

Addressing gender and women's rights

Consideration of gender continues to be one of the main gaps in the planning, reflection and learning of advocacy work done by NGOs, community groups and social movements. A gender blind universalistic perspective is still common, which does not address how the inequalities between men and women are expressed in each context and struggle for rights. The invisibility of gender in the political agenda of many organisations has enormous implications: How can we overcome poverty, build democracy and achieve social justice without taking into account historical social inequalities based on gender?

To counter this gender blindness we advocate the adoption of gender lenses in all dimensions of advocacy work, from planning and monitoring to reflection and learning. Special attention needs to be paid to how issues affect the lives of women and girls in order to build affirmative strategies to overcome these

inequalities.

But, why is integrating gender concerns into advocacy frequently still a gap?

There are at least three different points that can help us unpack this question:

1) Gender is still perceived as a "natural" feature of human beings and not as a source of domination and social inequalities. Unfortunately, even among people working in NGOs and popular movements, the social differences between men and women are often seen as normal (with natural, cultural or divine causes). Gender discrimination is something that is so rooted in our blood, soul and minds that it is seen as something that cannot be changed. This perspective tends to depoliticise gender issues and put them outside the main agenda of political action and reflection. To achieve justice it is essential to challenge this apolitical approach to gender which is reaffirmed by religious and cultural fundamentalisms.

What are "Gender Lenses" and how can we use them?

It is important for all of us to expand our understanding and learning about gender issues to thereby increase the quality and the impact of our advocacy initiatives. The good news is that starting to use "gender lenses" does not require any previous expertise or training.

This is an invitation to look at the world with a different perspective. Instead of assuming men and women are affected in the same way by poverty and inequalities, we need to look at people's lives in new ways.

Gender lenses can, and should, be used constantly. Every time we are reflecting on and discussing an issue we should stop for a moment and ask ourselves whether we are taking gender into account. Useful questions to start this kind of reflection include: Is it (the subject of our reflection eg. land tenancy) affecting men and women in the same way? How is it challenging or reinforcing gender inequalities in this context? How can we deal with it?

It is best to start with simple questions and then, in the course of your reflection, you can add more complex points for deeper analysis.

You will see how it opens different, and often unexpected, dimensions for understanding and developing your advocacy strategies no matter the subject.

2) For many civil society groups, with the exception of women's movements, the debate on gender was introduced as an external requirement by other powerful players, such as donors. These ideas were often introduced, without a proper unpacking of how to address and incorporate them into an organisation's values and work. The last two decades have increased the demand to integrate gender into projects and reports, however, good friendly materials are not readily available to people to support them as they try to make these ideas real in their lives and work.

3) Many NGOs and social movements still do not discern that making gender a priority needs to go beyond only increasing the number of women

participants. Often, the quantitative increases do not become qualitative because no investment is made to empower these women or to open space for them in decision-making. It is common, unfortunately, to see processes where women are just invited to be an audience without creating conditions for their voice to be heard and counted.

Another more complex issue that requires attention is that fact that the participation of strong and powerful women does not guarantee in itself the adoption of gender lenses or the promotion of women's rights. Without challenging the attitudes of both men and women that reinforce women's inferior status and men's supremacy, no



real change can occur. Because over centuries women, like other poor and marginalised groups, have internalised these types of attitudes, they themselves, in many cases, have become their own oppressors. When they participate in positions of authority, they often reinforce these power dynamics. That's why such an important aspect of any advocacy aimed at policies and power structures needs to include deliberate work to help people question and overcome these beliefs.

HOW TO ADDRESS GENDER IN OUR ADVOCACY WORK?

The first and most important step is to realise that gender is one of the strongest sources of domination and social injustice in our world. So, to talk about gender is to talk about power. When struggling to overcome the denial of women's and girl's rights we need to challenge core power relations and structures in our societies.¹ To insert gender in our advocacy planning, reflection and learning we need to check whether we are taking into account the different faces of power in which gender domination is expressed.

We recommend paying special attention to how gender relations are operating in your specific context and in the particular issue you are working on. Concretely, how gender relations are:

- Shaping norms, values and ideologies;
- Shaping the political agenda;
- Determining whose voice is heard in decision-making processes;
- Framing formal decision-making and implementation of public policies.

As we do this we need to be aware that, in the same way power can operate in an invisible or hidden manner, gender dynamics are not always evident at first sight. The strongest expression of gender domination is usually "invisible" (especially to neutral eyes not wearing gender lenses).

As mentioned earlier, merely ensuring that women participate is not enough. It is also important to invest in women's empowerment and to ensure that they feel confident and able to participate fully in discussions and decision-making. This includes the development of political consciousness of men and women so that they are able to identify the different ways that power operates to oppress women and work to overcome it. The combination of these three will help to ensure that gender

Gender issues need particular attention in rights-based work

When working on "rights", gender-related imbalances in "rights" and "entitlements" are often overlooked because they are considered too difficult or too sensitive to tackle. Women, particularly the younger and poorer women, consistently lose out to men in terms of access to existing resources and power over decisions. Inheritance rights, land rights, reproductive rights, and other entitlements generally protect the interests of men as a group to the exclusion of the needs of women as a group. ActionAid and partners will need to discuss these issues with the women involved, about *whether* it is possible to open up such topics for discussion in ways that don't endanger women or undermine their voice and autonomy. Only then can we jointly agree *how* to put sensitive gender issues on the community development agenda. [Adapted from Notes to Accompany ALPS June 2001]

considerations are integrated into discussions and actions - hence improving the quality of our advocacy work.

The table below summarises some key points to focus on.

Discussing gender roles and relations can be a very emotional and sensitive issue as it challenges our perceptions of who we are as human beings and our role in the world. It therefore needs to be undertaken with care and sensitivity. This is particularly important in mixed groups, where it may be very hard for women to speak out and say what they really feel. Facilitators also need to think carefully about the longer term

repercussions of any discussions. Creating a "safe atmosphere" for the duration of the discussion is not enough when that safe environment cannot be offered outside the group. People who speak honestly - particularly women - can be placed at risk of retaliation or being ostracised at a later date.

Table summarising key questions to ask at different moments

Key moments	Women's full participation	Adoption of gender lenses
Planning	Did we create the best possible conditions for the participation and active intervention of women in this moment of the process? Did we guarantee that their voice was heard, respected and taken into account?	Is gender taken into account in: a) our contextual and power analysis? b) in our strategies and workplan? c) in the indicators and guidelines for monitoring?
Review and Learning		Is gender taken into account in our reflections and learning from our advocacy work? Are the indicators we selected contributing to deepening our analysis and understanding on how gender inequalities affect our struggle for rights? What lessons are we drawing from our work that will help others to promote women's and girl's rights?
Sharing and Accountability		Are our discussions, our plans, our reports and the results of our advocacy really addressing gender issues effectively? Are we investing enough resources to address gender issues? Are we fully engaging women in our governance systems?
Democratisation of Information		Does the information we share reflect and explain gender issues in an easy and accessible way? Do we make sufficient attempt to ensure everyone engaged in the advocacy understands the gender issues in it?

EXAMPLES OF TOOLS THAT CAN SUPPORT OUR DISCUSSIONS ON GENDER:

Gender and empowerment advocacy spiral

The gender and empowerment advocacy spiral is an interesting example of a framework that can be useful in helping people put on gender lenses for their planning and learning efforts. It is a spiral that we have adapted from Women for Changeⁱⁱ to plan advocacy and serves as the basis for an exercise that we present below.

This exercise can be useful to probe deeper on a particular issue or problem that is affecting people's lives.

1. WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE ISSUE?

In the spiral, the starting point (question 1) asks directly what is happening on the issue in focus from the women's point of view -specifically what's the problem(s) from their perspective? Depending on the group and context it may help to approach this question in different ways, for example:

Alternative A: The group is mixed - women and men.

When a group is mixed this way it's probably best to start with a prior question that is more general: "What is happening with regards to this issue?" To deepen the analysis, we then add the question 1 in a different way, asking "And if we try to look at this situation but now focus on how is it affecting women?" After that, the results of both reflections should be compared and discussed before passing to the next steps.

Alternative B: The group is just women or just men.

We can divide the participants into male or female only groups and ask them to discuss a broad question ("What is happening?") or ask each group to talk from their gender perspective "What is happening from men's/ women's point of view) After that we should compare both outputs and debate it before passing to the next step. However it is important to realise that having a women only group is not in itself sufficient to ensure that they are able to analyse the issue from a gender perspective - particularly where the group lacks critical consciousness or the gender dynamics are hard to see. Prior work may need to be done on unmasking invisible forms of power.

After discussing question 1 the group then goes on to discuss:

2. WHY IS IT HAPPENING? Why is this problem happening? What are the causes? What are the different faces of power operating in this case that reinforce the problem we are facing?

3. WHO HAS THE FORMAL POWER TO CHANGE THIS? WHO ELSE HAS POWER? Here the group are encouraged to look more deeply at questions of power and analyse the different ways it works.

4. HOW DOES IT AFFECT US? OUR FAMILY? OUR COMMUNITY? Here the group goes further into the problem they are facing to move from individual experience of the issue, to collective experience, on the way developing their motivation for changing the problem.

5 WHAT IS OUR VISION OF CHANGE? WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT? It is important the group have time to

Gender and empowerment advocacy spiral



Adapted from Women for Change Training manual for critical analysis and sustainable human development, builds on ideas of Paulo Freire and women activists around the world

develop their own vision of how they would prefer their lives to be. Then also to talk collectively about what they can do to achieve change to develop ownership within the group for action.

6 WHAT'S OUR PLAN? - WHY? WHAT? HOW? WHO? WHEN? The group now focus on the details of what they intend to do to give them direction

7. CHANGE, DEVELOPMENT, EMPOWERMENT. The group should discuss and celebrate the gains they have achieved - however small. Empowerment is a hard and sometimes painful struggle. It is important to take time to recognise and celebrate what has been achieved to both build on it and to motivate further action. (It is also important to recognise that at certain moments people may not want to explore some of the issues and assumptions about power and change in their lives because it may be too disruptive or even threatening. This may be especially true regarding women when empowerment, if acted upon, may alienate key sources of financial and emotional support they receive from other family members and friends. It could also generate violence if risks are not weighed and counter measures not adopted.)

8. MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT'S HAPPENING. And the never-ending struggle for justice and rights continues at a new level.

While these steps look neat and consecutive, the ups and downs and backs and forths of this process cannot be underscored enough. Empowerment along with the critical consciousness and willingness to act that it fosters are some of the most challenging aspects of people-centred advocacy. While people

may recognise their own rights are being denied, they may not recognise this happening with different groups of people also suffering similar forms of discrimination and oppression. Without solidarity and a sense of common struggle, developing a personal sense of empowerment will not lead to the broader visions of justice and social change we espouse. If we do not challenge ourselves to think about and identify with how others are subjected to patterns of oppression as well, our dreams for a better world will end up as nothing more than individual dreams of personal self-interest. This is a particular challenge in the individualised world most of us currently live in that preaches and reinforces the values and beliefs of individualism and rampant consumerism.

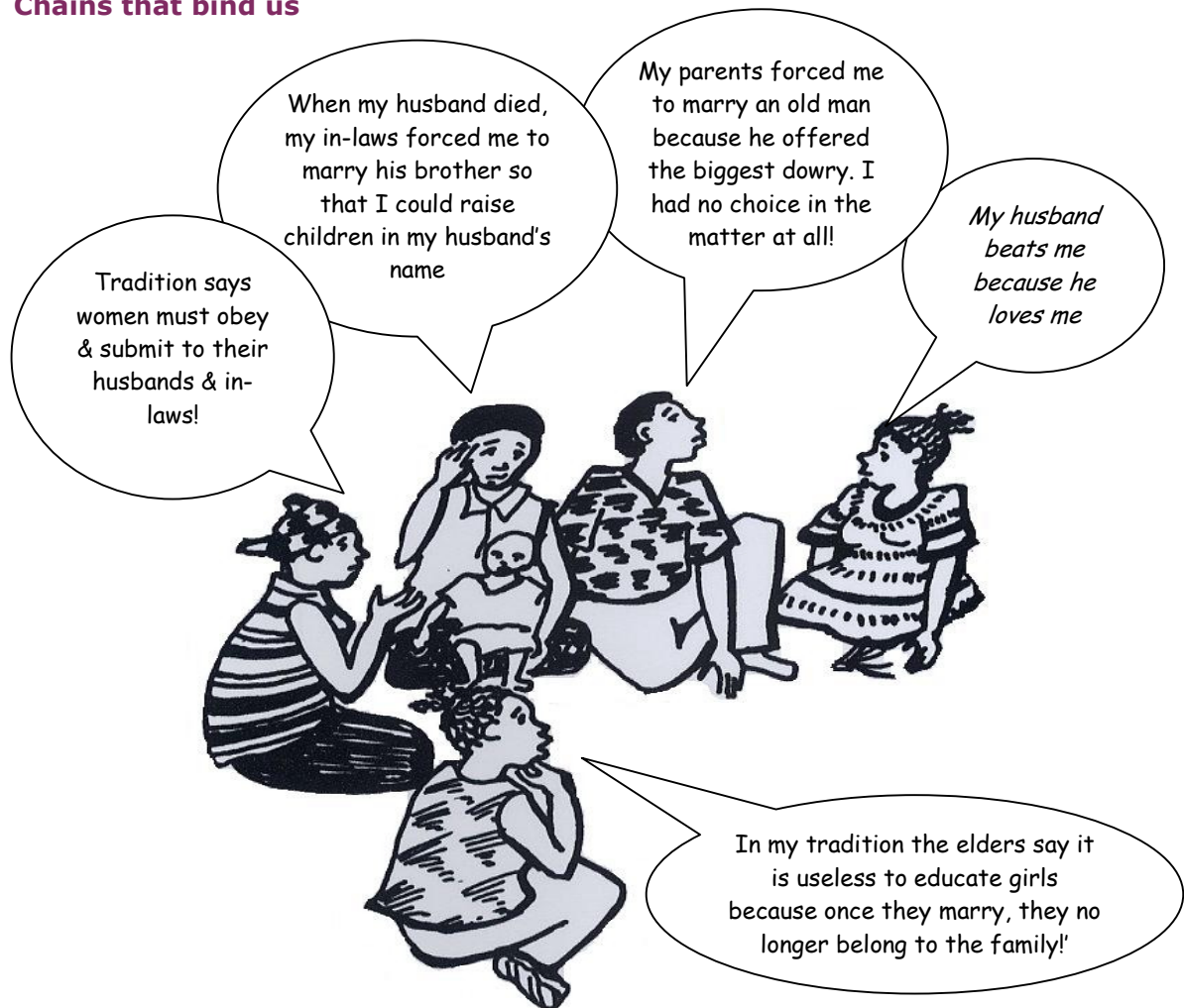
There are many other alternatives to how this discussion can be structured depending on the context and the particular group. Be flexible and innovative!

Chains that bind us

This exercise, adapted from an interesting manual published by Oxfam in 1994,ⁱⁱⁱ is an easy and friendly way to start a discussion that helps us to think about and question the most common representations and ideologies of gender in our cultures.

A picture is given to all members of the group (women only, men only or mixed groups - each will give us different kinds of debates), with a drawing of people talking with each other (try to use illustrations as close as possible to the features of the people participating to allow easy identification and solidarity). Each person in the drawing is saying a brief sentence with a common cultural belief that makes

Chains that bind us



problems related to gender domination explicit.

The example above is focused on women, but we can do the same with only men (having them say sentences related to male stereotypes) or a picture of men and women together (confronting social roles).

The idea is to use the drawing to brainstorm how the group feels and reacts to the common social beliefs shown. We can use the following questions to guide the debate:

- How do you personally feel about these examples? Is it real for your community? For your life? Do you have other examples?
- What are some other traditional and common beliefs like this in your community?
- Among all these examples, which ones affect you most? Why?
- Are any of these things changing? Which? How? Why not?
- What should be done to change it? How? Who has the power to change or reinforce it?

This exercise can also be used together with the Power over: inequity, exclusion and strategy chart (Section 1: Power).

Access and control profile

This tool can help us critically examine the extent to which our advocacy plans and results are really making a difference in power relations between men and women and in women's enjoyment of their rights. It helps us identify social inequalities, by illustrating power differences between men and women in terms of who has access to and control over resources. The tool can also be applied to other disadvantaged groups. The process of using this tool can be motivating and politicising for those involved: analysing differences and power dynamics in a community is important for political awareness.

The exercise can be done either on cards or large sheets of paper (flip chart or newsprint). On one set of cards, or one side of the paper, participants list all the aspects of the right or resource they are advocating for. For example if the concern is the lack of secure land tenure for food production this might

include land, water, produce, farming implements etc. The next set of cards or column on the paper examines who has access to this - men or women? Certain groups in society? The final set of cards or column examines who has control of these resources.

A discussion should then be had about inequities in access, but also issues around who has control and why. Exercises like this can be very useful for simultaneously mapping advocacy gains - eg in looking at the number of farmers who have gained tenancy rights and, at the same time, helping us to ask questions about whether our advocacy efforts are doing as much as they might to overturn gender inequities.

ⁱ We recommend the reading of Section 1: Power along with this chapter.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from *Training Manual for critical analysis and sustainable human development* Women for Change, 1998, Zambia. Women For Change is a Zambian NGO committed to working with and empowering remote rural communities especially women through gender analysis, popular education methodologies and advocacy to contribute towards the eradication of all forms of poverty. See <http://www.wfc.org.zm/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Oxfam Gender Training Manual, pages 457-459.



Tenant farmer women in Nepal