

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES:

**Understanding Women's
Participation and Empowerment**

**DISCUSSION GUIDE TO ACCOMPANY
ANIMATION**

February 2017

Trócaire

Guidance for facilitators:

This note is an accompaniment for the short animation “Women’s Participation & Empowerment,” although it can also be used as a standalone discussion format. It is intended to spark internal reflection and planning for action on women’s empowerment and participation in community level decision making.

The guide provides a suggested layout for facilitated discussions of three lengths.

- For a short discussion (30 mins – 45 mins), please refer to questions 1 & 2. This provides a format for an introductory discussion (that might be part of a team meeting, for example) which your team might follow up later with the additional exercises in order to plan concrete actions.
- For a more detailed conversation (1 hour – 1.5 hours), please refer to questions 1 & 2, followed by questions 3 & 4.
- For a comprehensive discussion or workshop (3 hours – 3.5 hours), please follow the format for 1 - 1.5 hours, and then chose from the remaining exercises (questions 5-8), as appropriate to your meeting purpose and the time you have available.

Welcome & Introduction



10 minutes

The facilitator should remind the group that there are no right/wrong answers or viewpoints, and how we approach women’s empowerment depends on the context, which is why reflection at country/community level is so important.

At the same time, any comments which oppose the value of gender equality & non-discrimination should be challenged as these can be harmful, and the universality of human rights should be stressed; while our approach must be context specific, our goals – equality and non-discrimination – are universal.

The facilitator should invite any initial comments on the animation from participants.

Part I:

Warm up & reflection on why supporting women's empowerment is important



30 minutes

Present the two questions listed here, allowing 15 minutes for meeting participants to share their thoughts and comments in an interactive plenary discussion. No additional tools or exercises are required for Part I.

1. What do the terms 'women's participation' and 'women's empowerment' mean to us, as staff of Trócaire/partner, and as members of this community?



15 minutes

Allow time for feedback, and note that the notions of 'participation', 'women's participation' and 'empowerment' can seem intangible and vague, making it challenging for practitioners.

After listening to feedback, offer Trócaire definitions:

- Trócaire understands participation as the creation of new opportunities for citizens to gain power to influence decisions that affect their lives, at the community and national levels. It typically includes involving discriminated and excluded individuals and groups in decision-making fora to influence issues that affect their lives, and giving access to power to those who are so often marginalised. Participation is thus a method to support human rights protection, a method to break the cycle of disempowerment and disadvantage, as well as a human right in itself.
- Empowerment is 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 among people where

changes can occur and power can be negotiated between individuals, through the increase in the power within individuals, and their collective power when they work together. In order to be transformative, the power balance between men and women needs to shift, as does the power balance between citizen and state.

2. What are the main reasons, in your opinion, to work on supporting women's empowerment? What happens when women are empowered?



15 minutes

Allow time for feedback. When feedback is collected, present (in your own words) some of the findings from the 3-year, multi-country study conducted by Trócaire "Pushing the Boundaries: Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment":

In practical terms, when women are not empowered to contribute to, and influence, decision-making on issues that affect their lives, they are at a higher risk of abuse or exploitation; they have less access to, and control over, scarce resources, including materials and services; they are less likely to be able to participate freely in private and public life; and, they are less likely to be able to make decisions about their future or that of any children they have, including regarding education, employment or participation in socio-economic and cultural life. Conversely, equitable participation and empowerment of women in decision making at the community level has wide ranging and mutually reinforcing benefits in domestic and public life:

- At a minimum, it facilitates empowerment of women within the private/domestic sphere.

This has the potential to reduce protection risks for women/girls by helping them to change their position within their family; to facilitate the consideration that education should be accessible to girls; to facilitate women taking an initial step towards participating at community level outside the home; to enable financial independence (which has indirect positive impacts on reducing vulnerability and strengthening resilience of women); to build the confidence of women and support their knowledge building about their rights.

- Within communities/the public sphere, participation and empowerment reinforce the empowerment achieved within the domestic sphere while also providing a mechanism for women to contribute to community level decisions. This facilitates full or partial control over material resources: even if no control over political decision making is desired/achieved, women can use their support structures to establish initiatives that yield material benefits, or they can organise so that they – as women – have some access to material resources within the wider community or state. It also facilitates and promotes partial control over political decision making on issues that affect the whole community.

The cyclical nature of discrimination, disadvantage and deprivation makes these findings all the more important. If participation can reduce a woman's marginalisation within the home, this can have positive implications for her position within the wider community; similarly, if a woman's position within a community is changed, so too can her position within her home. This might include positive consequences

such as an increase in decision making power within an intimate or marital relationship, or negative consequences such as tension and even an increase in violence. For this reason, efforts to support women's participation and empowerment must work at the level of the household and community simultaneously. This also has potential inter-generational implications, particularly if it means that girls have increased access to education and are exposed to a culture where subordination of women is reduced.

Beyond Trócaire's research finding, international best practice and human rights norms are clear that:

Women's participation and empowerment is a matter of justice, enshrined in states' international human rights obligations. Empowering women to participate fully in social, economic, cultural and political life across society is essential to respecting and protecting their human rights, building stronger economic and social communities through inclusive economic growth, eradicating poverty, achieving internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improving the quality of life for women, men, families and communities. This is because decision-making that is gender sensitive can respond to the differing needs of men, women, boys and girls, and is therefore more efficient and effective; but these needs will not be considered if women are absent from the decision-making forum. In the long-term, women's participation and empowerment supports and promotes gender equality, especially because decision-making fora reinforce gender equality/inequalities. This, in turn, has implications for eradicating gender-based violence, which is rooted in gender inequality.¹

¹ UN Women, "Women's Empowerment Principles," <http://www.unwomen.org/en/partnerships/businesses-and-foundations/womens-empowerment-principles>; Empower Women, "Empower Women: The Movement for Women's Economic Empowerment," (2015) http://www.empowerwomen.org/en/~/_documents/2015/08/05/05/16/empower-women-the-movement-for-womens-economic-empowerment; VSO, "Women in Power: beyond access to influence in a post-2015 world," (2013) http://www.beyond2015.org/sites/default/files/VSO_Women_in_Power_Report_FINAL%20PDF.pdf.

Part II:

Reflection on your organisation's strategies, programmes & policies, and the extent to which they support women's participation and empowerment



30 minutes

Present the two questions listed here, allowing 15 minutes for meeting participants to share their thoughts and comments.

3. On the basis of these definitions, which of our/your programmes/strategies/policies have a direct or indirect focus on women's empowerment and participation?



15 minutes

Allow for plenary discussion or group work and collect feedback.

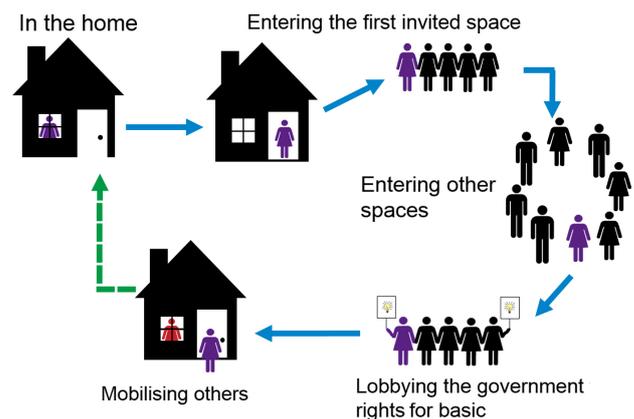
If using group work, present a short overview of the 'empowerment journey', and ask the group to reflect on which aspects of the journey their organisation's programme/strategies/policies have an impact on and where they would position their intervention currently.

Exercise: The empowerment journey:

- The first step is for women to leave the house and engage in community/public life. Many women are only active in the domestic sphere, where they undertake reproductive and productive work. Their ability to leave the house depends on social norms and practicalities.
- Women must choose to enter their first decision-making space, usually an invited space, which might be an informal safe space, or a formal decision-making body.
- Using the confidence they acquire in the initial space, some women may progress to participate in additional spaces.
- Some of the women will emerge from the decision making spaces as leaders and will engage in lobbying and advocacy on a public

platform, often for improved services for their community.

- Finally, some women will successfully mobilise other women to join their efforts, and to leave their homes and engage in community level decision making.



4. If we talk about decision-making at community level, what structures are important (i.e. what are the key decision-making structures within our communities)?



15 minutes

Allow for plenary discussion or group work and collect feedback.

If a prompt is needed, consider state-run and non-state organisations or fora; consider grass-roots organisations and networks and NGO-run structures. Consider also religious/cultural bodies and any other networks that organise and operate at community level. Ask participants to consider power relations within the community: who has power and how is it exercised, and in which bodies?

Part III:

Exercises to support planning and programme design/ implementation



2 hours

These exercises can be completed in a linear form, as presented below, or the facilitator can select one or more and deliver them as stand-alone exercises, depending on the time available and the priorities of the group/session.

5. Engaging with decision-making and power structures to address barriers and enablers to women's empowerment.



30 minutes

(a). Are women able to participate freely in decision-making structures within your community/the communities in which you work, and if yes, do they exert influence over the final decision-making?

Collect initial feedback as a plenary and then present the following group-work exercise.

Women might begin their empowerment journey

in their home, and the first step in that journey might simply be to leave their home (as was the case with Anita in the animation). 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. However, this journey is not a linear and straightforward process. Women may begin an 'empowerment journey' but may not take every step needed to arrive at a position of full equality, either because they do not want to, or because they are compelled backward by obstacles in their way.

In the community/communities in which we work, what barriers & enabling factors do women face when they attempt to participate in decision making structures and to influence decision-making within those structures? (Use the following table to complete the list).

Exercise: Mapping barriers & enablers:

Women are at home	→ they attempt to leave the home and participate within the community	Women are participating within community decision-making structures	→ they attempt to influence decisions regarding access to services, organisation or community, or to influence higher level government structures.
Barriers:		Barriers:	
Enabling factors:		Enabling factors:	

As a prompt, encourage participants to consider structural and behavioural factors, and finally present the following summary yourself.

Barriers	Enabling Factors
Social/Cultural/Behavioural	
Taboo around women in leadership & decision-making spaces	Access mechanisms for women to access authorities/ decision makers
	External actors challenging social norms
Internalisation of gender norms	Peer support/ group solidarity
	Women-only spaces
Structural/Practical	
Illiteracy and low levels of education	Support to build self-confidence
	Literacy training/support
	Training on human rights issues
Unequal division of labour	Family/Partner support
Lack of mobility & men’s control over women’s mobility	Economic independence & freedom of movement

(b). To what extent does your work challenge these barriers or support the enabling factors?

 15 minutes

Using the lists that the group/groups have just developed, ask them to consider which aspects of the organisation’s work supports the enabling factors, entrenches the barriers, or challenges the barriers?

Discuss in plenary, or request the participants to continue work with their group. Collect feedback.

6. Planning for women’s empowerment

 30 minutes

(a) What opportunities exist for you to challenge these barriers or support the enabling factors?

Exercise: Consider the following examples of two women that participated in Trócaire’s research:

“I get up at 3 o’clock in the morning. I start the day by cleaning the oven (pasting it with cow dung mixed in water) and light the fire to heat the water for bathing. Then I clean the outer courtyard, then the rooms. Then I go to fetch water and take a bath. Then again I go to fetch water for cooking and start cooking. I cook rice, ragi and some vegetable dish. After I finish cooking I clean the cowshed.

Then we eat. After eating I go to the field to work. The work varies depending on the season. During agricultural season it is weeding, transplanting, harvesting etc. Or else I go to the hills to collect fuel wood. If I go to the hills to collect fuel wood I return by 3 o’clock. Or if I go to work in the field I return by 5 o’clock. After returning, I go again to fetch water. Then I start cooking again. Once cooking is done I serve food to my children and husband. Then I eat. Then I make the bed for everyone and we go to bed. Again I get up the next morning at 3 o’clock.” (Bati – a female participant in India)

➤ **How can our organisation support Bati to effectively participate in community decision-making structures?**

“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. (Hilda, a female participant in Nicaragua)

➤ **How can our organisation support Hilda to effectively participate in community decision-making structures?**

Collect feedback and explain that the inequalities in power which underpin the numerous barriers to women's participation determine the boundaries of possible action, including the structures, stakeholders and activities to work with. In other words, if power is not devolved by the state to the citizens, then trying to increase the power held by women will be ineffectual; and if negative gender norms are entrenched, providing material support to women so that they can participate in decision-making might be a futile exercise.

Discuss this point as a group, if you feel that it means you will amend your list of opportunities.

(b) What are our key priorities? What can be done in relation to advancing this element of our work?

Exercise: Ranking of priorities

In small groups, select three priorities, ranked in order of preference, and share with the plenary.

Collect feedback and plot the list of priorities. As a plenary group, select 3-5 priorities to take forward.

7. It you chose to work on women's empowerment (and specifically on the priorities identified above), what implications does this have for your work?

 30 minutes

As a plenary group, consider the implications for our work and/or feasibility to engage in each priority, under the following headings:

- **Internal factors:**
 - o Partner portfolio & partner capacities
 - o Staff capacity & training needs
- **External factors:**
 - o Prevailing social norms & behaviours
 - o Legal framework
 - o Community decision-making structures
 - o Existing skill-set and strengths of women
 - o Protection concerns and other risks

Under each heading, consider whether implementing each priority is feasible, what investments/changes/supports might be required to do so, and what challenges that might trigger.

Finally, consider what opportunities exist, or might be created, to overcome the challenges identified.

8. Conclusions & Next Steps

 15-30 minutes

The facilitator can collate the session inputs and conclusions in a number of ways through the session, including by:

- a. Document using white boards/sticky notes throughout the session; and/or,
- b. Appoint a rapporteur/act as rapporteur documenting inputs on the summary templates below while group take part in exercises.

Where the group has completed questions 1-7, the following template can form the basis for conclusions.

Summary table 1. Barriers & enabler to women’s empowerment

Community-level decision-making structures	Barriers to women’s participation	Aspects of organisations which challenges or entrenches these barriers	Enablers to women’s participation	Aspects of organisations work which supports these enablers

Summary table 2. Planning ahead: Priorities to support women’s empowerment

Opportunity identified to support women’s empowerment	Justification for selected opportunity/priority (Aims/Objectives)	Feasibility of follow through/challenges identified	Implications for organisations operations and capacities (follow up actions required)	Aspects of organisations work which supports these enablers

Decisions & Follow-up action points:		
Immediate term (1-6 months)	Medium term (6 months – 1 year)	Long term (2-5 years)

The final item should be the collective discussion and decision on follow-up action points. The group can select priority activities to direct support women’s empowerment that they would like to take forward, or can select actions that would enable them to support women’s empowerment

in the future (for example- the group might decide to undertake training/capacity building, or to conduct a gender analysis within their community).

A copy of the summary tables should be shared with all participants subsequently.

Working for a just world.

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