

1. Women's Leadership and Participation

Overview

Introduction

Why support women's participation and leadership?

Throughout both the developing and the developed world, women carry a disproportionately high burden of poverty. This poverty is experienced not just as material deprivation, but also as marginalisation, which means that those living in poverty often have no, or little opportunity to influence the political, economic, and social processes and institutions which control and shape their lives and keep them trapped in a cycle of poverty.

For poor women, this experience of marginalisation is effectively doubled: not only do they belong to communities that exist 'on the edges of society', but they are also often denied a voice *within* the states, markets, communities, and households in which they live, dominated as they are by men and male interests. This lack of voice functions as a critical factor in the maintenance of gender inequality and poverty, effectively blocking women's access to decision-making and agenda-setting processes, and beyond that, opportunities for leading these processes. This situation contributes to an invisibility of women as public actors and constitutes a negation of their rights to equal participation. It also perpetuates a decision-making process which is less likely to represent women's interests than a more representative system and which, therefore, possesses neither the vision nor the motivation to challenge or change unequal gender relations in society.

Women's equal participation and leadership in decision-making processes at every level and in every sector is therefore fundamental to attempts to eliminate gender-based poverty. In order to challenge the unequal and ultimately unsustainable economic and social systems in which we live, and to secure the essential resources they need for dignified and rewarding lives, it has been argued that women need... 'to be visible politically *as women* and be empowered to act in that capacity, because... they... have needs and attitudes on vital issues which differ from those of men'.¹ Women's presence in significant numbers in elected bodies and in economic institutions can result in more equitable policy outcomes because it is likely to encourage policy makers to give more attention to issues affecting women, such as equal pay, better conditions of employment, child-care, violence against women, and unpaid labour.² And economic policies are also more likely to acknowledge the value of unpaid caring work (most of which is done by women) as an economic asset to be maintained and developed.

For instance, in Norway, women members of Parliament brought about the 'politics of care', which obligates the state to increase publicly sponsored child-care services, extend parental leave and flexible working, and improve pension rights for carers.³ In South Africa, women parliamentarians have led the world in the process of introducing gender budgeting to analyse state spending from a gender perspective and allocate resources to women's needs.⁴ While having more women in leadership positions does not guarantee women's concerns will be on the agenda, there is evidence that once a critical mass of women – over one-third – is in power, their shared interests *as women* start to come to the fore, as these two examples illustrate.⁵

Not only is women's participation and leadership an essential prerequisite for poverty alleviation and tackling gender inequality, it is also a basic human right. International human-rights treaties and conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),⁶ the Beijing Platform for Action,⁷ and the third Millennium Development Goal on gender equality, recognise that women have the right to participate equally with men at all levels and in all aspects of public life and decision-making, whether it is deciding how the household income is spent or determining how the country is run, and such conventions commit signatories to realising this goal.

Despite these commitments to promoting gender equality in formal structures of representation and decision-making, women continue to be under-represented in all areas of decision-making and face significant barriers to their full and equal participation in the structures and institutions that govern, and directly affect, their lives.

Why women's participation and leadership is critical to Oxfam GB's work

As a rights-based humanitarian, development, and campaigning organisation which works with others to overcome poverty and suffering, Oxfam GB has, for many years, sought to ensure that women's right to equal participation in the design and delivery of programmes is respected, so that they have greater influence over decisions affecting their lives. Increasingly there is a drive to go beyond this and support women's leadership of the institutions and processes that perpetuate the gendered inequalities of wealth and power that reinforce the denial of women's rights, giving particular support and encouragement to transformative leadership that seeks explicitly to challenge those inequalities.

This series of Programme Insights on Women's Leadership and Participation documents learning from programmes that Oxfam GB and its partners have been supporting around the world. Case studies from the Philippines, Israel, and the UK detail projects which have sought to nurture and draw attention to women's participation and leadership in the economic sphere, through supporting their activities in civil-society organisations. Four papers – from Sierra Leone, Honduras, Cambodia, and Haiti – describe programme work to encourage women's political participation in formal government structures. Finally, the case study from Chile makes the important link between increasing women's visibility in the economic and social sectors, and engaging in advocacy to promote women's employment rights at the political level.

Activities described here have taken place at all levels, from working with marginalised women to identify, articulate, and lobby on community-level issues of concern in the UK, to supporting elected representatives and ministers to incorporate a gender and poverty analysis into their work at senior government levels in Sierra Leone, Honduras, and Haiti. In all these case studies, no matter the level at which activities are taking place, what emerges strongly is the need to challenge actively the stereotypes, attitudes, and beliefs that continue to limit women's opportunities to realise their potential as active citizens and leaders. While all women are affected by these stereotypes, those living in poverty face further prejudice not just because of their gender identity, but also because of their class (or caste) identity, levels of education, and often racial or ethnic identity as well, all of which intersect to render them 'unfit' for positions of leadership and influence, in the eyes of powerful elites. These prejudices need to be challenged and addressed at every level, including by those women who do succeed in attaining formal positions of power and influence, and by male leaders. It is not enough just to 'get women into power'; once there, they need to be supported and encouraged to act in the best interests of *all* women, to

be held accountable to this responsibility, and to influence their male peers to do the same.

This is not an arena of ‘quick fixes’ and instant impact, but one where change is happening gradually, as women leaders and would-be leaders are nurtured and supported to engage with and participate in decision-making processes in a way that challenges inequalities and injustice. Reflecting this, many of the programmes featured here are as yet unable to provide concrete examples of how women’s increased participation and leadership have brought about positive changes for women living in poverty and marginalisation, beyond the very local level (in the case studies from Israel and Cambodia, for instance). That said, we feel that these case studies present some useful examples of ‘work in progress’ towards enabling the active participation of women from all backgrounds in decision-making structures, and towards strengthening transformative and progressive leadership, that will, in the future, bring about real and positive change for women living in poverty and marginalisation.

A snapshot of women’s participation and leadership in the world today

Economic institutions

In the field of economics and finance, women remain sorely under-represented in decision-making in institutions at local, national, and international levels. At government level, only 14 per cent of finance ministers are female (28 across 193 countries).⁸ International institutions, which shape economic and social policy in developing countries, have few women leaders. For example, at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, women comprise around 20 per cent of leadership staff, and under ten per cent of governors.⁹ And women are woefully absent at the top levels of business – just 25 out of the top 1000 multinational corporations are run by women.¹⁰ So the increasing role of the private sector in development is not showing promising signs of advancing women’s empowerment.

At the household and community levels, despite women moving into many economic fields which were once male-dominated, the gender division of labour is still very real both within the home and outside it. Within the household, women carry the overwhelming burden of unpaid reproductive labour and caring work, which affects their ability to be active outside the home, and to influence economic decisions within it. In many poor rural households, women’s role in agricultural production and processing often goes unrecognised or undervalued. And if women also work outside the home, they often find themselves in low-status, informal-sector jobs with few benefits and little protection. Even in the formal sector, women still earn considerably less than men. While women make up nearly 40 per

cent of the global paid workforce, they earn only 26 per cent of the world's income.¹¹ With little or no voice in the organisations and institutions which regulate or control the economic sector, the status of women will remain unchallenged.

On the positive side, women's income, and their career options in comparison to men's, have increased significantly over the past few decades, and they have shown spectacular success in running their own businesses across the world. But despite this, women are seldom found as managers, owners, and entrepreneurs in enterprises.

Even trade unions, co-operatives, and other producer associations, which are meant to uphold and represent the rights of *all* workers, often have few women in positions of power (unless they are dedicated women's co-operatives). Trade unions in particular are very male-dominated, with the result that the particular needs and priorities of women workers are often ignored. The types of work that women engage in, and the frequent precariousness of their employment situations, may also make it very difficult for them to obtain support from, and influence the policies of, traditional trade unions.

Political institutions

In almost all countries, women have now won the right to vote. Yet there are still scandalously few women in positions of political leadership. Globally, just 17.4 per cent of national political representatives are female, and only 15 out of 193 countries worldwide have achieved 30 per cent women in national governments.¹² In addition, globally, just 3.5 per cent of senior ministerial positions are held by women, meaning that at the top levels of government, women currently have little opportunity to shape policy.¹³ Lower down, in the regional and sub-regional government institutions which often play an important role in determining access to essential services and resources, women remain conspicuous by their absence. Women coming from poor backgrounds, or belonging to ethnic or other minority groups (based for instance on their sexual identity, (dis)ability, or HIV status) are particularly under-represented in formal political structures.

However, there are signs of improvement. Since 1995, the average proportion of women in national assemblies has almost doubled. There has been considerable progress in some parts of Africa. Six African countries now have better profiles for women's representation than the Europe/OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) countries (excluding the Scandinavian countries).¹⁴ The recent arrival to power of women heads of state such as Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia and Michelle Bachelet in Chile also indicates growing acceptance of the legitimacy of women leaders. Bachelet's election in particular provides hope, given that she campaigned on an openly pro-gender equality and women's rights

agenda. This agenda is now being transformed into policy decisions strengthening the rights of women in Chile, such as increasing child-care provision for low-income mothers, and legislation to allow access to emergency contraception.

Civil-society institutions

Because of women's historic lack of presence in formal government and the structural barriers they face in entering the political sphere, many women have sought leadership positions within civil-society organisations, as a means of finding alternative ways to forge the changes and obtain the responses they seek.¹⁵ In an example from Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories included here, poor Israeli-Arab women who are marginalised within their own communities, as well as within Israeli society more generally, have been able to secure influence through their activism within a civil-society organisation campaigning on rights for the unemployed.

However, even in NGOs and community-based organisations which claim to represent 'the community', women are much less likely to be leaders than men, and women's shared interests are less likely to be on the agenda. Community-based organisations may also end up being dominated by the interests of more powerful, wealthy members of the community, again marginalising poorer women's priorities and experiences. Women have founded their own organisations in response to this, yet these are often sidelined from policy processes involving civil-society organisations, and again, may reflect the interests of women who are already in relative positions of influence and power, rather than those lower down the social scale.

Barriers to women's participation and leadership, and strategies to overcome them

There are many factors which constrain women's ability to participate on an equal footing with men and to take up positions of leadership, regardless of whether they are poor or not, but these factors always impact hardest on poor women. Institutional gender bias represents a challenge to all women seeking equal participation and competing for leadership positions, as does the way that political and economic systems are organised. Scepticism and mistrust of women's ability to lead, and the stereotypes and prejudices about their role in society and their lack of suitability for leadership roles and decision-making, are other major challenges for all women.

Women living in poverty face a range of additional barriers. Lack of education and low levels of literacy make access to information difficult and commonly undermine the confidence and skills needed to enter public life whether at village, community, local, or national level. Lack of financial resources restrict poor women's opportunities and confidence to risk competing for, and maintaining, leadership

positions, as well as not allowing them to purchase caring support for dependants, which is often crucial to enable them to combine active public and family lives. Women are also less likely than men to have the networks, contacts, and social and professional experience expected of public leaders. Women living in poverty carry the overwhelming burden of reproductive labour within families; in many contexts, this includes collecting fuel and water, and cultivating subsistence crops to feed their families. This means that time is a critical resource. For poor women, participating in public decision-making beyond their immediate needs for survival may seem like an impossible extra burden. Restrictions on women's mobility, be they cultural, legal, or the result of women's own fears of encountering violence and harassment if they leave the safety of their own communities, may make travelling to take part in meetings or forums very difficult. This also limits campaigning opportunities for women seeking election to formal positions of power. In addition, women living in poverty are subject to particular gender-related risks and vulnerabilities caused by factors such as HIV, disability, and gender-based violence, all of which compound their inability to participate on an equal footing with men.

Carrying out 'gender audits' of one kind or another – for instance, research into how a particular issue or policy is impacting on women's well-being, as detailed in the Philippines case study (relating to trade liberalisation), or a participatory needs assessment, as undertaken by Oxfam GB's partner Sawt el-Amel in Israel (to determine how women were being affected by the Wisconsin Plan, a new 'welfare to work' programme) – are an important way of assessing what factors are limiting women's opportunities for participation in a particular context, in order to find ways of challenging and overcoming those limitations.

In broad terms there are three areas which need to be tackled:

- overcoming structural barriers;
- encouraging and supporting women to take up leadership roles or participate in decision-making on an equal footing with men;
- supporting women and men to carry out leadership roles which challenge inequalities of wealth and power and recognise and promote women's rights.

These will now be examined in greater depth, drawing examples from the case studies included in this series.

Overcoming the structural barriers to women's participation and leadership

Legislative reform

In the political sphere, the way elections are organised and run, especially in the selection of candidates, presents women with

particular problems, whether this is getting selected for a constituency-based election or appearing on a party list of candidates. Lack of knowledge, lack of access to patronage networks, lack of financial support, and active or perceived prejudice against women candidates all act as structural barriers to women participating in elections for public office at all levels of representation. For instance, in Sierra Leone, women candidates reported that political parties would often remove women from candidate lists at the last minute, replacing them with male candidates who, they felt, were more likely to win the seat.

In light of this, electoral reform can provide new opportunities for women seeking to become leaders in the political arena. The implementation of quotas and reservation of seats have been the key instruments in increasing women's political representation, and over 40 countries have adopted quota¹⁶ laws to regulate the selection or election of women to political office. In several of the examples included in this series – Sierra Leone, Haiti, Honduras – lobbying for the implementation or extension of quotas for women candidates has formed a central part of the programme's long-term work on women's participation and leadership, as has educating women voters about legislative changes, to encourage them to realise their right to participate in elections. However, women's interests as a collective group have not necessarily been advanced by quotas, as women who do succeed in reaching leadership roles may be unaware of the need (or be unwilling) to champion women's rights and influence their male colleagues to do the same. Because of this, if used in isolation or understood as being sufficient to bring about women's wider equality, quotas are vulnerable to political manipulation and have limited transformative power.¹⁷ And if the political will to implement quotas is lacking, and no mechanisms exist to enforce compliance, political parties and state structures may simply ignore them, as the example from Honduras illustrates.

Policies of decentralisation have been of particular significance in increasing women's representation at the local level. These give local and regional governments (rather than central government) the power to make decisions about local services, such as health, education, and sanitation. Because it is often easier for women to get elected at local level than at national level, decentralisation can give women real influence over decisions which will have a direct impact on the lives of members of their communities. In recognition of this, the introduction of decentralisation policies in Cambodia and Sierra Leone prompted Oxfam GB and its partners to give support to women standing for election to local government.

Increasing visibility in the economic sector

Women's under-representation in leadership roles in the economic sphere contributes to: the undervaluing and lack of recognition of

their contribution to the paid and unpaid economy; working conditions and production processes that do not meet their needs; lack of access to and control of economic resources; and their concentration at the lower end of the economic value chain, meaning they enjoy lower economic returns.

An important first step in strengthening women's opportunities to participate in decision-making and to attain leadership positions in the economic sector is making their contributions to that sector visible. Recognising this, in both the Philippines and in Chile, Oxfam GB and its partners worked to highlight women's vital contributions to the fishing sector and to the agricultural export sector respectively. In the Philippines, 'gender audits' helped to identify what contributions women are making to the fishing industry as a whole, and illuminate how the way in which worker organisations operate was making it difficult for women to participate actively. This highlighted the need for the creation of more inclusive management structures and for leadership training to enable women to participate more effectively in them. In Chile, Oxfam GB has facilitated links between women's rights organisations, trade unions, and mainstream civil-society organisations, as well as supporting a network of women agricultural workers to represent and lobby on behalf of women workers. This has led to a greater awareness of women's presence in the agricultural export industry, and of the vulnerability and exploitation that women workers experience, which in turn has meant that these alliances have lobbied effectively for changes in national level legislation to protect women workers' rights.

In Israel, the introduction of the Wisconsin Plan, an unpopular 'welfare to work' programme, prompted women from the Arab minority to act, on the grounds that the programme had a negative impact on women, was exploitative, and put the welfare of families in jeopardy. For many women, this was the first time that they had taken part in any kind of public activity. Doing so has unleashed their enormous potential for leadership and activism, as well as making them visible in public as a collective group. This was recognised by Oxfam GB's partner organisation Sawt el-Amel, and for the first time, women are now integrated into the organisation's leadership structure.

Changing attitudes to women's leadership and participation

Traditional attitudes and beliefs about women's role in society continue to prejudice both men's and women's preconceptions regarding women's ability to participate fully in public life. These attitudes include stereotypes about women being dependent, unskilled, and not suitable for institutional leadership and strategic decision-making. People may even question the 'morality' of women seeking leadership positions. In Sierra Leone, many women candidates reported experiencing hostility from female voters in

particular, who told them to 'go back home where they belong'. Elsewhere, in many conservative contexts women are actively prohibited from engagement in activities outside the home.

Working with women in the fishing industry in the Philippines, Oxfam GB and its partners found that a major obstacle to women's active participation and leadership was the women's own acceptance of existing gender roles and relations. In response to this, part of Oxfam GB's work has consisted not only of encouraging women in the fishing industry to recognise that they have the right to be leaders, but also encouraging women to reconsider their gendered perceptions about 'what makes a good leader'. In the UK, women participating in training to encourage economic and political participation and empowerment did not really have any sense of shared solidarity as women. It was only through meeting women from other parts of the country, and identifying and discussing common problems that they faced, that the participants came to realise that in fact, as women, they did face many of the same issues, and that many of these were the result of gender inequality, and stereotypes regarding acceptable masculine and feminine behaviour. These examples underline how important it is to remember that any work in this field must include activities that challenge women's own perceptions about their suitability for leadership.

Working to encourage men to be more receptive to the idea of women occupying positions of power is also critical in challenging the inequality and discrimination that women face. In Sierra Leone, as well as providing gender training to male politicians and leaders, Oxfam GB's partner the 50/50 Group is seeking to identify male 'champions' in positions of authority, who will be prepared to speak out in support of women's right to political leadership and participation. Such champions are crucial, the 50/50 Group argue, in changing other men's attitudes, as well as encouraging those men who reject male dominance and support more equal participation and leadership in development processes to speak out.

It is also true that 'actions speak louder than words'. In the Arab communities in Israel affected by the unpopular Wisconsin Plan, women have come to lead resistance to the Plan. Initially, some men objected to their wives and sisters participating in public protests. But now that the men in these communities have seen the benefits that the women's activism and leadership is bringing, most are supportive, and are happy to follow women's leadership in this campaign. In a society which is very traditional with regards to gender roles, and where women's mobility and activity is tightly controlled by male relatives, this represents a significant shift in gender power relations.

Dealing with constraints on women's time and mobility

Among the many practical barriers facing women who wish to take a more active role in the political, economic, and civil-society sectors is lack of time. There is a strong male bias in the work culture of many institutions, many of which favour leaders who have a traditional 'male' role in family life over those who carry out unpaid caring work. This places women at a distinct disadvantage, given the fact that everywhere, women are expected to undertake the bulk of domestic and child-care work, often in addition to paid work outside the home; younger married women in particular are likely to experience 'time poverty', given that they are often responsible not just for looking after their own children and husbands, but also members of their husband's extended family. In many contexts, these caring responsibilities will extend to collecting fuel and water, and growing food to feed their families.

Lack of control over if or when to have children also makes it difficult for women to plan their participation in leadership contests or elections, underlining how important reproductive rights are to enabling women to participate and lead. Those women who have become successful as leaders have often been able to do so because they have not had dependants to care for, are wealthy enough to be able to buy in care and other domestic help, or have been able to plan when to have their children, and how many to have. In the long term, attitudes need to change, and household labour needs to be more equally divided among all household members, men included. But in the short term, many of the programmes described in these case studies made sure that leadership training did not add to women's already considerable workload. In the Philippines and in Honduras, women receiving leadership training were offered free child-care, while in the UK, training was scheduled to fit around the school day, and in a way that meant the participants did not lose access to state benefits.

Limits on women's mobility are also a significant barrier to full participation, and to attaining positions of leadership. In many instances, these limitations are cultural. For instance, in the Arab community in Israel, it is generally not considered acceptable for women to be active outside the home, making women's involvement in the public campaign against the Wisconsin Plan there particularly significant. But in other contexts, these limitations may be practical and economic, often relating to the need to care for young children and the inability to pay for transport and/or child-care costs. They may also be the result of women's own lack of self-confidence and experience of travelling on their own, or speaking in public. In Honduras, Oxfam GB's partners provided women from poor, rural communities with free transport to attend meetings with candidates standing for election so that they could actively participate in democratic processes, as well as providing free, on-site child-care to

rural indigenous women who were attending leadership training at an 'advocacy school'. In the UK, as well as paying for transport and accommodation to enable women to attend lobbying meetings in London, Oxfam GB's partners ensured that the women travelled and attended meetings in pairs, so that they would not feel isolated.

Addressing inequalities of wealth and power

At every level, from the household to national government, unequal power relations impact on women's ability to participate fully in public life, and to attain positions of leadership. There are many ways that this power inequality is maintained, for example through: the use (or threat) of violence against women; restrictions on women's activities, dress, or movement which are sanctioned by culture or religion; gender stereotyping that presents women's unequal place in society as 'natural' and 'normal'; and patronage systems and networks that are dominated by men and male interests.

In the Philippines, Oxfam GB's partner organisation Developers found that encouraging women participants to analyse and discuss their own experiences of violence within the family led to their realising the extent to which violence impacts more generally on women's abilities to participate in decision-making processes outside the home. Participants then went on to raise awareness of violence against women within their community, and to lobby for local development plans to address gender-based violence.

Lack of funding is identified as an important obstacle in many of the case studies dealing with women's political leadership. This is not surprising, given the extent to which poverty disproportionately affects women everywhere, resulting from, as well as contributing to, their unequal status in society; but it may also result from women failing to gain full support from the political parties for which they are standing. In Sierra Leone, women who had stood for election in the 2004 local elections said that the small grants given to them by the 50/50 Group, Oxfam GB's partner, had made an enormous difference in terms of enabling them to pay for travel and other expenses during their campaigning. But allocating funding in this way is not ideal, not least because it could be seen as compromising the neutrality of projects designed to support women candidates, and because it is only ever a short-term solution to the problem. Recognising this, the 50/50 Group is also campaigning to reduce the current financial requirements for standing for election. In Honduras, Oxfam GB's partner organisations are pressing for a reduction in the campaign period, again because this would cut down on the amount of money that women candidates would have to spend on campaigning. Ultimately, of course, the only sustainable solution will be an improvement in the economic status of all women.

Encouraging and supporting women to take up, and be effective in, leadership roles

Providing targeted training to women who want to assume positions of leadership is one way of enabling more women to influence decision-making processes. Several of the papers in this collection give examples of women wishing to stand for election being provided with training that included, according to context, leadership and campaign skills, knowledge of political systems and structures, and how to develop and propose agendas that uphold women's rights. Activities also included legal-rights education or voter awareness-raising around elections, mobilising women to vote in elections and to hold elected representatives to account. Such campaigns are often vital in contexts where poor women in particular may have little awareness of their rights as voters and as citizens. Due to lack of literacy skills and their exclusion from channels of information, they may not have any way of finding out about these rights for themselves. For instance, some of the women community leaders who took part in training in Sierra Leone were not even aware that they had the right to *vote*, let alone stand for election.

An important challenge for organisations such as Oxfam GB or its partners is how this support can be delivered in as impartial a way as is possible, in order to maintain a distinction between supporting an increase in women's participation in political and economic institutions and avoiding a perception that the programme supports particular political interests. Another challenge is making sure that women from a diverse range of backgrounds – ethnicity, age, level of education, (dis)ability, socio-economic status – are included in training activities. This is something which has been achieved with varying levels of success in these programmes.

While training and support is important for women as they seek to attain positions of power, all too often, once they have been elected, or have attained a position of leadership, women find that they are left to 'fend for themselves' in what can be a very hostile environment. In the Women In Leadership Project (WIL), the first stage of Oxfam GB and the 50/50 Group's work on promoting women's political participation and leadership in Sierra Leone, emphasis was placed on preparing women (most of whom came from poor backgrounds and had no experience of formal leadership positions) for election. Once elected, many women councillors felt overwhelmed by and ill-equipped for the duties that they were now expected to undertake, often as a result of poor literacy skills, particularly when it came to working in English. So in the second stage of this work, the Promoting A Culture of Equal Representation (PACER) project, ongoing mentoring support is being offered to women councillors and members of Parliament, to help them to be more effective in their roles.

In Haiti, as well as supporting women standing for election, Oxfam GB's partner Fanm Yo La provides ongoing training to women councillors, senators, and deputies. In addition, the 'Women in Politics School' aims to motivate local women to enter politics and take up leadership roles. In Cambodia, Oxfam GB's partner Women For Prosperity has established regular Female Councillor Forums (FCFs), where women councillors can gain experience of speaking in public in a supportive environment, and learn from other councillors who have dealt with discrimination and other problems successfully. The benefits of this are tangible, with participants reporting that they now feel comfortable contributing to council debates, standing up to discrimination, and assuming extra responsibilities, such as leading committees.

Oxfam GB's work in the UK does not centre on preparing women for formal positions of leadership, but rather on encouraging women living in poverty to engage with the institutions that make decisions which impact on their lives. Central to this is building these women's confidence, and encouraging them to recognise that they have the right to challenge situations and decisions which they think are unfair, or which will have a negative impact. But another important aspect of this work has been preparing those in positions of power so that they are ready to really listen to what the women have to say, in order to make such exchanges as worthwhile as possible for both sides.

Beyond developing women's capacities to lead, there is a need to transform models of leadership development so that they become more gender responsive, and include issues such as participatory governance and inclusive dialogue, as exemplified by the Philippines case study. This is a relatively new area of thinking that has enormous potential for strengthening leadership on women's rights.

Supporting women and men to carry out leadership roles which recognise and promote women's rights

If increasing the profile of women in leadership roles is to be successful as a means of benefiting women living in poverty, this must be linked to a broader process of promoting women's rights and initiatives to combat poverty. In several of the case studies, increasing numbers of women in positions of power has had a direct, beneficial impact on the welfare of women living in poverty at the local level. In Cambodia, for instance, women councillors elected in local elections following the introduction of decentralisation have worked to provide targeted assistance to the poorest and most marginalised members of their communities, such as those affected by HIV.

But it is important to recognise that not all formal mechanisms to increase the profile of women automatically have this outcome. For instance, in the Honduras case study, electoral reform led to more women being elected, but many of these new congresswomen come

from religious, conservative backgrounds, and are members of the country's economic and cultural elite. They have been responsible for sponsoring regressive legislation that will limit women's rights and opportunities to advance gender equality, such as a ban on gender-sensitive sex education in schools. Women in formal positions of power will not necessarily act in the interests of other women, or of poor people or other marginalised groups. In addition, it is wrong to assume that all progressive women politicians will automatically be 'gender aware', and will incorporate women's rights and gender-equality issues into their agendas in a meaningful way.

In response to this, Oxfam GB's partners' work in Honduras since the elections has included building alliances between those congresswomen who are keen to promote women's rights and gender equality, and women's rights organisations. Both sides have benefited, with the organisations able to lobby these politicians directly, and the politicians receiving the information and ideas that they need, in order to be able to push for legislation within congress that advances gender equality and women's rights. Elsewhere, in Haiti, Sierra Leone, and Cambodia, women politicians elected to office have received training to help them identify key inequality issues affecting their constituents.

Another approach aimed at encouraging progressive candidates to integrate gender and poverty alleviation into their agendas has been the adoption of local 'pacts', or 'protocols'. In Haiti and Honduras, Oxfam GB's partner organisations facilitated meetings between voters and female and male candidates, where the former had a chance to voice their concerns and demands. Representatives from women's rights organisations were also invited to attend. At the end of the meetings, candidates formally signed a pact (in Honduras), or protocol (in Haiti), in which they pledged to be accountable to their electorate, to address the priorities identified by their constituents in the event of being elected, and to promote women's rights and gender equality.

Conclusion

Programmes aimed at strengthening women's leadership and participation will have limited impact unless the structures that uphold gender inequality, and other forms of inequality, begin to change. In addition to projects directly supporting women to participate actively in the economic, political, and civil-society sectors, many of the programmes described in these case studies have sought to challenge: unrepresentative governance and electoral systems that are not accountable to voters; organisational structures that reinforce male control and influence; and the economic discrimination that women face. For such challenges to be successful, men must be brought on board at all levels to accept the idea of

women occupying positions of power, to support women in attaining and carrying out effective leadership that challenges all forms of inequality, and to work with women to develop collective agendas for upholding women's rights.

Some of the principles that need to guide this work which have emerged through the experience of running these programmes are:

- There needs to be a particular focus on supporting the participation and leadership of women living in poverty or who suffer discrimination on the basis of aspects of their social identity such as disability, ethnicity, class, caste, HIV status, religion, or age.
- Work to support women's leadership will only advance poor women's interests if accompanied by long-term support for claiming and exercising their rights in other areas such as access to and control over resources, access to public services such as education and health, or protection from violence.
- Any support provided to prospective or elected women politicians must be carried out in as non-partisan a way as is possible.

A final important lesson concerns the need to base any programme work on an in-depth understanding of the particular gender issues facing a given community or organisation, and hence the particular barriers to women's participation and leadership in that context. 'Gender audits' in the Philippines case study, the participatory needs assessment carried out by Oxfam GB's partner organisation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and research undertaken by the civil-society 'observatories' in Chile all directly informed subsequent programme interventions and advocacy strategies that went on to have positive impacts for poor women.

Perhaps most significant to overcoming gender inequality, and the other forms of inequality and discrimination that keep women in poverty, is the work that feminist and women's rights organisations are already doing to articulate the needs of poor women, and to push for their strategic interests to be met. The work of just a few of these organisations – Movimiento de Mujeres por la Paz and Centro de Estudios de la Mujer in Honduras, Fanm Yo La in Haiti, Women for Prosperity in Cambodia, the 50/50 Group in Sierra Leone, and the Women's Budget Group in the UK – is profiled in these case studies. These groups, whether working at the local or national level, are made up of individuals who are already proving to be effective leaders, and are enabling other women to gain greater control over their lives, and to engage with their communities as active citizens.

Notes

¹ A.G. Jónasdóttir (1988) 'On the concept of interests, women's interests and the limitation of interest theory', in K. B. Jones and A. G. Jónasdóttir (eds.) *The Political Interests of Gender*, London: Sage Publications.

² Women's Environment & Development Organisation (WEDO), www.wedo.org (last accessed January 2008).

³ Women's Environment & Development Organisation (WEDO) '50/50 Campaign Kit', www.wedo.org/campaigns.aspx?mode=5050campaignkit (last accessed January 2008).

⁴ M. Fleschman (2002) "'Gender budgets" seek more equity. Improved spending priorities can benefit all Africans', *Africa Recovery* 16:1, www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol16no1/161wm.htm (last accessed January 2008).

⁵ For a review of the literature on the importance of a achieving a 'critical mass' of women in political institutions, see S. Grey (2001) 'Women and parliamentary politics. Does size matter? Critical mass and women MPs in the New Zealand House of Representatives', Paper for the 51st Political Studies Association Conference, 10–12 April 2001, Manchester, United Kingdom, www.capwip.org/readingroom/nz_wip.pdf (last accessed January 2008).

⁶ The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination (www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm – last accessed December 2007).

⁷ The Beijing Platform for Action, signed at the UN Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, commits 189 signatory governments to 'take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in decision-making and leadership...'. These measures include '[establishing] the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including ... setting targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men, if necessary through positive action, in all governmental and public administration positions'. (www.wedo.org/campaigns.aspx?mode=5050campaignkit – last accessed December 2007). This pledge was reiterated in 2006 at the 50th Commission on the Status of Women.

⁸ 'African Women Are Ready to Lead', *Africa Renewal*, July 2006, 7.

⁹ Women's Environment & Development Organisation (WEDO) 'The numbers speak for themselves', Fact Sheet no. 1, www.wedo.org/files/numbersspeak_factsh1.pdf (last accessed January 2008).

¹⁰ <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2007/womenceos/> (last accessed January 2008).

¹¹ United Nations (1995) *The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics*, New York: United Nations Statistics Division. Globally the gender gap in wages is hard to determine because so much data is not available. Within the industrial and services sector, the gap ranges between 53 per cent and 97 per cent with an average of 78 per cent (UNIFEM (2000) 'Biennial Report. Progress of the World's Women, 2000', New York: UNIFEM).

¹² Inter-Parliamentary Union (www.ipu.org – last accessed December 2007).

¹³ WOMANKIND (www.womankind.org.uk/statistics.html – last accessed December 2007).

¹⁴ For instance, Rwanda's lower house has 48 per cent women, South Africa's Parliament 32.8 per cent, and Mozambique 34.8 per cent. Inter-Parliamentary Union (www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif300906.htm – last accessed December 2007).

¹⁵ S. Clisby (2005) 'Gender mainstreaming or just more male-streaming? Experiences of popular participation in Bolivia', *Gender and Development* 13(2): 23–35.

¹⁶ There are two types – reserved seats and legislative quotas. Most quotas prior to the 1990s were adopted voluntarily by political parties and, as such, were directed only at reserving seats in a single party via changes to selection practices. Over the last decade, however, a growing number of national legislatures have adopted legislative quotas – amending constitutions and electoral laws to mandate that all parties increase the percentage of women they nominate for local or national elections.

¹⁷ In Eritrea – a state with no democracy or accountability – the women elected via quotas have no power to influence government decisions and there is confusion among them about who they represent. In Tanzania, the use of reserved seats for women has taken the pressure off political parties to place women in the ballot and may have eroded the power of women to take their places in Parliament via the 'normal' routes (E. Ward (2006) 'Real or illusory progress? Electoral quotas and women's political participation in Tanzania, Eritrea and Uganda', *Trocaire Development Review*, 73–95, <http://trocaire.org/pdfs/policy/developmentreview/2006/devrev2006.pdf> – last accessed December 2007).

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