before they participated in these community groups, their interactions in decision making were limited to the domestic sphere. They were engaged primarily in domestic work, and while some worked outside the home, they were not part of the public realm in the community when it comes to decision-making. They reported having low self-esteem, often experiencing violence, and having very little control over the decisions that affected their lives.

I didn’t participate, apart from my housework, I didn’t go out, I didn’t have a relationship with anyone, I didn’t have friendships because I didn’t go out.

Participant, Campirano, voice diary entry

All of the women reported a general acceptance in the communities that men have the right to control women’s movements. Women had to seek permission from their husbands before attending a community meeting of any kind. Additionally it was socially taboo for women to be involved in decision making spaces, which were considered the sole remit of men.

The women had to actively decide to change this situation and choose to participate. This is a step that only they can take for themselves and they must have sufficient ‘power within’ and ‘power to’ to be able to make this move.

Personally, one has to take the decision to go to a meeting, to open the mind to something and be able to participate.

Participant, La Bahiona, Success exercise

The decision to do so was generally prompted through a request to join an invited space by an NGO. Most of the women in Nicaragua started their journeys after the invitation to join a Trócaire project. Taking the decision is only the first step for women to successfully leave the house as they must negotiate this with their partners.

My husband never became aware because, at least with me, at first, he would say ‘you just want to be involved in that meeting, as you are lazy,’ and do you know what I did? I was clever. I took the brochures and I said to him ‘look, this is what I’m doing, look, we are learning’ and then he read them and he liked them.

Participant

This step is not a fixed point in time; rather, it is an on-going negotiation, supported by the power gained in the other steps. It may be very fraught and continue throughout their journeys.

#### Entering the first invited space

The women generally gained confidence and skills by participating in informal safe spaces, often in isolated, often not always, invited spaces established by NGOs that are women only. These spaces play a vital role in supporting the women to help overcome barriers that prevent them from entering more formal public spaces, including male control over mobility and low-self-esteem due to feelings of inferiority.

This is a crucial step in their empowerment journey as the women are challenging gender norms by entering the public realm.

At first the women all reported feeling very nervous and shy, often attending meetings without actively participating at them. Through gaining knowledge, experience and having a safe place to reflect on their lives the women slowly gained the confidence to express themselves.

#### Entering other spaces

Once women have experience of participating, it generally leads to more participation. Through their initial experience of participation, the women gained confidence in their abilities to comfortably participate in other spaces. Approximately 80% of the women involved in the research moved from participating within the initial safe space only, to participating in other spaces, often more formal spaces created by the government. Approximately 35% of the women have taken on leadership posts within different organisations.
and through this leadership have gained greater confidence and experience of negotiating and debating their ideas with others. Other women hold positions within these groups but do not emerge as the group leader. However, while one or two women in each community lead actions within the spaces, these women are the exception and have a greater sense of ‘power within’ and a belief that they have the ‘power to’ take action.

Power is a right that I have. Power is to decide, the power to decide, the power to lobby, the power to participate. It has a lot to do with participation, I think, because if I do not have the power, that is if I’m not empowered regarding my thoughts, what I want, if I’m undecided I have no power or a sense of myself. Participant, Tololar 2, Voice diary entry

This minority cohort is much more likely to have had experience in other invited or organic spaces before becoming involved in the Trócaire project and thus had a grounding in experience, knowledge and skills needed to enable them to enter new spaces with the expectation of being included and heard.

Lobbying authorities on basic needs
Some of the women then progressed from participating within community lobbying to lobbying the local government for improved access to services for their community. Within two of the communities, Los Mangles and Tololar 2, this lobbying generally took place within the cabildo (the municipal assembly), the official government space to which citizens are invited and can, in theory, influence community plans. In addition, in all of the communities the women also directly targeted key local authorities who have the power to make decisions.

All of the women that participated in the lobbying reported that the process strengthened their confidence and allowed them to express themselves in front of officials or large groups which in turn led them to believe in their ability to achieve change in their lives.

I don’t see things as impossible, I believe that everything is possible or at the least worth trying to achieve. I believe that everything that one proposed can be achieved. Participant, Tololar 2, Voice diary entry

The issues that women have lobbied for most publicly included access to services such as water, electricity and roads, and in each community the women have had some successes with their advocacy and decision makers have responded positively to their requests. These successes have reinforced the women’s positive experience, knowledge and confidence in their power to influence decisions that directly affect their lives.

Mobilising other women
Mobilising other women was the final stage in the empowerment journey for the women within Nicaragua. The women become aware that greater numbers led to greater impact, and in response they sought to mobilise other women within the community to start their own journeys of empowerment.

If there is a meeting what we have to do is form an alliance of women. I as a woman have my daughter, I have my female neighbour… I invite them and take 3 women with me. Others bring other women… and this creates the alliance that we have in the community meetings. Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry

Few women have managed to reach this step. Only a few, who are leaders within various spaces, have mobilised women beyond those involved in the community groups.

2.2.2 Case Studies

The overall steps provide an illustrative model of empowerment, but each woman’s experience is unique and 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 space; how some become empowered enough to take on leadership or advocacy roles; and what enables or hinders movement from one space and level to another.

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**Case study 1**

**Mariela**

Mariela has lived in Los Mangles all of her life. She is 38, married to the leader of the community, and has three sons who are all in secondary school. She has a small business and has been involved in the organised women’s group created by AMDES for the last 5 years.

In the Home

Mariela’s journey, like that of all participants in this research, began when she decided to enter the public space of the community.

If I wanted to go out I had to get permission first because I was a ‘slave to dominance.’ He had to decide. If he told me that I could go out, I went, if he didn’t I didn’t go out.

Entering the invited space

Mariela first started regularly participating when she joined the committee of rural women eight years ago, a group supported by a local NGO. At first she attended meetings, but did not engage in actual participation in discussions, debates or decisions. It is through her continual internal journey of empowerment that her understanding of participation increased, she became more confident and she recognises that “to simply attend does not mean to participate.” Changes in her self-esteem were essential for the move from simply attending to actually participating.

With low self-esteem one doesn’t have the security to say things; you think that everything you say, everything that you are going to say is unnecessary and invalid. This was the emotional change for me. With great self-esteem I now have the confidence and the security to say things without fear, to say things firmly. The other issue was shyness. I also was afraid to speak in front of other people; I thought that others were superior to me. I would say to myself: ‘you speak poorly so they will laugh at you’; all these things that I thought were only in my head because in reality I now understand that all of the world, all of the people in the world are equal and no one is superior to anyone else.

It was only after a few years of participating with the committee of rural women that Mariela felt confident in her abilities to express herself.

I knew that I could participate but I wasn’t open to this, now I have participated actively for 5 or 6 years, expressing what I think, what I believe and what I see.

Entering other spaces

Mariela joined the organised women’s group, established by AMDES in 2010, and was selected by the women’s group to be their leader. Being a leader has built upon Mariela’s confidence and belief in her own abilities.

It is in the organised women’s group that I have become a lot stronger because I am the coordinator of the group. The strength that I have comes from being a leader of this group, I try and get in touch with all the persons in the group, not just the women but the men too. So we are all in agreement, I never impose but I make proposals, this is not an imposition but I try to agree and get along with men and women. I don’t impose rules, I don’t go imposing anything and I am always there for them for whatever they need.

Through her leadership role, Mariela has engaged in multiple spaces within the community. She has the confidence to express herself and feels recognised as a leader in the community, despite on-going criticism from other community members.

I see myself as a recognized person because in front of the organizations or the Municipal Government I am recognized for my work, for my advocacy. It’s not for laziness as some think but because they see the leadership I have achieved. I see myself as a community leader even if I haven’t been appointed by the community as here they recognize the community leader as someone who is appointed, but despite the fact that I have not been appointed I am leading the community.

Mariela’s recognition has resulted in calls from community members for her to lead on issues. However, her heavy workload at times prevents her from engaging in the many different community spaces. Recognising this, Mariela

5 Name changed to protect the security and privacy of the participant.
declined to accept a position on the Council of Family.

I didn’t stay in that structure because I didn’t want to accept a post, I have a lot of responsibility and I feel that in reality now I don’t live in the house; they call me continuously to meetings either here in the community or outside and I don’t have the time.

Lobbying the government on basic needs

As a leader of the organised women’s group, Mariela has lobbied the local government in many different forums, enabled by her positive changes in self-esteem and self-confidence. This confidence has allowed her to voice the demands of her community in front of local authorities.

I have been empowered, I won’t name specifically a theme or a specific training or discussion because there are many and they all helped, but the experience that I loved was when I spoke (for the first time in the municipal assembly. I liked knowing that I could do it because it is not the same to speak with one person or a small group than to speak in front of a crowd no less with a microphone, which made me more nervous.

Mariela’s initial motivation to begin her empowerment journey was the broken water system in her community. At the time, women walked 8 kilometres to get water every day, adding a significant strain to their already busy lives. Mariela, together with three other women on the executive committee of the organised women’s group, led the village members to lobby the municipal government to fix the water system. The act of lobbying was itself empowering, as it challenged the belief that only men could participate.

Before, I never thought I would be involved in advocacy or be able to knock on the doors of any and every organisation. This was one of the experiences that I also loved because when we have gone to lobby they have listened to us. Before you only saw men participating, they were the only ones involved in this kind of thing.

Even though the water problem was a community issue that would have wide benefits, her involvement was viewed negatively by many in the community.

The behaviour of my neighbours and others in the community to our advocacy that we left the community to conduct was negative because they only saw I was leaving, going here, there, and everywhere constantly. Their behaviour was negative and they were gossiping with others. There were times when we would leave for up to three days straight. They would say to us “come back tomorrow” but we had to keep going because we had to demonstrate the need we were trying to express in her ‘power’ to take action and she no longer regarded things as impossible.

Another one of the things that changed in me was the pessimism; I saw that nothing is impossible. If you do things with a positive mentality and belief in yourself, it is not impossible to achieve the things you want. Another one of the things that changed was my perseverance. I used to say ‘if they don’t give me a response, then I won’t go any further’ but now it’s not like that; if they don’t give me a response in one place then I go to another place and if they don’t give me a response there then I will not stop, I will look for another way.

Now, Mariela is happy to place the demands of the community in front of different authorities in any space.

Mobilising others to participate

Mariela has worked hard to ensure that the organised women’s group is united in its views, and that the views of the executive committee only, do not dominate efforts to lobby the municipal government. All the lobbying has been done collectively and often involving other women’s groups.

I haven’t done it alone, I have always been accompanied by people from the community that I live in and also other communities, when we are advocating on joint issues of the municipalities, women of the municipalities of different communities.

Mariela believes that the successes have only come from the collective power that the women have as a group, and the role that group solidarity has played within her own journey.

It is because we were a united group that we managed to obtain what we had proposed. An organised group has more force than the efforts of one person.

Mariela aspires to have more women engage with the organised women’s group and actively participate in community meetings. However, she cites mobilising others as the biggest challenge that the group and the community face. Within the group she feels that:

Not all women are this way, but I would like it if everyone was equal, if we were all going in the same path in relation to advocacy, to be actively participating.

Those that criticized her actions did not recognise Mariela’s attempts to secure water for the community. Instead, they simply focused on the perception that she was breaking cultural norms regarding a women’s role in the community. Although she found these criticisms hurtful, Mariela was determined not only to continue on her path, but she felt that in reality she was able to take action and she no longer regarded things as impossible.

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Hilda

Hilda is 21 years old. She lives in the community of La Bahiona with her 6-year old daughter and partner. Hilda is involved in each of the three spaces in La Bahiona that were part of this research project: she is a member of the self-help group set up by APADEIM; she is on the executive committee of the Council of Family and holds the health portfolio; and she holds the post of secretary in the cooperative of fishermen and women.

Entering the first invited space

Hilda was 15 when she first participated in community spaces. At 18, Hilda had her daughter and became involved in a programme run by Plan Nicaragua (an NGO) for young mothers. She was involved in training through this programme but describes her initial participation as limited.

I hardly participated because I was scared to speak. I thought I would have to answer a question and I was worried because I thought I would not answer it correctly.

Hilda’s interest in participating was sparked by her experiences within this space, but she lacked the confidence to express herself. In addition, she had had to constantly negotiate with her husband to allow her to participate.

Before he didn’t like me going out, now this is not the case. I say to him, when they invite us, ‘look there is a meeting in this place and I want to go’, he only says to me look for somewhere to leave our daughter, this is all he says to me.

Entering other spaces

Hilda was the first woman to join the self-help group set up by APADEIM.

When APADEIM arrived none of the women wanted to join and I was the first one who said to them, I don’t know what motivated me, “ladies lets enrol”. Madam Karla and I went first and enrolled, afterwards the others went.

For Hilda, the process of gaining confidence to participate in spaces beyond the safe space of the self-help group was slow.

I was very timid, I had a very low level of self-esteem. I was embarrassed and this is why I had barely participated before. However, now I have changed little by little. Since 3 years after I started to come to the APADEIM project, I started to leave the community to go to trainings, workshops of 2 days and now I participate a lot in the community, in organisations and the cooperative.

Hilda feels that her involvement in APADEIM has enabled her participation within other community spaces because of the knowledge that she has gained and this has strengthened her power.

I feel stronger because now I know our rights as women or citizens; I know new things that motivate me: joy, change, communication and equality. I know where to go in case of violence; I know the law that protects women victims of violence is the violence against women law, 779. It is a triumph for me that APADEIM has come to my community; we were as isolated in the darkness, and didn’t see the daylight.

Since her initial participation Hilda has become very active in the community. She is now an executive member of the disaster preparedness committee, the cooperative, and the Council of Family. She has also become the community representative for the NGO Plan Nicaragua. Although Hilda enjoys participating she also feels the burden of these responsibilities.

I always say it is good (to participate) but I don’t know if the community will want me to continue participating always. Even though I always say ‘I am going to resign’ the people don’t accept it, maybe they see the level of my participation, I participate a lot and maybe no one else will do it.

Despite her active participation within the community, Hilda reports three main barriers that still impede her participation: the lack of childcare, criticism from community members and resistance from her husband. Hilda must find childcare when she participates in meetings and this is an on-going barrier to her participation.

I go and find someone who can look after her. Sometimes, when I can, I take her with me but it is boring and she doesn’t like it; she rarely comes with me. This is something that sometimes makes me tired of attending meetings.

Hilda also has to overcome resistance to her participation from her family and members of the wider community, many of whom continually criticise her for her participation. In each of the three spaces the research focused on, she reported criticism from the community as the biggest problem she has encountered.

The thing I don’t like is when we go to meetings and people discriminate against you. They say that I am involved in doing bad things, that we are lazy and we don’t have anything to do. This is what I haven’t liked and this always happens even when I have participated in other spaces; people are always the same.

The critiques came from the women as well as the men, but not from the women involved in APADEIM’s self-help group. Hilda’s husband has also become increasingly unhappy with her participation as she takes on more responsibility. He is increasingly exercising violence in the form of emotional
and financial control to stop her from participating.

When I returned to the house and I told him they had elected me, he asked why I had not involved and said if I was going to go to meetings he wasn’t going to give me the money to go. I didn’t say anything to him I decided I would just see what I could achieve.

This has negatively affected their relationship and he has become increasingly controlling. Hilda admits to giving consideration to removing herself from her community engagement, but she does not want to abandon all the work that she fought for through her participation.

Sometimes I have a desire to leave and go far away, but then I start to think about the pig project and I have to pay, and if I leave it will look bad on me. I think about a lot of things, like the cooperative, I would lose all of it, all they are giving me money to go. I didn’t say anything to him I decided I would use what I could achieve.

Mobilising others to participate

Hilda wants all of the women in the community to be united through their participation within APADEIM. When APADEIM and the women of the self-help group invite others to participate, events about preventing violence in the community, she invites people to join.

When we have educational fairs in the community, we invite lots of women and men and they come. She even uses her experiences of resistance from family members to support others experiencing violence.

Whenever I leave to go to a meeting, I have a brother who is 17 and he says ‘you are ruined, you do not want to live in the house.’ I start to say ‘you do not have to be this way, because someday will get married, you’ll have your wife and you do not have to be this way,’ ‘yes but only lazy women go out, those who no longer want to live in the house.’ Then I talk to him and tell him, and then, after, he doesn’t say anything anymore. I have motivated some of the women who participate. They tell me what’s going on at home and advise them and say ‘this is good, this is bad’ and so I help them and others help me and so we are all like family.

However, there are tensions within the community because of opposition to the cooperative from the community leader, which has led to conflict between women in the cooperative and the self-help group. This, in turn, has affected her ability to mobilise others.

There are other women participating besides me and between the same community there is conflict, because there are women including some in the cooperative that have been influenced by him, and when I come, he begins to fight with me.

Hilda’s home situation impacts on her ability to participate in advocacy. Her lack of financial independence prevents her from being able to attend meetings outside the community.

He is working and I am here, I have no money, I have to rely on him to give me money to go to meetings and he won’t give me money for this. When I don’t have it I can’t go.

In the home

Before Ivania became involved with APADEIM her life was limited to the household.

Well, for example, before I did not care because I was not involved in any organization. I spent all me time in my house, only on my chores, every day was the same for me.

Ivania had to overcome her husband’s resistance to her participation in order to leave the house and be fully integrated into APADEIM.

He does not stop me when I am invited to a meeting with APADEIM. I just go. Maybe he will tell me ‘no, do not go’ or some such thing and I say ‘I am going’.

Entering the first invited space

Ivania began participating in community affairs when she was 39 years old, through the self-help group organised by APADEIM.

I was invited to a meeting organised by APADEIM by a lady who has since died. She invited me to come and listen. It was nice. You learned to know the value of women, our rights. It was in the home of the [this lady], the first time I went I loved it. I was drawn to the workshop they were giving us on the rights to women.

At first Ivania was nervous and felt unable to express herself within the space.

Speaking and participating in the spaces, this is the first achievement that made me feel good. I did it because of my participation in the meetings of APADEIM. Before I was involved in APADEIM, I was a woman who was afraid to talk because I thought I was going to say things that would hurt me. I was afraid. I was afraid to speak.

Through participating within this safe space, Ivania has seen many changes in her power that has enabled her to take more control over her life.

The second change is that I feel that I am someone important because I had very low self-esteem. Today, because I have participated in meetings, I feel like a human being, a woman, someone important.

One of the most important changes that has happened as a result of her participation has been the change within her relationship with her family. Ivania feels that the changes with her husband have come from changes she has made but also through his involvement in the programme.

My third change: I am able to participate, to communicate with my children. That has helped me a lot. They have confidence in me and I with them. That is something good to be confident with your children.

The fourth is also the power to lobby because that was when I saw the change in me. Going to these meetings has made me change a lot, a lot. And so I thank APADEIM for this program because it helped me a lot. The fifth change that has made me feel good is to have confidence with my partner to communicate as a couple. The power that I have gained to feel like a woman that has power and be able to make my own decisions. As he is also involved in the network of men set up by APADEIM there is also a change in his life ... I was a woman who was abused by my partner, but I thank God that today the two of us joined the program. I kept going and came to him saying ‘look, this is nice’ and he taught you there how to share as a couple, to communicate and to try to get along so at home there are no problems; but of course there are always issues but there isn’t aggression or mistreatment physically or verbally.

Her relationship with her extended family and her community have improved because of changes in her personal empowerment.

My family feels good because before I could not express myself, to tell them about the rights of women. Today I talk my own mind. My second brother, my younger brother, my sisters, my daughter, my female friends, my neighbours, all my family feels good because I have participated in meetings, I feel like a human being.

As a result of being involved in APADEIM’s programme, meetings and everything, people saw the change in me, people put trust in me and that was when I was elected for the water issue. In this space I worked as the coordinator. I feel very good that people have had confidence in me, people always look for support from me on any issue they look for me.

Case study 3

Ivania

Ivania is 45 years old and has two sons and one daughter.

She lives in Campirano with her partner and is a committed member of the evangelical church in the community. She has been involved with APADEIM for 5 years and currently holds positions on the water committee and the Council of Family. Ivania is the key motivator of the other women in APADEIM’s self-help group and led the community in addressing the limitations associated with the water committees.

In the home

Before Ivania became involved with APADEIM her life was limited to the household.

...
Lobbying for support

Ivania mobilised support from the community and in particular from the women involved with APADEIM in the self-help group. Through her participation, Ivania feels that she has become a role model for other women and feels strengthened by the support that she has received from the community.

I have learnt by going to APADEIM meetings and being involved in the self-help group, all of that has helped me to be an example to other women and I am also grateful to my community that has supported me and believed in change that has happened in me.

Ivania has used her influence gained by virtue of her role with the Council of Family to involve more women in projects that are initiated, including in a new government scheme providing pigs and chickens that has been introduced in the community.

The most positive experience that I have had through participation was in the water committee. There is just one key and the water comes out, that is one of the most positive achievements that I have personally. It was an ordeal but finally it was positive, and it was something that I proposed. I said ‘I will win this fight and I will not stop fighting until this is done.’ There was a change in my life because that fear I felt I could dispel, get rid of. From there I began to see a change in me; it is something that sometimes one does not expect it, but thank God I have learned enough that women have power and we can do lobbying just like men. We can lobby for whatever we need in our community.

Although Ivania feels strengthened by being a leader, she also found the responsibility a burden and has considered resigning as a result.

People have confidence in me because I have participated in all the spaces, people have elected me and if you chose me it is because you have confidence in me, and I also appreciated that, I value my people. I think that I already did the most I could and as I am also involved in other positions, I wanted to retire (from the water committee) but seeing that people didn’t want me to go, I said ‘okay, I’ll continue.’

Mobilising others to participate

Ivania remained on the committee but not as a coordinator. A man was elected to this role and she became the second in command. The water committee is hierarchical and, because she is no longer the coordinator, she struggles to influence decisions. Ivania suggested that the committee lower the cost of water for some families, but could not convince the coordinator to agree to this proposal or to obtain the support from other women.

The truth is that I am like this and I don’t like injustices. For this reason I have differences with the other fellows, because I don’t agree with what they say, because if I see they are acting wrongly I cannot support their opinions.

Ivania has used her experience to influence decisions. She was able to convince the coordinator to agree to the proposal to lower the cost of water for some families. She also involved other women in the advocacy effort.

The three case studies provide examples of different women’s experiences and how these different experiences alter women’s journeys.

Mariela has participated in decision making structures prior to her engagement with the projects initiated with Trócaire support, and had already gained the confidence to be a leader when AMDES initiated the organised women’s group. A number of women like Mariela built on their previous experience to become strong leaders. Other women, like Ivania, had no previous participation experience, but through their participation within the women-only spaces supported by Trócaire’s partners, they have been able to increase their ‘power within’ and belief in themselves to enable them to strengthen their leadership and take on new leadership posts. 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, and some have done both. Many of these women have also personally taken action to renegotiate their position within their families. Within these stories there are differences as women are limited by various barriers in their lives.

The women whose experiences are represented by Hilda have been able to gain confidence and self-esteem to move into different community spaces, but have not yet become leaders who initiate advocacy efforts. They may be limited, as Hilda was, by their husbands or other barriers such as childcare responsibilities. These women have developed a critical awareness of their rights as women but many remain powerless to implement changes within their homes.

That makes me feel important as a person. I have value as a woman.

There were some criticisms from people about her participation but she had the confidence within her leadership and so she was able to ignore them.

I do not know if it is because they are envious, but there have been some people that have actually made me feel bad. Thanks to God who gives me the strength to face it and not take any notice. I mean, if I feel good then maybe what she says against me is not true. I keep going. I have not taken it to heart, but there have been things that have bothered me, but in my position I’ll keep going. I won’t let this beat me, I’m not going to collapse, I’ll move on.

Lobbying the government

When the water system broke down, Ivania, as a member of the council of family, was elected to lead the advocacy to have it repaired. She approached the Mayor and the company that owns the land that Campirano is built on, to advocate for support to have the water system fixed. This experience was an important achievement for Ivania in her journey, as it triggered her belief in her ‘power to’ take action.

2.2.3 Summary of the cases

The three case studies provide examples of different women’s experiences and how these different experiences alter women’s journeys.
3. Research Findings: Barriers & enabling factors

This section analyses the barriers the women face along the empowerment 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 gender norms are so rigidly entrenched that they are accepted and internalised by men and women requiring vast shifts in power for transformation of these to occur.

3.1 Barriers

3.1.1 Male violence and control over women’s mobility

In Nicaragua, the most widely cited barrier and apparent form of violence was male control over women’s mobility. This control stems from the accepted notion that a woman is a man’s possession, that he holds the power within the relationship, and that he has authority to allow/disallow her to have agency of any kind. All of the women reported a general acceptance in the communities that men have the right to control women’s mobility. At every single stage of the empowerment journey the women must counter this control.

More than anything the issue of permission, because we are accustomed to go where he says, if he tells me yes then I go, that is what we are accustomed to. Participant, Tololar 2, Voice diary entry.

To leave the house and start the empowerment journey, the women must seek permission from their partners and risk potential conflict and violence as a result. Obtaining permission to enter one space does not imply that their husbands will allow them to start participating in new spaces. Even very active women can have their participation limited by their husband’s control, and those that lack control over economic resources, which are needed to participate, are particularly vulnerable.

3.1.2 Taboo of women in decision making spaces

Because of the prevailing patriarchal systems in each of the communities reviewed, women are not traditionally part of public decision making. Prior to their leaving the house and participating in the community, men made decisions and women were not even invited to attend meetings and it was not considered women’s role to be involved in such discussions.

Even though all of the women in the research had taken the decision to be involved in at least the invited spaces, they faced constant criticism for doing so. At every stage of the journey the legitimacy of their participation was undermined. The women had their motives questioned with many reporting that they were accused of using their participation as a cover for their promiscuity.

Some people still have not left behind the machismo, they haven’t eradicated this machismo, and many women are still not participating. My neighbours and the community say that what the women who participate, including me, want is to betray our husbands.

Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry.

They were also repeatedly referred to as ‘vagas’, a term used in all four of the communities which directly translated as ‘lazy’, but is used to criticise a woman for being out of the house, and therefore not fulfilling her domestic duties. This term is used by both men and women.

I (the organised women) don’t all get on with everyone in the community, including other women, especially those that are ruled by men. As the men say about us ‘this woman is lazy, she has nothing to do, going here and there’ so the woman also says ‘she is like this; because she lacks the knowledge to know any better.

Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry.

Their participation is delegitimized by being recast as a cover for character flaws. This becomes even more problematic when women become involved in lobbying the local authorities as they must physically leave the community to do so. Within the spaces themselves, this resistance inhibits women’s ability to insert influence over decisions when there are more men than women in the space as demonstrated in the Council of Family in La Bahiona, and the water committee in Campirano.

3.1.3 Unequal division of labour

Women are widely considered to have sole responsibility for all domestic duties within the household. The internalisation of gender norms means that women are seen as care givers and therefore duty-bound to undertake all domestic tasks. When they begin to challenge the existing norms by participating in public spaces, they continue to shoulder the burden of care within the home. The result is a triple burden of reproductive, productive and community activity.
3.2 Enabling factors

Given that ‘power over’ exercises such strong oppression, it is necessary to explore the factors that have supported women’s participation and strengthened their empowerment. For each woman, the specific enablers are different depending on their personal circumstances, but in general, the following are important factors in supporting women in their journeys.

3.2.1 Training on women’s rights

In all communities, participants cited the benefits of gaining knowledge about civil and political rights and protection of women’s human rights through their participation as one of the most important enablers. The women did not name specific rights that had supported their empowerment journeys, but referred much more generally to knowing their rights as women.

Training was frequent in Nicaragua as the partners accompanied the women in meetings every two weeks. In the gender programme, the women received support from psychologists, social workers and lawyers, which dramatically increased their interaction with the partner organisations. The training in the gender programme was more broadly focused on the protection of women’s human rights as a universal concept, explored against a background of violence and oppression. In the governance programme, specific national legislations regarding civil and political rights were addressed, including issues such as violence and relations within the home.

The knowledge the women gained through this training has given them a feeling of self-worth, knowing that as women they have rights, changes their perception of themselves and gives them strength to take action because they feel entitled to do so.

Living free from violence was an issue that resonated with many of the women in the programme and the only law that was repeatedly cited by all of the communities was the violence against women law passed in 2012. The women in Nicaragua reported positive changes in their familial relationships as a result of the knowledge and skills they learnt by being involved in Trocaire projects. One of the big enablers for women was learning that they were entitled to be free from the control of their husbands in the home. This knowledge strengthened the women’s self-esteem and allowed many to question their husband’s dominance in the home and further negotiate their ability to participate in different community spaces.

I love it when we discuss, debate and talk about our rights as women. This is how we have learnt our rights as women. It is better now for women if we see that our partner is treating us badly, we have the right to leave them, because our life has value. We don’t have to continue living a life of abuse, we don’t have to continue being victims to our husbands, our neighbours or anyone anymore because we are women and we have value...I tell my sons that all the rights that they have equally their wives have the same rights, to take decisions, as they are not the rulers of their wives.

Participant, Campirano, Voice diary entry

3.2.2 Group solidarity

The solidarity that women feel from the groups, supported them individually to participate in mixed community meetings by making them feel more secure in these (often male dominated) spaces and by allowing them to speak as a united voice, giving them more leverage to influence.

These ‘safe spaces’ provided women with the opportunity to meet and discuss issues affecting their lives and build their confidence. They discussed issues affecting them as women and knew that they could share things which would not be shared outside the space. Many of the women were given an opportunity to share their experiences of violence, domination and control within their households and support each other in addressing these issues.

Because we didn’t leave our village we had decided that our problems only applied to us here but this is not the case. Now I know women from other communities, I know their stories and they mine. This has been a success because through APADEIM we have all got to know each other and when a woman we knew was raped in Jiquillo we got in the truck and went there. This meant a lot to me because that day she was not alone as we were all there with her.

Participant, Campirano, Success exercise

3.2.3 Self-confidence

The bonds between the women also supported those that emerge as leaders, who benefit from the knowledge that they can rely on the support of the women from the women’s group.

We have to support her and unite so that they hear us, because it is not only her that needs the water but the whole community.

Participant, Campirano, Success exercise

The women believe that their power is strengthened when they are a collective voice rather than just as individuals.

3.2.3 Self-confidence

The first step on the empowerment journey requires women to have the confidence to resist cultural norms; they must decide to take the step and feel that they have the ‘power within’ to do this. Even when they have taken the first step, increases in confidence and self-esteem are essential for progress along the journey. As the women continue to participate and become more vocal in public spaces, they become increasingly secure in their right to participate.

The women in the research that had previous experience of participating were more easily able to progress in their journeys, precisely because they had already gained self-confidence through their previous experiences.

As well as a security within themselves and their ability to express themselves, greater self-confidence has helped the majority of the women to develop strategies to handle the critiques they receive from the community.

I learnt to think, to believe that I am a person who is useful and capable. I don’t pay attention to the negative things that people say about me.

Participant, La Bahiona

Women mentioned feeling able to cope with the criticism by either ignoring them, or feeling able to confront them.

3.2.4 Independent economic means

Given that the issue of money for transportation was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier to undertaking advocacy work, it is unsurprising that having an independent or favourable means of earning money has been an enabler for women. One of the women described the importance of the ‘pig project’ that the women had secured through the support of AMDES because of the liberty it gave her.

Sometimes we don’t have the money to attend so I say ‘I am going to sell something and I am going to go to that meeting because it is very important that I participate.’ With those 100 pesos that I will get I will go. In respect to this I think it is something very important as I have said before I lived from the wallet of the man, he did what he wanted to do, if he wanted to go he went; if he wanted to drink he drank the bottle. I am not a millionaire but I can have a
better life. Participant, Los Mangles, Photovoice.

The organised women’s group in Los Mangles demanded an economic project from AMDES to support their participation and AMDES worked to set up revolving funds with all the communities, which has given the women greater power to be able to decide whether they can attend meetings outside of the community. In the communities supported by APADEIM, the women also note the importance of independent income as a way to liberate them from the ‘wallet of their husbands.’ However, while an economic component to a project may support women’s empowerment, it can also create further tensions. For example, as discussed in detail below, in La Bahiona where the women secured a tourism project backed by the government, this led to friction in the community.

reported changes as a result, they continue to shoulder the burden of these duties.

Sometimes I feel tired. Sometimes I wish I could have a day to sit and relax with nothing to do. To be calm, a day to do absolutely nothing because there are times where I don’t have time for anything… he helps me to a certain point, but it is not that he is going to make the main effort. Participant, La Bahiona, Voice diary entry.

These successes demonstrate the importance of engaging men within programmes. The women do not participate in a vacuum; the ‘power over’ women, which men possess, will be more easily transformed if men and women have an awareness of that power.

3.3 Collective experiences within the spaces

Participation within the various spaces has led to positive changes in women’s lives, both through their individual actions and the collective action as a group. This section looks at the experiences the women have collectively had within the spaces. It demonstrates that while the women gained more power through their participation in the various, creation of spaces alone is not enough 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.

3.3.1 Advocacy has resulted in some material benefits and strengthened local administration, but the women repeatedly faced barriers collectively

The women have used their collective women-only spaces to organise and plan, with a view to lobbying local government bodies to deliver services. This has resulted in the subsequent delivery of services and has strengthened local administrative systems in the process. However, they endured a constant struggle in dealing with male control, despite a very active women’s group. This is illustrated by the water pump advocacy in Los Mangles. The women’s group successfully lobbied for a water pump through the water committee, but feel that they have insufficient influence within the committee. However, they continue to plan further advocacy strategies to influence the committee.

The water project in Los Mangles: Lobbying for a new water pump

The organised women’s group established by AMDES in Los Mangles became a mechanism for lobbying local government and NGOs. The women collectively decided on which issues they should address and lobbied accordingly.

Their lobbying efforts resulted in material benefits for the wider community, and the women felt empowered as a result of the successes. Two of their key successes, according to the women, were obtaining a new water pump and having a women’s municipal assembly mandated in the local Government’s bi-laws. The whole community are members of the water committee and are involved in management decisions while the day to day running is managed by an executive committee, elected by the wider community.

It is not just the executive that decides ‘It will cost this’ and that’s because, what if the community doesn’t accept it? So that’s where we participate, because we are the ones who decide depending if the water level rises or not or lovers, we are the ones who decide, therefore we can say ‘we participate.’ Participant, Los Mangles, Mapping exercise

However, the executive committee manages the accounts and the maintenance of the system. In 2006, community members began to doubt the skills of the committee.

The problem was that the executive committee did not want to surrender the accounts to us. For over nine months the pump was not scrubbed. Participant, Los Mangles, River of Life

Of the research participants were committee members, and the committee was entirely composed of men. The committee, which had a dramatic effect on the women of the community, who are responsible for most domestic tasks, including the collection of water.

The CAPS (water committee) here in the community broke down in 2006. It was totally a failure because the system was in debt, it had large debts and could not be repaired because the mayor had previously supported for repair. We spent two and a half years going to bring water eight miles, sometimes eating (raw food) ... because we had no water to cook the corn. Participant, Los Mangles, Success exercise

No government support was provided when the system collapsed, and there was no space in the community that automatically filled the power void. In response to this, the (then) newly formed organised women’s group created by AMDES became the mobilising space for women to address the issue. A group of women decided to organise to repair the water system.

... petitions to the mayor; about the electricity, we did as an organisation... We have lobbied for grains for production; I will repeat the electricity; for repairs to kerbs and roads; a women’s police station; for health workers to come to the community and for productive projects for women, so we can be economically empowered. We have also lobbied for the gender policy and the adoption of the women’s assemblies. Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry

It was hard and there was the initiative to organize, to search for support from institutions and NGOs, and we thank God that we were heard because that is when we were beginning to be organized as a group by AMDES. We negotiated with support from AMDES and the Committee of Rural Women (another NGO) supported us with other funds. The mayors, as we span two municipalities, they also heard, and in the community, the executive also lent some to repair the system and thank God it was repaired. Participant, Los Mangles, Success exercise

A new committee was established and an auditing mechanism was put in place to ensure transparency between the committee and the community. The committee now has 280,000 Cordobas ($US11,200) in reserve. However, one of the women, who led the advocacy, reports that it does not maintain the communities’ interest in managing the system.

Talking about the water and sanitation committee that we have within the community of Los Mangles, the greatest difficulty I feel is the lack of participation of the community in the Assemblies. They are held every six months for them (the committee) to provide us with information. I sense that there are difficulties in that space. I feel that one difficulty is that failure to reach a sufficient quorum, we were unable to make decisions for a lack of quorum. Participant, Los Mangles Voice diary entry

As a result, the women worry the executive committee is gaining too much power and still feel that there have not been sufficient women on the committee to be able to influence decisions.

The CAP (water committee) are running with an executive committee. We are waiting for December because we’re going to change some things that aren’t working. We put a female colleague to work there, but as you know there were more men than women and they had to take their side. We will remove them and from there we will continue. Participant, Los Mangles, interview

The organised women’s group have begun to plan the selection of candidates so that they can present a united voice in the community meetings of the water committee.
3.3.2 The women have collectively created new spaces in which to exert influence, which has had some limited material benefit but has not contributed to long term change

The women of Los Mangles and Tololar 2 worked collectively to have a women’s municipal assembly established, creating a new platform through which they could collectively participate and exert influence, including over the structure of the Council of the Family. Women have made use of this space to achieve tangible benefits for their communities, including in improving the electricity infrastructure. However, with a change in political officials, the women’s assembly was disbanded, demonstrating that even achievements grounded in municipal policy are not permanent or secure.

Pushing the boundaries of influence: Engaging with the Municipal Assemblies in Los Mangles & Tololar 2

Despite provisions put in place to ensure that all citizens can participate in the municipal assemblies, the women in the municipality of Posoltega (where AMDES operates) felt that they were indistinguishable and their participation was ineffective.

In those other assemblies we could not explain our needs and priorities that we have as women. Nearly all the participation and the agenda were composed by the men, they decided.

Participant, Los Mangles, Success exercise

In response, the women lobbied for a special women’s municipal assembly to take place once every year. The women joined with AMDES’ other organised women’s groups from the municipality when they lobbied for this.

It began within our organisation, with the accomplishment of AMDES. We succeeded in 2011 to have the women’s assembly accepted but in spite of that it was not put into the executive. Not only did they lobby the government through a number of channels, after three years of waiting for the project, they lobbied the Ministry of Energy to give them the right to produce electricity which would be distributed to the community. They also lobbied the municipal government to make the women’s assembly a reality.

Participant, Los Mangles, Spaces exercise

We were six women elected as the commission, to go to the Municipal Assembly to present our demands, and they decided.

Participant, Los Mangles, Performance exercise

Two days after this, the electricity began to arrive in the community. Despite their achievements and the introduction of the women’s municipal assembly into municipal policy in 2014, in September 2014, the women were informed that there will not be any more women’s municipal assemblies.

A name removed asked what happened to the women’s assembly, why have they not had it, was it not established that it would happen in a week of July? They didn’t answer the 3 questions. They said they would not answer these questions. But as A said, no one supported me, I was the only one who asked what was happening and did nothing more.

Participant, Los Mangles, Interview

Although no other women asked about the women’s assemblies in the meeting, one of the women confronted a local politician after the meeting. The women’s municipal assembly was instituted by the ex-mayor and there appears to be no political appetite for it to exist anymore:

Then they did not answer the question about the women’s assembly and so when it was over Francisco, who is the local politician, said ‘don’t ask again about the women’s assembly’. I asked why and he said ‘Because the women’s assembly has been erased.’

Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry

The women felt that the establishment of the Women’s Municipal Assembly and its confirmation within policy was a significant success.

We actively participate and can express or demand

for the most pressing needs for us women.

Participant, Los Mangles, Performance exercise

They have raised many issues in the women’s assemblies: one of the most important was the issue of electricity. This has been a priority for the community for many years and over a five year period community members have utilised different avenues to bring electricity to the community. The organised women’s group worked to ensure that their voices were heard and that their persistence was accepted by the municipal government.

Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry

Not only did they lobby the government through a number of channels, after three years of waiting for the project, they lobbied the Ministry of Energy to give them the right to produce electricity which would be distributed to the community. They also lobbied the municipal government to make the women’s assembly a reality.

The organised women’s group worked to ensure that their voices were heard and that their persistence was accepted by the municipal government.

The women felt that the establishment of the Women’s Municipal Assembly and its confirmation within policy was a significant success.

We actively participate and can express or demand

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We, the women decide who are going to be in the executive committee, we meet together to decide who we are going to put in the executive.

Participant, Los Mangles, Spaces exercise

were held at all, breaking the municipal regulations. The women reported that in the municipal assembly in September 2014 the budget had already been allocated by the mayor before the assembly took place, even though the assembly is supposed to discuss the coming budget. The community wanted support for planting a further crop, as their harvest had been poor, but the mayor decided to spend on the central government’s Plan Tacho (a zinc roofing scheme) programme.

Here we depend on cultivation. You know that the first harvest failed and there are a lot of people waiting for a second season, so they have to wait for the coming budget. The community wanted support for planting a further crop, as their harvest had been poor, but the mayor decided to spend on the central government’s Plan Tacho (a zinc roofing scheme) programme.

We succeeded in 2011 to have the women’s assembly accepted but in spite of that it was not put in the executive. There are hectares of land uncultivated waiting for seeds. However, the mayor closed the door on us because he had other projects to spend the money on. We spoke before, but the mayor shut us down and said that the government said that there were no funds for the project. We were frustrated and said we had a grand plan, this with this money we could buy how much of onions. How many pounds of beans could we have so and we have a second season? But when the mayor came he shut us down and said that the government said that there were no funds for the project.

Participant, Los Mangles, Voice diary entry

Although the women were able to establish their own space to present issues as women, ultimately their efforts were eroded by those with power, leaving the women with little recourse to action.

3.3.3 The women have utilised existing participation and influence channels, but the limitations of these channels renders their efforts ineffective at times

The women have worked collectively to use existing platforms to advocate on issues that affect their lives. They have organised and strategized to lobby and monitor the municipal government, using the skills they developed in the women’s groups. However, in many cases, their participation has not always led to influence over decision making over budgetary allocations and local issues or distribution of resources.

This is due, in part, to outside political influence, and this contributes to a lack of trust between the women and those in power. This is demonstrated by the stories of the women in Tololar 2 and their engagement with the Municipal Assembly and the Council of Family.

Participation without influence: Lobbying the Municipal Assembly in Tololar 2 for road repairs

The women have lobbied the municipal government through the official spaces, and have engaged with the mayor in smaller delegations. Through their advocacy, the women have become the most active members of the community in advocating for community schemes. For example, the community has been working to get a new secondary school and the women’s group played an important role in the advocacy campaign to achieve this.

It was us who lobbied for it. It wasn’t very difficult because they gave us a response quickly. The commission went frequently to inquire about progress, because there was a commission. They went by bicycle to lobby at mid-day and it was advocated for.

Participatory, Tololar 2, Performance exercise

This view is echoed by the husband of one of the women:

Interviewer: If for example you compared the advocacy and benefits that the male leaders have brought and benefits that the women have brought, who do you think has managed to bring more benefits to the community?

Husband: I would say from what I have seen the women, because, it seems that they are more active.

Interviewer: Do you feel the benefits that these women have advocated for?

Husband: clearly, the children were going to Chichigalpa daily for classes. Now they can go here. It is a great benefit because, can you imagine that journey daily?

They have also lobbied for a number of other issues including a community hall and repairs to the road. Despite these achievements, and despite seeing the Municipal Assemblies and the establishment of the Women’s Assembly as important, the women have encountered impediments within the spaces themselves and have felt that their voices are not listened to. They feel that the Municipal Government has not delivered on its promises and has failed to provide the sufficient budget to undertake the projects that the women have advocated for in the municipal assemblies.

Before the women’s assembly didn’t even exist; it was from our own suggestion that this emerged, so that we could have a space to express our needs, so that they would listen to us and give us a response. From there we started to go and lay our demands and our needs, but they have never fulfilled them. So sometimes they don’t give us the space to speak or even convene the women’s assembly, they don’t even take notes of anything so those are mere words to the wind.

Participant, Tololar 2, Performance exercise

They advocated for new ramps because of the flooding that happens during the rainy season. The women utilised many different opportunities, beyond the official space of the Municipal Assemblies to have their request fulfilled.

Repairing the ramps, the ramps of the road, we had to keep lobbying them to give them to us, this even was a budget but they never gave them, we had to keep pushing

Participant, Tololar 2, Performance exercise

Section 3: Research Findings: Barriers and enabling factors
and pushing, me and the other organised women.

Participant, Tololar 2, Voice diary entry

Despite their advocacy, the decision making system about projects was ultimately beyond their control.

They [the municipal government] didn’t consult the whole community. They called the coordinator of the community, and said they needed the answer right away and he did not have time to notify the community so he alone decided on a protective wall at the entrance of the community, allowing us access to the two communities. When they came to execute the project, they had diverted the budget designated for the community and they did a poor quality job, which is what happened in the community this year. They said that the budget for each community was $200,000 and the project in Tololar No. 2 was the repair of protective wall but what happened was the budget was divided between three communities.

Participant, Tololar 2, Success exercise

The confusion regarding the budget, led to distrust between the women and the municipal government. In response, the women arranged to monitor the implementation of the project to ensure a lack of corruption, by setting up a monitoring group of volunteers.

It was through the training we had in the organised women’s group that we decided to create a monitoring committee to ensure they were completed on time and quality work was done.

Participant, Tololar 2, Voice diary entry

The monitoring group looked for support in the community and found some support from the Council of Family, in part because some of the women participate in both the women’s group and the Council of Family.

I am on the Council of family (executive committee) and as the organised women’s group we share knowledge with the Council of Family. Through the organized women’s group we consult with the Council of Family. Through this we realised the monitoring and we made it to the end, not the way that we had hoped or wanted, but we got to the end with the monitoring, supported by the Council and the organized women’s group.

Participant, Campirano, Success exercise

Despite their monitoring, the repairs have already been damaged. The women believe this is because the reduced budget meant that the materials were not of good quality in the first place.

They have not undertaken advocacy on anything or supported us to lobby the authorities. What is the point of forming this committee if we do not function... just for signing things. ‘Look, you have to sign this paper’ not for anything else.

Participant, Tololar 2, Spaces exercise

As well as having little influence over decisions related to benefit distribution, the members of the committee are also charged with undertaking Sandinista party business. The women on the committee report giving out party membership cards within the community through the Council.

They gave us this role [of distributing the cards] because we are the ones who know who best in the community is affiliated with the Sandinista party.

Participant, Tololar 2, Interview

The members of the council then become actors of the ruling party because of their role within the council. This blurring of roles means that the council could easily become equated as a structure of the Party rather than the community. Additionally, although the benefits are meant to be given to those that are in most need, the women were told that the card acted as backing for them when they are receiving benefits, implying that affiliated party members may get preference in the selection process.

We were asked what the party membership card was for... and we said ‘what we can tell those people’, this is something that can back you up when you follow up on paperwork, for example here they were giving zinc sheets...

They didn’t consult the women of the Council of Family and they were not asked what has been done.

Participant, Tololar 2, Spaces exercise

The fishing cooperative in La Bahiona:

Entrenching tensions while supporting empowerment? The fishing cooperative in La Bahiona:
The cooperative in La Bahiona has an 87% female majority and both the president and the secretary are research participants. The women that are involved in the cooperative were more dedicated to their participation in the cooperative than with any other space in which they were involved. The cooperative is still being established; it was first formed in 2010 after another cooperative, which started in 2008, failed. Its first achievement has been obtaining sole fishing rights for the area, which it obtained by applying to the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources for a permit to fish in the area. This is a significant achievement for the women, as they can now fish legally in this protected area. However, the issue of ownership to fishing rights has caused tension between the women members of the cooperative and some others in the community.

Well, as a cooperative we are organised, there was a man who wanted to open a shrimp farm in the area and we took the decision to stop it because it was a restricted area and belongs to the cooperative as a nursery. We managed to get MARENA (the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources) to come and undertake an inspection (of the situation).

The cooperative then went on to obtain a Tourism Project with the support of the NGO FUNDAR and with government backing, a success that the women feel is a result of their participation. They hope that the tourism will bring greater prosperity to the community. However, the project has led to tension within the community. The leader of the community opposes the project and has tried to rally others to oppose the project and the cooperative. This has caused conflict within the community and caused people to take sides.

They got a truck with posters denouncing the cooperative. With the [tourism] project FUNDAR are supporting us directly with the government, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources. They are giving us all the support because the cooperative is legal, completely. The permission for the nets and the quay, we have acquired legally... this is the irritation. They also went to denounce us to the Mayor saying we were not legal, but we had it, the permission was in process. With these things... my neighbour has stopped talking to me, she denied me water and she told me that I can’t collect water from her pump anymore.

Participant, La Bahiona, Voice diary entry

As a result, the women have received many criticisms and it has caused tension within some of their relationships, both in the family and between the women within the cooperative and the self-help group set up by APADEIM.

This photo (below) was taken because I liked seeing how well the hens are laying eggs in the same nest the two of them, without fighting without anything and that is how I would like us to be without fighting, without selfishness.

Participant, La Bahiona, Photovoice

The ongoing conflict has caused the NGO supporting the project to remove some of the support.

Well, as there were misunderstandings between the Cooperative and the rest of the community, to not exacerbate the conflict, the NGO (FUNDAR) decided to take away the materials and support us through a different means. We thank God that they didn’t remove us entirely. Only the material was taken, but they will continue to support us.

Participant, La Bahiona, Photovoice

Many of the women have become de-motivated as a result. However, although the conflict has affected the women in the cooperative, all of the women involved in the research hoped that things would be resolved so they can continue participating.

I would not stop participating in the space of the cooperative because I think that maybe we can solve our problems, and maybe we can escape poverty a little more.

Participant, La Bahiona, Voice diary entry
Section 4: Analysis of the power dynamics within the spaces

4. Analysis of the power dynamics within the spaces

While women in Nicaragua participate within collective spaces, and this supports their personal empowerment, their performance within the space (and its impact) is affected by the wider power dynamics imbued in the spaces by the individuals/groups that established them and the wider socio-political environment. The following section explores the women’s experiences of participation and their empowerment journeys to assess the extent to which their participation supported them to push the boundaries of power and not simply reinforce the status quo. On that basis, this section presents some of the overarching conclusions arising from the research.

4.1 Who decides?

4.1.1 Nominal Participation in the Municipal Assembly

The municipal assemblies are participatory spaces where people can be informed about municipal plans and contribute with their own proposals, but it is the municipal council that makes the final decisions. The women have reported a number of instances which suggest that the municipal assembly merely creates an optic of inclusion within decisions. For example, in Posoltega, the central government overrode the community’s desires, demonstrating top-down management of the municipality rather than true citizen participation, reducing the space to that of nominal participation to legitimise existing plans.

4.1.2 Outsiders control the decisions in the Council of Family

In the Council of Family, the community are invited to attend meetings when various government schemes are established and they, with the help of the executive committee, are meant to select beneficiaries of these schemes based on need. However, research participants report that beneficiaries were chosen by external representatives of the Sandinista party in several cases.

4.1.3 The invited and organic spaces are more egalitarian in nature

In the invited spaces of the organised women’s groups, the self-helps group and the organic space of the cooperative, it is the women themselves that make the decisions. The organised women’s group has an executive committee, but it is the women members who collectively decide on issues.

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.

We make decisions in the way that as organized women we say “Let’s go and undertake social control (government project monitoring)” as we know how to do it, we say “let’s go” or “go.”

Participant, Tololar 2

The self-help groups have not been an organising space for community issues but the women have collectively engaged in supporting other women in situations of violence because they feel this is an important issue for them. Despite tensions within the cooperative, the members make decisions meaning it is the women who primarily make the decisions.
4.2.1 Challenging government to deliver rights

The organised women’s group was set up by Trocaire’s partner AMDES to support women to organise and advocate for their rights with municipal authorities. The women were given training on advocacy and supported to attend municipal assemblies so that they could influence government decisions. The municipal assembly is the official space for citizens to participate within, to shape municipal plans and to hold the municipal council to account over spending.

Is it achieving this purpose?

The research found that within the municipality of Posotega (where two of the research communities are located) no assemblies were held in 2013. Although these resumed in 2014, the women’s assembly, which had been approved in municipal law, was not held in 2014 and the women were told that it will not be held again. When the assemblies are held, the communities are not given sufficient notice. The removal of the women’s municipal assembly as a space denies the women the opportunity to express their demands as women participating within the public space. Many women have been able to challenge the taboo of women participating in public space. Many women have successfully and continuously been able to negotiate their ability to participate with their husbands, challenging male control over women’s movement. Many of the women report discussing the issue of unequal gender norms with their families and friends, and even changing the way they bring up their own children. However, the women still report high levels of resistance to their participation by some community members. Their participation in public or within their own homes can result in increased risks of violence or conflict with their families and communities. Many women spoke about the price they had to pay for stepping beyond the existing social norms, and those working with them need to be aware and work with them to mitigate the risks they are taking in participating and travelling this empowerment pathway.

4.2.2 Questioning gender norms

The self-help group and the organised women’s group are designed to challenge gender norms by providing women with the opportunity to participate and, through training, supporting them to make changes by knowing their rights.

Is it achieving this purpose?

Through the training, reflection and sharing of experiences, the women in these groups have started to question gender norms and are taking action to challenge them. All of the women have been able to challenge the taboos of women participating within the public space. Many women have successfully and continuously been able to negotiate their ability to participate with their husbands, challenging male control over women’s movement. Many of the women report discussing the issue of unequal gender norms with their families and friends, and even changing the way they bring up their own children. However, the women still report high levels of resistance to their participation by some community members. Their participation in public or within their own homes can result in increased risks of violence or conflict with their families and communities. Many women spoke about the price they had to pay for stepping beyond the existing social norms, and those working with them need to be aware and work with them to mitigate the risks they are taking in participating and travelling this empowerment pathway.

4.2.3 Improving access to material resources

The self-help group and the organised women’s group are designed to challenge gender norms by providing women with the opportunity to participate and, through training, supporting them to make changes by knowing their rights.

Intended purpose of the spaces in this category

Both the self-help group and the organised women’s group are designed to challenge gender norms by providing women with the opportunity to participate and, through training, supporting them to make changes by knowing their rights.

Are they achieving this purpose?

The Council is a space which navigates competing agendas and demands. As the rules that created the space were and continue to be interpreted, the work portfolio of the new Councils is very wide, and the space has been easily used for different actors’ purposes. This has meant that the ruling Sandinista Party has been able to use the Councils to further party political agendas. It was found that in some cases, the executive committee was tasked with carrying out Party business through distributing party membership identity cards, blurring the lines between citizen participation in community affairs and party political issues. However, the unclear purpose of the space also means that the women have been able to use the Council when other spaces have not been functioning. In Campirano, it became the space that filled the gap of the water committee, temporarily morphing into an organic participatory space, owned by the community. In Los Mangiles, its creation was resisted and it was used as a bargaining chip by the organised women’s group. In Tololar 2, the Council supported the women to monitor the transparency in the implementation of the road project and is now the lead space organising the advocacy to fix the road. The Council does have the potential to encourage community mobilisation and become a space that challenges the government to deliver rights or even question gender norms but it can equally increase partisan divisions within the community.

Filling the state’s role. In both Campirano and Los Mangiles the state has failed to adequately support the water committees and they both fell into disrepair, leaving the communities without water systems for years, and solutions were only found through women that organised within the community. The women’s experiences within the water committee show that the state has handed over the functioning of water systems to the communities but their participation is not that of equal partners deciding on the needs of the community. The state is not providing them with any financial support and the women had to lobby the municipal government and find external resources for their water systems to be repaired. This does not demonstrate effective decentralisation or citizen control in action, but a transfer of responsibilities by the state without the necessary support.

4.3 Who participates in the space?

Women chose to participate in the invited spaces set up by Trocaire’s partners, as opposed to being invited or selected by the partners. Membership was open to all women in the community. No analysis of marginalisation was undertaken, so it is possible that the most vulnerable women are not participating within these spaces.

Within both of the state sponsored community level invited spaces, the Council of Family and the water committee, an executive committee of volunteers selected by the community is established to run the space on behalf of the community. Thus, analysis of who is being represented becomes important.

4.3.1 Issues of representation

In any representative space, especially where people are selected on an elected basis, there are questions as to who should be present to represent, is it possible for the chosen participants to become gatekeepers of power, excluding the views of others and reinforcing social divides. Within both of the spaces reviewed in this project, there are tensions between the community and the executive committee over decisions.

The Council of Family executive committees are tasked with selecting beneficiaries for various government schemes. According to women interviewed, decisions on beneficiaries were not always taken by the committee members themselves, but directly by party officials. Claims of lack of transparency in the selection of beneficiaries have created tensions between the women in the committee, all members of the Sandinista party, and other women in the research sample.

The executive committee membership of the water committee is chosen by the community. The price of water is set by the community at meetings, not just the executive committee. However, the members of the executive committee must collect payment from community members. The lack of trust between the community and the committee meant that in both Los Mangiles and Campirano the water committee was ultimately dissolved. Although in Los Mangiles they have implemented an auditing system, the women still don’t feel that the committee really listens to the community. In Campirano, the only research participant member of the executive
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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. In Nicaragua, despite the rhetoric of administrative decentralization and citizen participation, the central government still have a high degree of control. Additionally, gender norms are very rigid and dictate the proper behaviour of women and men, making women subordinate to men in practice.

4.4.1 Between Citizens and the State

Within Nicaragua, the women have started to challenge the state to deliver rights through various lobbying efforts. Some of the women have been able to use their own power to alter the relations between them and the state. However, decentralisation has not been fully implemented and powers have not been truly devolved to the citizens through the municipal assemblies, as intended by state policy. As a result, the central government are still making many of the decisions about municipal development. Within this context, women’s participation can end up reinforcing the status quo.

The water committees have legal recognition and are the primary mechanism to play this role effectively. Thus, the power devolved to women, and to the wider community member, is limited in what it can achieve, and this can delegitimize the spaces for participation.

The women have tried to utilise the Council of Family for advancing their strategic needs. However, in some cases, the structure and its members have also been perceived as agents for the Sandinista Party, pushing party agendas and reinforcing party allegiance through service delivery of government schemes. The agenda of these external actors do not always match those of the women, and therefore the space in these situations does not serve the women’s specific interests.

The organised women’s groups fought for a female only municipal assembly as they felt that men dominated the general assemblies. This did not address the fundamental power differences between men and women but aimed to create a safe space where the women would be able to change power relations between themselves and the state. The boundaries were nudged wider but just as the women can exercise their different forms of power so can local authorities, who have told the women there will be no more Women’s Assemblies.

Ultimately the political reality disempowers citizens impeding their ability to actually push the boundaries of possibility within the existing structures.

4.4.2 Between men and women

Many women are now participating within the public spaces. The women have actively fought for greater control over their mobility and they are now known, respected and sought out by other community members.

When we have community meetings as the school committee the others want me to take on different positions. This is something that gives me lots of confidence and I am grateful for the faith that the community places in me.

However, now that women are participating many men have stopped undertaking lobbying. The women perceive this as either because the men know that the women will do it for them or that if men were to work with women, this would be a sign they were condoning women’s participation.

Now it is the women that are more active than the men. I see that most of the men barely involve themselves, they leave it to the women who are organised… I don’t know if it is because of their machismo that they think ‘ah! That’s where those crazy old women are involved.’

Participant, Tololar 2, interview

Gender norms have shifted around women’s participation but the underlying power differentials remain, and women are still not viewed as having the same rights as men.

The women have individually pushed the boundaries in their homes. Through a process of consciousness-raising, within the women led spaces created by Trocaire’s partners, the women have come to question male domination within the household. To be able to continue participating, most women have had to fight to change their position within the household by claiming greater influence over their own mobility. Many women still face issues of control and dominance from their husbands but they are actively trying to change these through dialogue and negotiation with their partners. The majority of the women in the research had been successful in gaining acceptance of their participation from their partners. Inequality and violence are no longer accepted by these women as the norm within their personal relationships. The women have also allowed the concepts of gender equality to inform how they parent their children and they have discussed these ideas with extended family members. These discussions are starting to challenge the current dominance of the gender norms which underpin women’s inequality. They may not completely change social norms but could be an enabling process for the next generation.

4.5 Recommendations

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

1. Select appropriate spaces: Invited spaces have the potential to encourage community mobilisation and become a space that challenges the government to deliver rights or even question gender norms but they can equally increase partisan divides within the community. Ultimately the political reality can disempower citizens impeding their ability to actually push the boundaries of possibility within the existing structures. Meanwhile, organic spaces can create an enabling environment for confidence building and awareness-raising, but has a more limited function in delivering changes in social norms and tangible benefits.

- 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.

2. Challenge multiple boundaries of power: Even in cases in which women developed their personal skills and capacities and used these skills to work on community issues such as access to water and electricity, they were subjected to criticism from community members and resistance from family members and spouses. Tension between women within a community can dis-empower them collectively. In some cases, this contributed to an increase in violence exercised against these women. This demonstrates the need to
work with social norms as well as women’s personal attributes. Similarly, challenging social
norms alone is not sufficient in the absence of empowering legal and administrative frameworks.

As the research has demonstrated in the cases described, long term and sustainable change that
empowers women is not possible in the absence of accountable and equitable legal frameworks.

• Design programmes that work with the existing
legal, political, economic and social boundaries of
power and influence – working with men and
women, communities and households, social
norms and legal frameworks.

3. Create and support safe spaces: The first step for
all women within the research group in Nicaragua,
was to leave the home. Before they participated
in these community groups, their interactions in
decision making were limited to the domestic
sphere and they had low self-esteem, often
experiencing violence, and had very little control
over the decisions that affected their lives. The
women had to actively decide to change this
situation and choose to participate, and this was
generally prompted through a request to join an
invited space by an NGO. The women generally

 gained confidence and skills by participating in
informal safe spaces, often women only spaces.

This played a vital role in supporting the women
to help overcome barriers that prevent them from
entering more formal public spaces, including
male control over mobility and low-self-esteem
due to feelings of inferiority, and was a crucial step
in their empowerment journey as the women are
challenging gender norms by entering the public
realm.

• Create and support safe-spaces within which
women can take the first steps towards
empowerment, including leaving the home and
building their self-confidence and public speaking
abilities.

4. Be flexible and open to long-term empowerment
journeys: Over time, some of the women
progressed from participating within community
spaces to actively lobbying the local government for
improved access to services for their community.

This process strengthened their confidence and
allowed them to express themselves in front of
officials or large groups which in turn led them to
believe in their ability to achieve change in their
lives. For some women, the process of building
their confidence took several years, and it was
only after that point that they were willing and/or
able to express themselves clearly and make their
voices heard in decision-making bodies.

• Establish programmes and policies that allow
women to move at their own pace through their
individual empowerment journey.

5. Support training and awareness-raising:

For some women, the knowledge about their
rights - combined with a new found confidence
- led to immediate empowerment within their
domestic sphere. The women in Nicaragua
reported positive changes in their familial
relationships as a result of the knowledge and
skills they learnt by being in community bodies.

A significant enabler for women was learning that
they were entitled to be free from the control
of their husbands in the home. This knowledge
strengthened the women’s self-esteem and
allowed many to question their husband’s
dominance in the home and further negotiate
their ability to participate in different community
spaces.

• Support training and awareness raising
programmes to build women’s confidence and
empower them with the tools they need to resist
disempowerment.

6. Celebrate success: Lobbying efforts conducted
by women on access to services such as water,
electricity and roads, led to some successes in
every community, with decision makers
responding positively to their requests in at least
some instances. These successes reinforced the
women’s positive experience, knowledge and
confidence in their power to influence decisions
that directly affect their lives.

• Acknowledge and celebrate success when it
occurs. This has the power to challenge negative
social norms regarding women’s role in public
life and to further women’s empowerment by
strengthening their confidence and power within.

7. Support collective action: By exploring issues
collectively in safe environments, the women
transitioned from perceiving the violence in their
lives as an individual issue within their relationships,
to seeing it as a collective issue that was rooted
in their gender identities. The bonds between
the women also supported those that emerge
as leaders, who benefit from the knowledge that
they can rely on the support of the women from
the women’s group. The women believe that their
power is strengthened when they are a collective
voice rather than just as individuals. Collective
action also led to tangible positive outcomes,
including a water pump through the water
committee in one community.

• Support collective action that focuses on advocacy
& lobbying, mutual support and peer to peer
learning.

8. Providing tangible support: In one community, the
women referred to the importance of independent
income as a way to liberate them from the ‘wallet
of their husbands.’ However, this can also lead to
tension. Across communities, women reported
the challenge associated with the triple burden of
reproduction, protection and community work.

• Consider what tangible supports might enable
women to participate regularly, effectively and
without negative consequence in community
decision-making.


