

Raising Her Voice: An Overview



Launched in August 2008 and running until March 2013, Oxfam's Raising Her Voice programme aims to promote the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels – by enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women. Oxfam is working with local partners in 17 countries and across four continents to implement a portfolio of projects, which are examined in more depth in the case studies in this pack.

Background

Oxfam's vision is that many more women will gain power over their lives and will live free from violence, through changes in attitudes, ideas and beliefs about gender roles and relations, and through increased levels of women's active engagement and leadership – in institutions, decision-making and change processes.

To achieve this, we need to challenge often deeply-entrenched beliefs that women are of less value than men, and to transform the unequal power relations between men and women which result from these beliefs. Oxfam has, therefore, placed renewed emphasis on work that deliberately aims to increase women's status.

The Raising Her Voice programme is founded on Oxfam's belief that women's access to political leadership and participation is a crucial aspect of achieving gender equality and development – and that Oxfam has an important role to play in supporting this, as part of our organisational commitment to putting poor women's rights at the heart of all we do.

Women are still under-represented in all areas, and at all levels, of decision-making. This is a concern because equal representation of men and women is a basic issue of justice. But more than that, women's and men's different experiences need to be voiced separately, so that men's opinions and experiences are not taken as the norm, and therefore as the sole basis for political decisions. Similarly, women and men have different – and sometimes apparently conflicting – interests; therefore, both must be represented in decision-making processes and structures.

Since 2008, through Raising Her Voice, Oxfam has been working with 45 local partners and more than 410 coalition members in 17 countries, to overcome women's exclusion from political, social and economic life. The programme also seeks to draw out lessons from these experiences at country level, to strengthen wider governance work, and to increase Oxfam's impact in this vital area.

Raising Her Voice is mainly funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development's (DFID) Governance and Transparency Fund. DFID supports initiatives to help civil society, the media and other stakeholders to promote accountable and transparent governance and governments.

Objectives

Raising Her Voice is a diverse portfolio of projects, each with its own priorities and approaches that take into account local realities and opportunities. However, all projects share the overall objective of ensuring that public policy, decision-making, practices, and expenditure reflect the interests of poor and marginalised women. Strategies fall broadly into four 'clusters' of activities:

1. Enabling poor women activists to network, campaign, and advocate;
2. Supporting civil-society organisations to achieve poor women's rights as citizens, through awareness raising, capacity building, and training;
3. Working with public institutions and decision-making forums, including traditional structures;
4. Disseminating lessons and good practice through innovative media and communications work.

Seven African country projects are managed within a regional Pan-African programme. This has links to a continent-wide coalition, also supported by Raising Her Voice, which is working to ensure the ratification, domestication and implementation of the African Women's Rights Protocol. Ten country projects in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe have developed out of their own national priorities. A global coordination team supports project management and accountability, facilitates the sharing of learning and carries out global advocacy.

Strategies and approaches

Poor and marginalised women face multiple barriers to involvement in decision-making at all levels. They need determination and encouragement plus targeted and sustained support to strengthen their political leadership and participation. Similarly, while appropriate laws and policies are necessary, they do not guarantee that women's rights will be upheld, and efforts are needed to ensure implementation. Therefore Raising Her Voice works at different levels, often combining two or more approaches, to achieve lasting changes in women's lives.

Building women's confidence and capacity

Many Raising Her Voice projects have had a strong impact on women's personal confidence and capacity through creating and strengthening social spaces where women can support each other, as well as through direct training and support. With confidence, women have been able to find ways to influence local decision-making; use their knowledge of laws to defend and access their rights; and to challenge the negative stereotypes and cultural norms which hold them back from participating in public life. The Raising Her Voice projects in Armenia, Indonesia, Nepal and South Africa provide particularly strong examples of this.

"I was speaking very little before. Now I can express my thoughts and speak out in public. I have my own vision and can initiate something on my own."

Project participant, Armenia

Strengthening women's organisations

Projects are building and linking organisations and networks to advocate for women's rights at different levels, and strengthening their ability to raise public awareness and challenge stereotypes. This includes work to strengthen women's collective voice - supporting women to organise, mobilise, debate and agree priorities and strategies for effective engagement in governance. This has been a particularly effective approach in Bolivia, Nepal and Uganda, and in the Pan-African programme.

"Our unity is our strength. For showing us where our strength lies, we would like to thank Raising Her Voice."

Project participant, Nepal

Raising public awareness

Projects are working to create a supportive social environment, which includes raising public awareness of women's rights, priorities and needs; building public openness to hearing women's voices; and influencing the media. This has been a strong focus of the work in Armenia, Guatemala and Indonesia.

"I realise now that women want to be involved but they don't have enough opportunity to speak out, so we have to start to listen to women's voices."

Male participant in a Raising Her Voice awareness-raising session, Indonesia

Influencing decision-makers

Projects are working directly with government stakeholders and other decision-makers to strengthen laws and policies, and gain their support for women to access decision-making positions and claim their rights. This has included helping women to participate formally as elected representatives; bringing women into dialogue with decision-makers, so that they can voice their needs and concerns for themselves; and lobbying governments on key women's rights issues. Project work at this level has been a particular focus in Guatemala, Honduras, Nigeria and Pakistan.

"Before [Raising Her Voice], women didn't participate in meetings, but now we are involved in school boards, where all members are women, and the COCODE [development councils], where half of the members are women."

Project participant, Guatemala

The case studies in this pack explore the strategies that each of the Raising Her Voice projects have used, the impact they are having, and the lessons they have learned.

Find out more about Raising Her Voice through videos, images, key documents and blogs at:
<http://raisinghervoice.ning.com/>

Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.

