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COLLECTIVE ACTION AND WOMEN'S AGENCY: A BACKGROUND PAPER

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THE WORLD BANK

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ABSTRACT

Following the findings and policy messages of the *World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development 2012* (WDR2012), the World Bank's Gender and Development group are seeking to deepen the evidence base on promoting women's agency as a basis for enhanced action on gender equality.

A component of this work is a review of evidence on the relationship between collective action and women's agency: whether and how different forms of collective action enhance women's ability to exercise agency in key domains (what the WDR 2012 terms "expressions of agency") and the operational implications for Bank policies and programmes. This is the focus of this paper.

The paper seeks to clarify the conceptual terrain of collective action; identify the links with women's agency; and draw lessons from the evidence on what works and what does not for boosting development and gender-equality outcomes. The paper does not attempt to do justice to the very wide literature on collective action in development, nor the broad feminist scholarship on the political and historical role of national and transnational women's movements.² Instead it draws on the somewhat smaller body of empirical research examining the mechanics of collective action and its links with economic and social wellbeing, particularly within developing societies. The findings are complex, but the overall conclusions are consistent with an emerging body of literature now questioning participation as a silver bullet in development and calling for more flexible, context-sensitive approaches for promoting agency and empowerment.

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² The importance of such activism in driving progressive policy change over many decades must be fully acknowledged.

1. COLLECTIVE ACTION AND AGENCY

Wherever we look today we can see collective action at work. From credit and savings associations, to community managed services, political parties and online collaborative platforms--all seeking to harness the *power and influence of the group*. Commonly, collective action refers to the act of mobilising people around common or shared concerns. The action can be routine or sporadic; it can take place through an organisation or a government structure or entirely informally; it can be localised or transnational; it can focus on the articulation of rights or the delivery of services; it can be "induced" from outside or, as is most often the case, it can evolve organically (Mansuri & Rao 2013).

Collective action for and by women has a long history. As the *World Development Report 2012* states, collective action has been and can be a potent force change in women's empowerment; from the Suffragette movements in the United Kingdom and United States at the start of the 20th century to the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s, to modern day campaigners against sexual violence in the DRC and fighting for abortion reform in the Philippines. Today collective action has taken on a whole new dimension as it draws on the connective power of social media and online platforms to inspire, initiate and facilitate people's need to highlight and find solutions to shared problems from gender-based violence to ethnic and religious discrimination and child marriage. The power of information technologies (ICT) are that they creates opportunities to mobilise members and influence decision-makers well beyond the site of any specific event, as demonstrated by. the response to the gang rape and eventual death of a young female student in Delhi in 2012. This creates huge potential for shared problem solving on a scale that was in the past limited by geography and by strict cultural norms.

BOX 1: THE THEORY OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

In economics, collective action refers to the provision of public goods (and other collective consumption) through the collaboration of two or more individuals. Since Olson's (1965) seminal work on the matter, much of the mainstream economics literature has focused on the challenges of undertaking effective collective action because of the tendency of individuals to want the benefits but none of the costs of participating—the problem known as free-riding. The implication, from Olson and others, is that goods tend to be underprovided when they depend on collective action and that this is particularly the case in poor societies where the costs of participation are often high.

Ostrom (1986) and colleagues countered this by arguing that effective collective action does often take place in poor rural societies and can be an effective response to both state and market dysfunction, in particular, internalizing negative externalities and/or generating positive externalities in the use and management of natural resources. Significantly, Ostrom and colleagues were able to provide evidence of the factors contributing to successful collective action, identifying the critical importance of rules and norms—the "cooperative infrastructure"—in supporting group-based agency. Ostrom's work has gone on to become some of the most influential in the field and has spawned considerable interest by researchers and development actors in the potential role for local group action in solving longstanding development problems.

Source: Mansuri and Rao 2013; Olson 1965; Ostrom 1998, 2004; and Booth 2012.

Understanding the conditions in which collective action occurs, and how it can overcome institutional and political blockages to improve peoples' lives, has become a central question in development (Corduneanu-Huci et al, 2013, Booth, 2012). In development practice, collective action is seen as a platform for local problem solving and for increased social accountability—from participatory

budgeting to expenditure tracking and community scorecards—in which citizens claim voice and resources through bottom-up pressure on the structures of power (Mansuri and Rao, 2013, Ringold et al. 2012, Devarajan et al.2012). An alternative view questions the bottom-up approach, highlighting instead the importance of combining top-down governmental action with local problem solving to resolve (largely political) constraints to the delivery of public goods and services (Booth 2012). Common to both approaches is the notion that collective action is a way to solve problems associated with missing or weakened state action and deliver better results for citizens.

Participation through group action is now widespread in development practice(Hickey, S et al. 2004) but what form does women’s collective action take, under what conditions does it emerge and how successful is it in boosting outcomes and enhancing agency? What strategies are most effective in promoting and supporting successful collective action by and for women?

There are several different ways to conceptualise the link between agency and collective action. A review of the empirical literature (Pandolfelli et al, 2008; Contreras-Arias et al 2013; Meier zu Selhausen) suggests that links exist at a number of levels:

- actions to *solve public goods problems* that directly impact on women’s lives and livelihoods, such as managing a shared water source, or monitoring local health and education services or maintaining community forests;
- actions that *expand the set of opportunities and enhance women’s decision-making power* within the household and community for example, through self-help savings and loans groups that boost the flow of capital and support women’s businesses, to cooperatives providing access to training and new markets, to village education groups providing adult literacy classes;
- actions that explicitly *challenge the social norms and behaviours* that, often irrespective of social status, continue to constrain female agency within the public domain and within the family context. These actions seek to significantly shift the balance of local norms that in turn creates new space for women to express their agency. Actions might include women’s groups agitating about norms around age at marriage, seeking legal recourse on oppressive dowry practices or promoting women’s suitability for political office. Collective action in this sense is less about solving particular practical development problems and more about shifting the whole context in which women and girls can engage fully and fruitfully in the process of development.

None of these links is mutually exclusive and they are all essentially *instrumental*—collective action helps women advance specific value goals or objectives. But a further vital link between collective action and agency is between the *act of* associating and women’s psycho-social wellbeing. This is what Naila Kabeer calls the *intrinsic value (or “power from within”)* of collective action. In this sense, whether it provides measurable developmental benefits or not, group action can be vital in supporting women’s self-esteem and self-confidence as well as providing access to spaces and networks that go beyond family and kin. Through developing the power within, women can go on to challenge gender norms in the wider community, whether together or as individuals (Contrearas-Arias et al. 2013 on an indigenous women’s collective in Mexico).

As will be demonstrated throughout this paper, it is both the intrinsic and instrumental properties of collective action that underlie its transformative power, and not just for women but for society as a

whole, and its absence can be a key contributor to the experience of disempowerment for both women and men (Box 2).

Box 2: The Gaps in Women’s Empowerment: Is Collective Action the Missing Piece?

The IFPRI Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) now has data for three countries. One of the first countries surveyed was Bangladesh. Data reveal that the domains that contribute most to women’s disempowerment are, in rank order, weak leadership and influence in the community; lack of control over resources; and lack of control over income. The domain indicators that contribute most to women’s disempowerment are: a lack of participation in groups, control over income and discomfort speaking in public. Although women are more likely belong to groups than men, the results indicate that many women still do not belong to a group and regard this as a major contributor to their feelings and experience of disempowerment

Source: http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/weai_brochure.pdf

Enthusiasm for group-based action has long been part of the narrative on women in development. But not all collective action is successful nor is it all positive or pro-development. Corduneanu-Huci (2013) point to instances where collective action is used to oppose or block pro-development reforms or to protect the claims of one group to the explicit detriment of other groups (particularly the less powerful). Nor is collective action always a rosy picture of mutually collaborative behaviour (Mcloughlin and Harris 2013). Instead, groups can form, fail to gain consensus, fail to deliver equal benefits or dissolve as fast as they have emerged. Collective action is in reality a fairly continuous process of contestation and negotiation, suggesting that collective action is best understood as a site of *constant accommodation* rather than as a simple “means to an end” (Mansuri and Rao 2013; Booth et al. 2012). As Mcloughlin et al. find in a political economy analysis of the water and sanitation sectors in Colombo, collective action tends to be successful at the point where the different political and economic incentives of key actors (citizens, politicians and state officials) align and not because of anything inherently “good” about group-based action.

The empirical literature is clear that the conditions for successful collective action vary and depend to a significant extent on the local institutional and incentive context (Ostrom 1998, 2004) or what Mansuri and Rao (2013) term the “cooperative infrastructure.” Pre-existing levels of social inequality and social cohesion and prior experiences with collective action are also significant (see Box 3), while the gendered and hierarchical nature of local norms and institutional rules have a crucial influence on the terms on which women and girls are able to participate in and benefit from collective action in their communities and beyond (Agarwal 2000; Pandolfelli, Lauren, Ruth Meinzen-Dick and Stephan Dohrn 2007).

Box 3: Hierarchies, Rules and Norms: Why the Link Between Collective Action and Agency Is Complex

Narayan, Pritchett and Kapoor (2009) find in a 15-country study that the linkages between collective action and poverty escapes are weaker than expected, and in the case of the relationship between collective action and social mobility, the findings are wholly negative. This is almost entirely down to existing levels of social stratification at the community level which get replicated through village-level groups and tend to favour the better off and more connected members of the community. The willingness of individuals and their experience of participation are also key factors. Mahmud’s (2002) study of collective action in the health and education sectors in Bangladesh clearly shows how social hierarchies shape the terrain for collective action and explains the unequal distribution of benefits that flow from it. The motivation for participation was higher among elite

groups. In an experiment in an Albanian school, Barr et al. (2012) also find that the parents who actively joined parent groups linked to the school were more likely to have already participated in some school process and were also more likely to have voted in recent parliamentary elections. The implication is that the motivation to participate in groups can be influenced by social status and prior experiences of participation.

Agarwal's (2000) study of community forestry groups (CFGs) in South Asia shows convincingly that the factors influencing collective action are almost never gender neutral. Through in-depth field research she finds that CFGs that initially appear participative, equitable and effective are in fact deeply divided along gender lines. She examines how low participation by women is driven by longstanding beliefs about women's roles and actually results in women bearing the brunt of the decisions—such as the banning of foraging or firewood collection in protected forests—made by these male-dominated groups.

But these factors are not all immutable, at least not when we look at longer time-scales. In the case of Bangladesh, a highly stratified and unequal society, the journey of women's collective action has been long and non-linear, but Bangladesh has made remarkable progress on a number of gender-related issues, including maternal mortality, female education and political participation, with mobilisation of women's groups at the grassroots a vital part of that story (Kabeer). Experiences of working collectively can also feedback to influence the rules and norms that shape other aspects of women's agency. In India, for example, Panda (2005) observes that women who participated in the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) water campaign grew more confident to participate in the public domain which in turn impacted on their ability to take action on gendered family norms relating to physical mobility, alcohol consumption and gender-related violence.

What will be clear from the evidence presented below is that the linkages between collective action and women's agency are complex and context-specific. While there are many positive and inspiring examples of collective action both within and beyond development practice, there is no single, linear pathway that links collective action and improvements in women's status, nor any hard and fast rules about how the benefits of collective action can be scaled and sustained over time. Key for development actors is understanding that a series of reinforcing actions is likely necessary to enable the space for collective action while ensuring development interventions do no harm.

The next section of the paper examines different forms and trajectories of collective action and how these relate to/impact on different expressions of women's agency: access to and control over resources; decision-making over family formation; freedom of movement (mobility); freedom from violence; and political participation and societal influence.

The final section considers the operational relevance of these findings for the Bank, its policies and programmes. The main question posed is whether there are particular entry points available to the Bank to work with or support collective action processes in support of greater women's agency and what, if any, should be the criteria to guide such work?

2. THE EVIDENCE

Empirical research that examines the direct link between collective action and women's agency is fairly limited. In the development space much of it focuses on different initiatives to support women's empowerment and particularly women's employment and access to and control over economic resources (Pandolfelli et al. 2008; Meinzen, Dick and Zwartveen 1998). In this section we review some of this evidence but also seek out additional links with the wider dimensions of women's agency including autonomy in decision-making, freedom from violence, freedom of movement and voice and

influence in the wider society. Table 1 illustrates how collective action and agency have been linked in different quantitative and qualitative studies.

Table 1: How are collective action and women’s agency linked?

Agency domain	Access to & control over resources	Decision-making over family formation	Mobility	Freedom from violence	Voice and political participation
Collective Action Arena/Site					
Public goods & social provisioning (e.g. local public goods provision/managing the commons, protecting rights and claims to resources, risk-pooling)	SHG’s help maintain & uphold women’s claims to community resources; mutual support groups provide a hedge against covariant risk	Group action on access to & choice over contraceptive services & reproductive health services; monitoring of services	SHG provide access to infrastructure &/or networks beyond the household; shared information & meeting places beyond family	Community mobilisation supports rights awareness re: domestic violence, dowry practices, spousal selection	Women’s leadership of community groups can lead to participation in local governance structures and increased political influence
Expanding opportunities (e.g. enhancing access to livelihoods, expanding economic opportunities and opportunities for community leadership)	Networks of women as informal workers, business owners & leaders lobby for improved infrastructure, share information and expand market share.	Cooperative working improves bargaining power within family; cooperative associations tackle social norms that restrict participation	Marketing associations & cooperatives offering access to new economic opportunities and mobility beyond the household	Women workers mobilise against VAW in the workplace, migrant workers associate for improved working conditions	Women’s groups lobby for representation in regional and national government, use their strength as a voting bloc; gender quotas
Tackling/shifting social norms (e.g. challenging gender inequality in the legal and political sphere, national and international action on GBV, FGM and labour standards)	Representation of women’s economic interests in macroeconomic policy, gender budgets, inheritance laws; equality of ownership for women and men	Legal/statutory changes give women options for divorce, age at marriage; spousal selection.	Transport and infrastructure provision takes account of women’s interests practical & strategic needs;	Laws supporting rights, advocacy for rights and laws, judicial redress of rights violations; internationally agreed conventions can help fill gaps in legal frameworks	Gender quotas; international conventions & legal frameworks support an enabling environment for voice & action

2.1. WOMEN'S CONTROL OVER RESOURCES AND ASSETS

Control over resources and assets, whether through formal ownership, employment or customary access, plays a key role in advancing the rights and well-being of women and their families across the globe (World Bank 2012). A critical agenda for development actors is to improve women's access to markets and resources and to increase their participation in economic decision making within and beyond the household. One way this is done is through support for group-based action.

Collective action in the form of self-help groups, marketing cooperatives and credit and savings associations can have positive effects in terms of individual economic outcomes as well as more generalised benefits. Data from rural Uttarakhand in northern India show that engagement in community-level (collective) female empowerment programmes (*Mahila Samakhya*) has resulted in significant increases in female access to employment, physical mobility and political participation. For those who do not enter employment there is a measurable increase in the reservation wage, which adds to their bargaining power. At the core of the programme are support groups, literacy camps, adult education classes and vocational training (Kandpal 2013).

Elsewhere Beath et al. (2010) use a randomized field experiment encompassing 500 Afghan villages and find that a development programme which incorporates mandated female participation, increases female mobility and involvement in income generation despite strong discriminatory social norms. In Western Uganda research on 26 self-help groups of a joint microfinance and coffee co-operative finds that women members are generally better off in terms of income compared to the rest of the community and are able to use their group status to affect broader change including a reduction in tolerance of gender-based violence and increases in the likelihood of joint land holding with spouses (Meier zu Selhaisen 2012). Blattman et al. (2013) in an evaluation of the Women's Income Generating Support (WINGS) programme in Northern Uganda, find that efforts to enhance women's earnings through a combination of business skills training, an individual start-up grant of roughly \$150, group formation and related support was highly effective in raising women's monthly cash income and increasing control over durable assets compared to the control group.

More specific research on women's collective action in agricultural markets in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania led by Oxfam, finds significant economic benefits for women who join groups. Group members tend to be more productive and their products are of higher quality, so their average income tends to be higher also. Being part of a group also improves access to credit and market information, while training and the use of improved technology provided through groups, helped to raise quality and productivity (Oxfam 2013) (Box 4).

BOX 4: Busy Bees: Women's Collection Action in Honey Production, Ethiopia

At first glance, the honey sector in Ethiopia seems an unlikely place to find women forming collective action (CA) groups, taking leadership positions and benefiting from increased income generation. Beekeeping and honey production are largely male occupations. Over the last decade, however, women have begun to participate in cooperatives and self-help groups in the honey sector in the Amhara region of Ethiopia and to benefit from their involvement in these groups. This change has been enabled by a number of factors, driven by the growing global demand for honey and bee products. The sector has become an attractive investment opportunity, opening up a space for women and other marginalized smallholder producers to engage with market and state actors.

The research was carried out in Dangila and Mecha *woredas* (districts) in Amhara, a honey producing region in the northwest highlands of Ethiopia. The main form of recognized collective action in Amhara is the “multipurpose farmers’ primary cooperative” (MPPC). MPPCs provide access to inputs and services, as well as marketing support for various commodities. Cooperative members can also be members of informal groups or self-help groups. The latter have been established especially for increasing women’s participation in cooperatives.

Women derive significant benefits from joining CA groups in the Amhara honey sector. Women group members surveyed earn 81 percent more than women outside groups. This translates to an increase in profit of at least US\$35 per year for women members compared to non-members. For members of the 14 SHGs surveyed, both the quantity of honey produced and market revenues increase when that member also belongs to a formal marketing cooperative. Cooperatives offer 20 percent higher prices for raw honey than other market buyers and group members have better access to these sales outlets, with 78 percent of women members mostly selling to groups, compared to only 1 percent of non-members. Group membership also confers greater control over decisions in some key domains such as access to and use of credit and income for household expenditures. Perceptions of women’s roles are also changing: A local leader in Rim *kebele* in Mecha *woreda* reports that, “Compared to non-members, [WCA] members are assertive, can explain their feelings, give ideas, and are punctual and disciplined. Actually, there are many men who are less assertive and participate less than women in the cooperative. There is big gap between WCA members and non-members.” These results are even more impressive given the male-dominated context of the sector, and the social norms that restrict women’s participation in economic activities in the region as a whole.

Source: *Women’s collective action in the honey sector in Ethiopia*. www.womenscollectiveaction.com Oxfam 2013

Demographic change and the extent of unemployment in parts of Africa and Asia has increased the importance of finding better economic opportunities for young women to avoid future vulnerability to and dependence on men. A novel approach is targeting adolescent girls through community-based adolescent girls clubs with vocational skills training to enable girls to start small-scale income generating activities and life skills to build knowledge and reduce risky behaviours. In both South Sudan and Uganda these programmes, implemented by BRAC³, are pointing to increases in labour force participation and earnings (largely self-employment) while reducing risky behaviours. Compared to standalone programmes it is clear that engaging with girls as a group and providing combined or mutually reinforcing interventions (in this case vocational and life skills training) produces socially and economically beneficial outcomes for the girls.

Box 5: Girls’ Clubs in South Sudan

Ajah is 19 and attends Bor Secondary School in South Sudan’s remote Jonglei state. In a country with literacy rate of just 16 percent for women and girls 15 and older, Ajah is an exception to the rule. And she is leading the charge to change the rules. She is the leader of an Adolescent Girls Initiative (AGI) Club, one of 100 such clubs BRAC is running in the country, and one of 10,000 similar clubs BRAC is running in seven countries.

AGI Clubs have six components: providing a safe space and peer support for adolescent girls; life-skills lessons (such as early marriage and sexual and reproductive health); financial literacy training; livelihoods training; a savings and credit facility; and wider community sensitization.

Ajah describes how it can be “difficult to collect everyone to attend” the club with parents wanting their children at home to do household work. The community sensitization component of AGI is meant to address

³ <http://www.brac.net/content/who-we-are>

this social pressure through activities that bring together the girls from the various clubs, their parents and members of the wider community. As South Sudan begins the long process of building a peaceful foundation for its future, BRAC adolescent clubs are helping girls like Ajah to play their role and secure opportunities for themselves and their generation.

Source: <http://blog.brac.net/2013/03/girls-taking-on-a-leading-role-in-south-sudan/> See more at: <http://blog.brac.net/2013/03/girls-taking-on-a-leading-role-in-south-sudan/#sthash.K3Q3x4q7.dpuf>

The socially beneficial elements of collective action in the economic sphere are also noted in a review of gender differences across a total of 46 collective action groups (mixed and single-sex) in 33 rural programmes in 20 countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Westermann, Ashby and Pretty, 2005). These authors found that significant gender differences existed in relation to group maturity and natural resource management outcomes and around the experience of collaboration and the capacity to manage conflict. Overall they found that collaboration, solidarity and conflict resolution all increased in groups where women were present (including women-only groups). In addition, norms of reciprocity were more likely to operate in women's and mixed groups. They also found that the capacity for self-sustaining collective action increased with women's presence and was significantly higher in groups involving women.

Nevertheless, it is important to avoid overly simplistic conclusions about the relationship between collective action and women's control over economic resources and assets. Several studies find that where groups are succeeding they are made up of women group members that are older, married and from wealthier households, meaning that most already have better access to assets and resources before joining the group (Oxfam 2013, Meier zu Selhaisen 2012, Pandofelli et al. 2008). Literacy and land ownership requirements also favour some members over others, to the detriment of mainly younger and unmarried women; differences among women and among social contexts mean that income gains, while valuable in themselves, do not always result in broad-based improvements in agency. Instead there are incremental changes depending on context-specific gender norms.

Other studies show how assumptions about gender relations can be detrimental. Fischer and Quaim (2012) demonstrate how farmer collective action intended to improve smallholder access to markets and technology has aggravated gender disparities in Kenya. With bananas traditionally a women's crop in Kenya, the introduction of groups without a clear understanding of context resulted in increased male control. In South Asia, a review of evidence reveals minimal participation by women in water users' organisations (Meinzen Dick et al. 1998). Reasons include restrictive membership criteria, time costs and added social risks. Women instead find informal means of obtaining irrigation services. These are typically less secure than those services obtained through formal groups. The study points to the need to include women by improving rules of compliance and maintenance contributions and recognising the different balance of costs and benefits associated with their participation. This is confirmed in the Oxfam study of women's collective action in agricultural markets showing that having sufficient time to attend meetings and carry out group activities, as well as support to cover childcare or household duties, are all crucial to enabling women's participation.

The empirical literature confirms that there are significant economic benefits to women operating in groups, even in the context of restrictive gender norms. These benefits can spill over more widely and generate socially welfare-enhancing changes at the community level. But the scale and duration of benefits depends critically on the context, and in the case of development interventions, depends crucially on how explicitly programmes seek to shift social norms. The Oxfam study concludes that

where collectives are organised with the specific objective of addressing social norms or where interventions are accompanied by wider measures to address existing societal norms (e.g. property rights), greater empowerment impacts can be expected. Otherwise, changes in empowerment for group members are likely to be partial and incremental rather than transformative in collectives focused purely on economic outcomes (Oxfam 2013: 12). Social hierarchies and gender norms are powerful shapers of women's participation and, as subsequent evidence shows, the links between improved resource control and the other dimensions of women's agency are complex and non-linear.

2.2. DECISION-MAKING AND VOICE

In development practice, collective action is frequently seen in instrumental terms as a means to improve accountability and bring about changes in the ability of marginalised groups to exercise choice and voice. These "empowerment approaches" often work at the grassroots helping diverse groups of poor and socially excluded citizens organise themselves to improve their livelihoods and demand broader institutional change (Mahmud 2002; Gaventa).

Deinenger et al. (2009) draw on a large household survey to assess the social and economic impacts of the formation of self-help groups in one of the poorest region of India. They find positive impacts on empowerment and nutritional intake in programme areas overall with female empowerment in the programme areas increasing irrespective of participation status (i.e. whether a participant or non-participant) suggesting positive spillovers from the programme. In Tanzania and Mali, women members of collective action groups benefit from increased freedom of movement, and in Ethiopia from enhanced control of household expenditure. In Mali, group members noted greater autonomy over the use of agricultural incomes and were consulted more on community and organisational decision-making (Oxfam 2013: 12).

In other sectors too there is positive evidence of the role that local collective action can play in filling the vacuum created by conflict and weak or incomplete top-down (state-led) reforms. Pritchett examines how more than 70 grassroots women-led groups in seven countries in Africa are helping women and communities to access justice in diverse contexts. The research points to the importance of women's access to both *de facto* (customary) and *de jure* justice mechanisms and to the power of local collective action to secure justice for women in these countries. In Yemen, also, the Yemeni Women's Union, with external support, is working to ensure that the legal system protects the rights of vulnerable women by raising awareness about legal rights, providing legal aid and supporting female prisoners (Oxfam 2012, cited in World Bank 2013). In DRC too, women are working in groups in the face of a breakdown of law and order and the existence of generalised gender violence (Box 6).

Box 6: Women Stand Up in DRC

"When the international community thinks of DRC, it does not automatically think of a women's rights movement." Umoja Wa Akina Mama Fizi, United Women of Fizi (UWAFI) an umbrella network of 16 women's community-based organizations working in 15 villages in South Kivu Province, seeks to change that perception. In the context of women's subordinate status in society, high rates of illiteracy, and exclusion from decision-making, UWAFI promotes women's human rights and raises women's consciousness through education, training, research and advocacy. It works in three towns in predominantly rural Fizi District and also runs a documentation centre on women's rights. The group has built expertise in conducting training for women in human rights, political rights, leadership and reproductive rights.

As the coordinator of the Human Rights Protection and Prevention Network in Fizi, UWAFI trained network members to document human rights violations. It organizes community dialogues on women's political rights, the rights enshrined in CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) to which the Congolese government is a signatory, and the provisions in the DRC Constitution that extend civil rights to women. It also helps rural women obtain identity cards so they can register to vote, giving them access to broader civic and social rights. It used a recent GFW grant to conduct workshops on citizenship rights, democracy and gender-based violence for rural women and to organize exchange visits with other women's rights groups as a strategy toward building a movement. UWAFI is convinced that when women know their rights and can claim them, they can also denounce sexual violence. Its other programs include legal and medical assistance to victims of sexual violence and political prisoners; and the extension of small loans for income-generating activities to women living in poverty.

Source: Mukenge, M (2010), Global Fund for Women

The work discussed earlier on adolescent girl groups shows the importance of working creatively and linking interventions together to support opportunities for greater control over decision-making and voice. Adolescent girl clubs not only provide a space for training but also *safe spaces* where issues can be discussed and girls can mobilise around shared concerns. As girls become more visible, they gain more power. For instance, the Girls Gaining Ground programme in India turned girls into vocal members of their communities. In one town, the governor had promised a new lightning grid but hadn't delivered on his promise, so the girls came together and demanded that he install the lightning grid, which he then did. In the Amhara region of Ethiopia, when girls learned that underage marriage is illegal and harmful through CARE's TESFA programme, they banded together to stop it. Girls went to community leaders and demanded an end to marriages of young girls. As of 2012, they had stopped 170 child marriages (The Girl Effect www.thegirleffect.org).

But not all the evidence on the link between material gain and agency is straightforward. Blattman's impact evaluation of the Women's Income Generating Support (WINGS) programme in Northern Uganda finds that positive results in terms of women's cash income and control over durable assets are not accompanied by positive effects on either health or empowerment more broadly defined—what the authors term the “impact paradox.” As household incomes increase there appears to be little evidence of women becoming more empowered in terms of household decision-making, independence, gender attitudes or rates of intimate partner violence.

Beath et al. (2010), using a randomized field experiment encompassing 500 Afghan villages, also find that while mandated female participation increases women's involvement in income generation it does not change female roles in family decision-making or attitudes toward the general role of women in society.

An impact evaluation of a CDD program in post-war Sierra Leone (Casey et al. 2011) also finds positive short-run effects on the provision of local public goods, but no sustained impacts on fund-raising, decision-making processes, or the involvement of marginalized groups (especially women) in local affairs, indicating that CDD was largely ineffective at durably reshaping local institutions. Efforts to increase community decision-making through the use of different deliberative mechanisms show more promise, but group formation still tends to be parochial and unequal (Mansuri and Rao 2013). (Box 7) In concluding, the authors argue that, “Absent some kind of affirmative action programme, groups that form under the aegis of interventions tend to systematically exclude disadvantaged and minority groups and women” (:275).

Box 7: Tackling Weak Collective Action Head-One: When Things Don't Go Right.

The Women's Group Project, implemented by the Dutch NGO International Child Support (ICS) in two rural districts of Kenya sought to address the problems of weak civic participation, low participation in community associations (particularly amongst women) through a programme of leadership and management training for group leaders, agricultural tools and seeds for member use and training in agricultural techniques. An evaluation of the first phase of the project randomly assigned 40 of 80 operational women's associations involved in agricultural activities to receive training and inputs. The remaining associations received treatment two years later, and for the purposes of this evaluation comprised the comparison group. The results were striking.

1. The evaluation found no significant post-project differences between the treatment and comparison groups on nearly all measures of agricultural output, group strength and community interaction.
2. The project was associated with significant effects on group membership patterns. The number of applicants to programme groups was 40 percent higher than to control groups, and treated groups reported twice as many new members during the project period. New members of treated groups were generally of higher socioeconomic status as measured by formal-sector income and educational attainment.
3. Turnover in group leadership was 20 percentage points greater in treatment associations, and both men and well-educated women were significantly more likely to take on leadership roles in treated groups.

The study concluded that, notwithstanding the laudable aim of strengthening women's local collective action with a view to improving rural-based livelihoods, the project actually had negative effects on participation by socioeconomically disadvantaged persons, especially older women. The findings also suggested that external funding made membership more attractive to higher-status persons, thereby crowding out the poorest and most disadvantaged members.

Source: Gugerty, Mary Kay and Kremer, Michael. 2008.

One hypothesis for the apparent mismatch between increases in women's income or asset levels and other expressions of agency is the overly dominant engagement of, or in the obverse, the lack of involvement of men, which in turn limits opportunities for changes in gender attitudes and behaviours. Finding ways to work with and alongside men may be a way of untangling this impact paradox. Promundo, for instance, has recently been involved with MenCare,⁴ a global fatherhood campaign that works at multiple levels to engage men as caregivers and as fathers. The aim is to establish fathers groups to get legal and societal recognitions for men's role as caregivers alongside the efforts of women's groups to provide women with a stronger platform for exercising voice and agency. Other initiatives confirm that mixed groups, those involving both women and men can, under certain circumstances, produce better results (Westermann, Ashby and Pretty 2005) particularly on sensitive issues such as women's decision-making control. The evaluation of the WINGS programme in Uganda sort to test whether more involvement of men contributed to better empowerment outcomes. While the test was restrictive—including a control group of women participating in the programme with their male household partners—the results did show a small but significant decline in women's psychological stress compared to women in the standard programme and some improvement in relationship skills demonstrated by male partners.

What these studies confirm is that enhancing agency is a complex and non-linear process that cannot be achieved overnight. The prospect for transforming agency depends significantly on the wider normative context and whether and how far collective actions can actually challenge prevailing social

⁴ Promundo is a men and gender equality project focused on promoting more caring and non-violent masculinities www.promundo.org.br. MenCare is a global campaign that seeks to speak up for fatherhood and caregiving www.men-care.org

norms and hierarchies, or not. Development interventions can enhance women's empowerment, even situations of persistent poverty and restrictive gender norms, but often do so only partially or incrementally in the absence of broader efforts to challenge normative frameworks. Challenging the normative framework, both formal and informal, is often a prerequisite for more transformative change and this requires a number of reinforcing changes that build over time, both inside the community and beyond. Participation in collective action can bring important intrinsic and material benefits but alone it is not a sufficient condition for enhanced agency.

2.3. SHIFTING NORMS AND EXERCISING SOCIETAL INFLUENCE

The need to tackle the wider normative framework is widely recognised. Collective action has a vital role to play in pressing directly for legal and regulatory change and in producing role models and leaders who help to inspire and build a much broader movement for social change. This needs an enabling environment nationally and legal and moral support at the international level.

One example of the possibility created by collective action is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Their presence in Ahmedabad, Gujarat for the past 30 years has done more than represent female "headloaders" in the garment trade; it has tackled norms and shifted the attitudes of government officials, trade unions and the community towards women's economic and political participation across a much wider landscape (Panda 2007). As the title of a book about SEWA, "We are poor, but so many," illustrates, SEWA also evolved from a small association battling a male dominated union to a "workers movement" with more than one million members spread out across different states in India. In 2007 its status was finally recognised as a national trade union. Its 35-year journey is a testament to the power of leadership and the resilience of its grassroots organisational structure that still shapes SEWA today (Blaxall 2007).

Box 8: Shifting Battle Lines: the Case of SEWA

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) began in 1972 with a small group of migrant women cart pullers in the wholesale cloth market of Ahmedabad City, Gujarat, India. These women worked as "headloaders," carrying clothes to and from the wholesale market. They were paid on a per trip basis, regardless of the distance they travelled or the weight they carried. Often, they were not paid the full amount they were owed because no records were kept. Ela Bhatt, head of the Women's Wing of the Textile Labour Association, helped organise the group and negotiate with the cloth merchants to gain fair treatment.

SEWA is now a member of the International Confederation of Trade Unions and has become a model for associations of informal workers internationally. In 2011, SEWA had more than 1.3 million members across India. The members are drawn from multiple trades and occupations and from all religious and caste groups. SEWA stresses self-reliance and promotes organising around the central strategies of work security, income security, food security and social security. Primarily a trade union, SEWA now engages in a wide range of other areas, including leadership development, collective bargaining, policy advocacy, financial services, social services, infrastructure and training and capacity building. Over the past decade, SEWA has also inspired or cofounded national and regional networks of home-workers in other parts of South and Southeast Asia, national networks of street vendors in India and Kenya and international networks of domestic workers and waste pickers. International and regional networks have secured two international conventions for home workers and domestic workers and policies, laws or legal judgements in several countries.

Source: World Development Report – Jobs (2013)

The experience of SEWA also illustrates how collective actions that begin seeking norm changes in one domain, for instance protesting against discriminatory labour standards, can lead to collective action in other domains that also affect women's agency, such as demands for political representation, laws on domestic violence and affirmative action. Collective actions that start out responding to a specific institutional failure can, over a period of time, evolve into actions that tackle the norms and behaviours that shape broader political and societal participation. This can be done formally through legislative change and increased political visibility and representation, and informally through the everyday struggles of women's groups lobbying for social change (Box 9).

Box 9: Collective Action and the Right to Information Act, India

M. Lakshmi Devi, a 25-year-old Dalit woman from Kondavanipalli village of Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh, used to work as daily wage labourer weeding, ploughing or sowing seeds in fields or digging and building roads for the equivalent of around US65 cents per day. In 2002, due to her father's sickness she took out a loan of mere Rs 1,000 (around US\$16) expecting to repay it. What she did not know was that the upper-caste moneylender had made her sign five acres of land away with a thumb impression. She joined APDS-Andhra Pradesh Dalit Samakhya (a women's self-help group) to rescue her land. Last year, using the Right to Information Act (RTI), Lakshmi and her fellow activists found 110 acres of vacant land and lobbied hard for its return to Dalit women. In November last year, 60 women got one or two acres of fertile land worth Rs 1,000,000 (US\$16350) per acre.

Source: *The Role of the RTI Act in Women's Empowerment*, Nazia Shafti – Greater Kashmir – 29 Mar. 2010

Gender quotas are one way of shifting norms and creating space for women's formal political agency. Quotas now exist in more than 100 countries aimed at increasing the proportion of female candidates for political office (Franceschet et al. 2008). While the measures themselves take different forms (from party lists to reserved seats) proponents point to evidence, such as that from Rwanda and India, of the considerable potential for quotas in raising the profile of women's issues in policymaking, encouraging a more diverse group of women to get engaged in politics and, as a consequence, beginning to change the gendered nature of the public sphere.

At the village *panchayat* level in India, for instance, quotas for women and scheduled castes have been observed to change political incentives in favour of the interests of the group that is favoured by the quota by weakening prevailing stereotypes and shifting social norms (Mansuri and Rao 2013). Greater representation in these local political bodies has also resulted, in some contexts, in greater allocations to some infrastructure and other services serving women's and their children's needs, as well as greater women's participation in village meetings, increased reporting of crimes against women and more arrests for such crimes (WDR 2013:152).

Quotas can also transform expectations from the policy process itself giving female politicians more room to influence key pieces of legislation, as has been demonstrated, for instance, amongst certain *gram sabhas* (local self-governments) in India. In Rwanda, following the genocide and it was the formal representation of women in the legislature and the subsequent creation of a woman's caucus in Parliament that resulted in changes in inheritance laws and the rights of women to inherit land (Powley, E. 2006)

With more female representation, parliamentary caucuses can play an important role in amplifying the collective voices of women and building collaboration on gender issues across political parties. In

Brazil the women's caucus promoted legislation to establish a gender quota and a law on violence against women. The caucus also worked to promote the inclusion of funds for social programmes and gender equality initiatives into the budget. In Uruguay and Colombia, the parliamentary women's caucus worked to approve laws on domestic violence.

Box 10: Gender Budgets: Creating Space for Collective Action on Economic Policy Issues

Achieving gender equality goals requires resources, and gender budgets are an increasingly important tool for improving the alignment between revenue mobilisation, public spending and the stated aim of governments to improve the status of women and girls. Gender budgeting exercises are now taking place in more than 40 countries, in some cases at both central and local government levels. But gender budgets are not just a technical exercise they also create space, inside and outside government, for new types of evidence to inform policymaking and for a different kind of conversation to take place between politicians, government officials and civil society activists about the key purposes and priorities of public policy.

The Women's Budget Group in the United Kingdom, for instance, is independent voluntary organisation bringing together individuals from academia, local and national government, non- government organisations and trade unions to conduct Gender Budget Analysis and promote Gender Responsive Budgeting by the UK Government. The Group produces regular assessments of UK economic and social policy, with a particular focus on the UK Budget and Expenditure Reviews. The aim is to show the impact that government taxation and expenditure can have on women's everyday lives, especially women experiencing poverty and to identify alternatives to policies that are not supportive of gender equality and women's rights.

www.wbg.org.uk

Committees are formal bodies within the legislature. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, over 60 parliaments have now established committees to deal with gender issues and to mainstream gender issues in their committee work. In South Africa, the Women's National Committee, made up of all party members and women's organisations, was vocal about women's representation in the political settlement following the end of apartheid, leading to a number of important gains for women (Nazneen and Mahmud 2012). More recently the Parliamentary Joint Monitoring Committee on the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Women has overseen the work of government departments and helped shape numerous pieces of legislation to support gender equality, including a gender budget.

Formal political committees and caucuses can also help to build a positive authorising environment for other forms of collective action by women. In Uganda for instance, the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association has not only engaged directly in the legislative process but also created awareness campaigns, shared information and built networks with NGOs and women's groups as part of a broader platform of engagement on gender equality.

Improvements in women's agency at the societal level are without doubt influenced by the level of women's formal political participation. But still women have limited influence in political decision making and are much less likely than men to belong to a political party (World Bank 2012). The research evidence also paints a complex picture around the willingness and capacity of women legislators, once in power, to act for and on behalf of women (and particularly women beyond their social class).

Box 11: Political Quotas in Burundi

Article 164 of Burundi's 2004 Constitution stipulates a 30 percent quota for women in Parliament. In the 2010 elections, 32 percent of the 106 seats in the National Assembly were taken up by women. While the number of women in decision-making bodies at all levels has increased, this has not led to a significant reduction in inequalities between men and women. The adoption of a quota system was not accompanied by a transformation of the political and institutional systems, which remain heavily masculine and hamper the promotion of gender equality. The combination of ethnic and regional quotas, adopted in 2005, reinforced ethnic and regionally based allegiances as well as ethnic and political isolationism, pushing politicians, including women, into partisan positions accordingly. Nonetheless, the increased representation of women in state institutions may be having gradual positive effects on social transformation in Burundi. It seems that women are progressively building up self-confidence, resulting in their increased access to speech within the public sphere, as well as higher social respect.

Source: Sow, N. (2012).

Factors that influence women's behaviour as collective political actors include: their individual socio-economic characteristics and priorities; their party affiliations; the presence or not of a critical mass of women organising outside of formal politics to whom individual political actors can relate; and the structural features of the policy-making process itself (Franceschet 2008). These factors create a complex web of costs and benefits to collective action within the political sphere which in turn influences the size and shape of gains made for and on behalf of women. In Afghanistan, for example, notwithstanding the increase in female participation through the provision of reserved seats, huge obstacles still exist for women seeking to operate as effective political actors including the enormous challenge of constructing a collective identity based on gender rather than ethnicity or religion; and a legislative environment that is full of informal rules that impede women's ability to promote women's rights (Larson in Franceschet 2008). The increased presence of women in governance bodies and parliaments has also often resulted in an over-identification of women's issues as "social issues." The WDR 2012 cites data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union showing that, even in 2010, women ministers were twice as likely to hold a social portfolio, than an economic one.

The same applies to women's participation in the judiciary, in labour unions and other statutory bodies that represent wider societal interests. Women's participation in labour unions partly reflects the pattern of formal female labour force participation, but even where women are heavily engaged in the labour market they still make up a tiny proportion of union leaders. Across Europe, for example, 44 percent of union members are women but less than 10 percent of their presidents and 20 percent of their secretary-generals are women (World Bank 2012).⁵ As a result, many of the issues that are of broader relevance for women workers are left off the agenda, while reducing the contribution that unions can make to furthering gender equality goals through enhancing women's collective bargaining power and social standing in the workplace.

Repeated and persistent patterns of female marginalisation in decision-making bodies across nation states, point to the importance of collective action at the regional and global level. Whilst any form of collective action at the inter-state level remains enormously complex and difficult, the introduction of a set of norms and conventions on gender equality at the international level has been a critical aid to

⁵ A notable exception is the election in 2012 of the first women as General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the UK, the umbrella body that represents British Trade Unions. The TUC was founded in 1868.

women's movements everywhere seeking to change laws and shine a light on discriminatory social norms that constrain women's agency. The process of securing these conventions is also critical for building capacity and gaining status recognition for local women's associations. The interaction of local, national and international legal standards have played an important role in enabling the work of women's groups and caucuses around the world. Often times they are involved in monitoring how international provisions are included and implemented in national laws, which in turn creates space and builds capacity for more effective civic engagement on domestic legislative issues (Box 12).

Box 12: International Norms and Collective Action

International norms set out standards of behaviour that are regarded as appropriate by a critical mass of nation states. Such norms affect domestic policy making along a variety of causal pathways (Simmons 2009). These pathways include creating standards in global civil society, creating shared expectations in regional communities of nations, and mobilizing domestic civil society (Mala & Weldon 2012).

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is the UN treaty that ensures that countries which have ratified it are held to account on their obligations to protect women, end all forms of discrimination against women, and promote equality in both the private and public spheres.

The advantage of CEDAW is that unlike other forms of national legislation on sex discrimination and equal treatment, the convention is solely concerned with the position of women rather than discrimination faced by both sexes, and focuses on achieving substantive equality, understanding that there needs to be positive action to ensure that women can fulfil their rights. The four-year reporting cycle creates important opportunities not only for governments to report on measures implemented by the country to comply with its obligations under the convention but also for women's organisations via written shadow reports, and informal and formal meetings, to bring women's real concerns to national and international attention and to highlight the gap between ratification and compliance.

There are examples of success, including Turkey's domestic violence act which draws directly on CEDAW, as does Australia's Sex Discrimination Act, while monitoring and advocacy by Colombia women's groups in CEDAW informed the expansion of reproductive health guarantees in the Colombian Constitution and facilitated greater access to contraception. But for each example of success there are numerous others that show sluggish or no progress in fulfilling the key obligations set out under CEDAW. So the struggle for a global agenda that truly shifts social norms on gender issues at the national level continues.

Sources: World Bank 2012, Women's Resource Centre, UK

But it is not only inter-governmental conventions and normative frameworks that are important; increasingly, it is collaboration among public, private and non-profit sector entities that are shifting the pattern of collective action and shaping the way in which gender equality issues are resourced and tackled at the global level. *Every Woman, Every Child*, for instance, is a global partnership bringing together multilaterals, national governments, NGOs and the private sector to work together on mobilising funding and delivering better access to health care and nutrition for women and girls. By working across public and private sectors and combining their relative strengths it is possible to develop a more comprehensive and technologically sophisticated approach to solving longstanding development problems. So far US\$40 billion has been raised, far more than would be possible in a single-agency approach. The IFC-ILO *Better Work Partnership* is another international collaborative effort to improve working conditions for workers, the majority of them women, in heavily globalised sectors such as the garment industry. In collaboration with national governments, manufacturers,

international buyers, workers and their unions, Better Work identifies areas of non-compliance with international and national labour standards and works alongside employers to improve performance, provide training and encourage awareness of the substantial shared benefits of better working practices (www.betterwork.org).

Building partnerships to support collective action is crucial. But the vast majority of actions in which women engage—where they take place and around what issues—are products of conjuncture. Naila Kabeer (2011) argues that “their priorities will determine the issues on which they are willing to take action while the constraints shape the form their action takes”. On this basis, the way that women exercise agency in formal institutions and in the work place is often different to that of men, including the resort to more informal, autonomous groupings and associations (Box 13).

Box 13: Beyond the Formal: Autonomous Movements and Progressive Policy Change

Despite growing evidence of the costs of violence against women in society, national policies to combat such violence vary widely. Htun and Weldon (2012) ask why some governments have more comprehensive policy approaches than others, and why some governments are quick to adopt policies to address violence, whereas others are slow.

The research examines six dimensions of government action in response to VAW: services to victims, legal reform, specific policies for vulnerable populations of women, training of professionals, prevention and administrative reform, across a data set covering four decades and 70 countries. In examining a number of possible determinants of the presence of a more progressive policy regime (high scores on the index of government action in response to VAW), the study finds significant results for the presence of effective policy machineries, the presence and diffusion of international norms, and the presence of strong, autonomous feminist movements i.e. groups that adopt an independent agenda and exist outside of formal political parties or wings of trade unions. In contrast, the presence of women in national legislatures was not significant, while national GDP levels and levels of democratic development produced only very small, positive effects.

The authors conclude: “Women’s autonomous organizing in civil society affects political change...Autonomous movements articulate the social perspectives of marginalized groups, transform social practice, and change public opinion. They drive sweeping policy change as voters, civic leaders and activists, by pressuring policy makers to respond to their demands and as policy makers themselves become sympathetic to the movement’s goals. These effects of autonomous organizing are more important in our analysis than women’s descriptive representation inside the legislature or the impact of political parties” (: 564)

Source: Htun and Weldon (2012)

The Middle East and North Africa is a region long associated with strict gender norms and codes. But important gains have been made by women of the region over the past two decades due largely to the mobilisation of autonomous women’s groups on issues ranging from sexual harassment in Egypt, to the rights of tribal women to ownership of communal lands in Morocco, to changing attitudes in Jordan to “honour killings” and the right of women to apply for a passport without a male guardian’s permission in Palestine (Azzouni cited in Riza 2013). While diverse in many respects, these examples of collective action resonate broadly due to having been built organically, often with men in support, drawing heavily in recent years on social media and building alliances both locally and transnationally. These forms of collective action are often the first time and the only space that women affected by severely restrictive social norms have been able to exercise voice and agency at scale.

The importance of autonomous women's associations in the Bangladesh context is explored by Kabeer (2009). These groups are significant because membership is not given based on social position but rather are the result of a "chosen affiliation" beyond the given affiliations of family or kinship. This is one of the rare occasions when women are addressed by the name they were given at birth instead of being referred to as their husband's wife or son's mother, and the only time when their own view point is requested or valued along with those of their peers. This once again points to the intrinsic value of association where the very act of associating becomes the resource - in the form of an increased sense of self and self-esteem. This is especially important for women living and working on the margins of the public sphere. And, as the case of SEWA and other grassroots women's groups illustrates, positive feedback loops between an increasing sense of self-worth and women's agency mean that, over time, these more informal associations can begin to change restrictive social norms.

Box 14: From Local Problem-Solving to Political Participation

To understand the conditions that enable effective participation by women in politics there needs to be an analysis not just of the characteristics and performance of elected women leaders but also the extent to which village communities are engaged through collective processes in demanding accountability from those elected. The experience of a women's movement in Uttarakhand, India, that evolved out of a programme of environmental education, shows a growing political consciousness amongst women. Women's participation in Whole Village Groups has paved the way for active engagement with local governance institutions. By enabling collective spaces, reinforcing norms of equality and inclusiveness through debate and negotiation, building networks across villages and supporting each other through conflicts and confrontations, the organisations demonstrated that processes of collective action can lead to effective political participation.

Source: Sharma and Sudarshan, 2010.

History is filled with examples of women organising that have either contested or joined forces with local or national governments to champion gender equality. Today, the power behind these movements is even greater as globalisation and new communications technology have created new opportunities to raise awareness, create networks, generate debate and mobilise people of all social groups against inequalities. Again in the MENA region the Arab Spring heralded a whole new viral form of social organising across class, gender and national boundaries. There are now worrying signs that such examples may be in retreat, but the demonstration effect nevertheless lingers on.

New forms of social networking and communication have become platforms for awareness raising, social mobilisation and political discussion, as well as fundraising through, for instance, crowd funding. The emergence of "many-to-many" communication, the capacity to organise without an organisational structure and the fact that much ICT drastically lowers the cost of working collectively, are opening up the possibilities for collective agency in the future. Current practices on the internet bear witness to a thriving culture of collective action ranging from online petitions to anti-harassment initiatives and flash mobs (Postmes et al. 2002). One Billion Rising, for example, used an Internet-based campaign and a connected series of flash mobs across the world to raise awareness around gender-based violence. Girl Rising is an internet-based fundraising campaign for girls' education. Social media and social networking are at the heart of campaigns such as Hollaback, Stop Street Harassment and Collective Action for Safe Spaces.⁶ Smartphone Apps for registering the location of

⁶ www.Ihollaback.org; www.stopstreetharassment.org; www.collectiveactiondc.org

street harassment against women have started to build up a picture for city officials and legislators of the scale and incidence of street harassment from New York to Cairo.

Elsewhere technology is being used to create new platforms for civic engagement in the public sphere. In Africa, Ushahidi was used to crowd-source reports of violence during the 2009 Kenyan elections. The same software is now being used to help women's organisations report corruption in frontline maternal services in northern India (Box 15), and to crowd-source women's technology organisations across Africa (Ushahidi at <http://www.usshahidi.com/>).

Box 15: Crowdsourcing Data on Informal Payments for Maternal Health Services in India

Maternal mortality remains a major challenge in India, with 56,000 maternal deaths each year (WHO 2012) and with parts of the country still lacking access to quality health services. In recent years, the government has made efforts to reduce maternal mortality by expanding access through the provision of free maternal health services in government health facilities.

A grassroots women's organization, Mahila Swasthya Adhikar Manch (MSAM), has been actively monitoring the quality and affordability of health and related services in 10 districts of Uttar Pradesh since 2006. Through the Mera Swasthya Meri Aawaz (My Health, My Voice) campaign, MSAM women in the districts of Azamgarh and Mirzapur have been monitoring informal payments using mobile phones to call a toll-free number to report out-of-pocket expenses. Their reports are automatically recorded onto a map, which shows the facilities where informal payments were demanded, the amount charged and the type of services for which they were charged. The data collected are used by MSAM to work with health officials in these two districts in order to remove this barrier to health access.

The Mera Swasthya Meri Aawaz (My Health, My Voice) campaign aims to:

- Provide communities in the two districts with a mechanism to report, track and monitor informal fees
- Collect and present evidence on informal fees for maternal health services and explore ways of using this information to stop the practice of informal fees
- Explore, document and evaluate the introduction and use of this technology in the project areas

Source: Ushahidi at <http://www.usshahidi.com>

ICT's are already revolutionising the opportunity for collective action amongst populations with digital access. The scale of such access is only likely to increase as mobile telephony networks expand and mobile phones pack ever more increased computing power. But technology is never neutral and norms and rules govern the way it is used and impacts on society. While the power of ICT in facilitating awareness and a sense of shared purpose from girls to older women, is there for all to see, we simply don't know yet whether such forms are going to be more effective in tackling the deep seated constraints on women's agency than more conventional paths, or whether ICT becomes simply another channel in which women and girls have to battle for equal rights.

3. EMERGING FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

There are many positive and inspiring examples of collective action both within and beyond development practice. There is also sufficient evidence of quality to be sure that collective action is, and can be, an important mechanism for promoting women's agency—from accessing and controlling economic resources to increasing decision-making power at the household and the societal level to driving forward progressive policy change. But social norms are slow to change, and the norms that constrain women's individual agency also constrain their collective agency. Much development

practice involves incremental change. Feedback loops mean that more transformative change does happen, but not overnight and not in any linear way. As Kabeer (2012) argues, there is no linear trajectory between powerlessness and empowerment. Vital for development actors is the understanding that participation in groups is not a silver bullet and there are likely to be a series of reinforcing actions that are necessary to enable the space for women to claim and exercise greater agency, while at the same time ensuring that development interventions do no harm to the intrinsic value of independent and autonomous association.

3.1. PRACTICAL AND OPERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

At the operational level, what does the evidence on collective action and women's agency mean for what the World Bank Group should be doing more of, or doing differently? The lessons from the reviewed literature and case studies point to the critical importance of:

- *Context*: Take context firmly into account in the design of community or social accountability programmes and ensure a careful reading of the local incentives that work for, and often against, inclusive action in support of women's agency.
- *Take account of the long term, non-linear process of social change*. Context does not always play out in predictable ways and social norms can be deep seated and slow to change. Avoid quick technical fixes that make assumptions about women's social capital as something inherently positive.
- *Actions are needed at a number of levels and should reinforce one another to build lasting change*: Just as women's agency is multifaceted so are routes for getting there—and there are no silver bullets. Multiple entry points may be needed to support collective efforts that are addressing key local problems (such as the lack of safe contraceptive services) while at the same time creating an enabling environment for these efforts to formalise or scale up to address agency issues more fundamentally. Top-down and local actions are both needed to bring about transformative change.
- *External engagement needs careful thought*: Efforts to create or induce group-based action to fill public goods gaps or solve accountability problems can be problematic unless gender norms and institutions are well understood. Best practices are rarely useful and at worst can do more harm than good. More iterative and facilitative approaches may be needed that engage with the pathways of social change. Indirect, enabling environment reforms that tackle inequities enshrined in law, the regulatory framework or the political system are often needed to support local collective action.
- *Functioning state institutions are key*: Institutions can provide a framework for collective action at the local, national and international level. The nature of the state and its relationships with citizens and communities deeply affects the extent to which individual and collective agency can thrive. Top-down supports are vital to overcoming demand-side collective action problems, while legal and regulatory changes can be essential for breaking the “nexus” of dysfunctional rules and norms.

These lessons put considerable onus on the Bank and other external actors to understand the complex pathways that link development interventions, collective action and improvements in women's agency. They also point to the importance of working differently in different contexts and investing in multi-disciplinary research to find out *what works and how* (Box 16). The Bank needs to arbitrate between competing priorities and evidence to ensure that the design, delivery, monitoring and

evaluation of interventions reflect the best possible knowledge and understanding of local social norms. Learning by doing with large elements of local problem-solving rather than imposing boilerplate designs is now widely accepted as a better way of promoting institutional and social change (Andrews, Pritchett et al.).

Box 16: Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Cote D'Ivoire

The World Bank is supporting a project in Cote D'Ivoire aimed at providing prevention and assistance services to victims of GBV in a country that is witnessing a protracted socio-political crisis with peaks of violence. The project is seeking to improve the commitment and capacity of local authorities and community members in target areas to reducing GBV, improve access to multi-sectoral services for GBV survivors and improve coordination and capacity amongst key governmental stakeholders in the prevention and response to GBV, including the establishment of a multi-sector referral network. A quantitative evaluation is running alongside the project to provide information on what kind of impact the project has had on attitudes toward and the incidence of intimate partner violence, household resource control and decision-making and other gender norms. Qualitative work is also assessing how these processes of changing attitudes and behaviours occur among women participants as well as men's perspectives.

Because of the influence of social norms, enhancing women's agency is a contested process. The Bank as a lending agency should not presume it has all the right tools and instruments to understand and engage in such complex processes and should often look to others with more local legitimacy to work at the front line.

But the Bank does have considerable technical capacity and convening power that can be deployed to support national governments recognise and support efforts to shift social norms through appropriate policy, resourcing and legal changes (Box 17). It can also help resource the "space" needed for experimentation as a way of progressing new and innovative policy change in support of women's agency, such as through piloting and evaluating programmes that seek to shift behaviours regarding violence against women or experimenting with paralegal services to support women in land disputes. The best possible way to do this is directly with the client and those organisations working with women and girls struggling for change.

The operational implication is that public action needs to be multifaceted and multi-sectoral if it is to be relevant and effective in improving agency outcomes for women. Collective action is one of a number of important solutions to the problems posed by lack of agency, but it works best when it works in tandem with policy and institutional reforms at the sectoral or system-wide level, that fully acknowledge women's diverse needs and interests (Box 18). Ultimately, the findings on collective action and agency call for a shift of approach away from seeing collective action as a means for delivering pre-determined development objectives, to one that engages with collective action as a *site* for negotiation, for tackling shared problems and, ultimately, for finding shared solutions. Development actors, as a result, need to see themselves more as facilitators and convenors rather than as initiators or conductors of change.

3.1.1. Priorities for the Project and Programme Cycle

Diagnostics

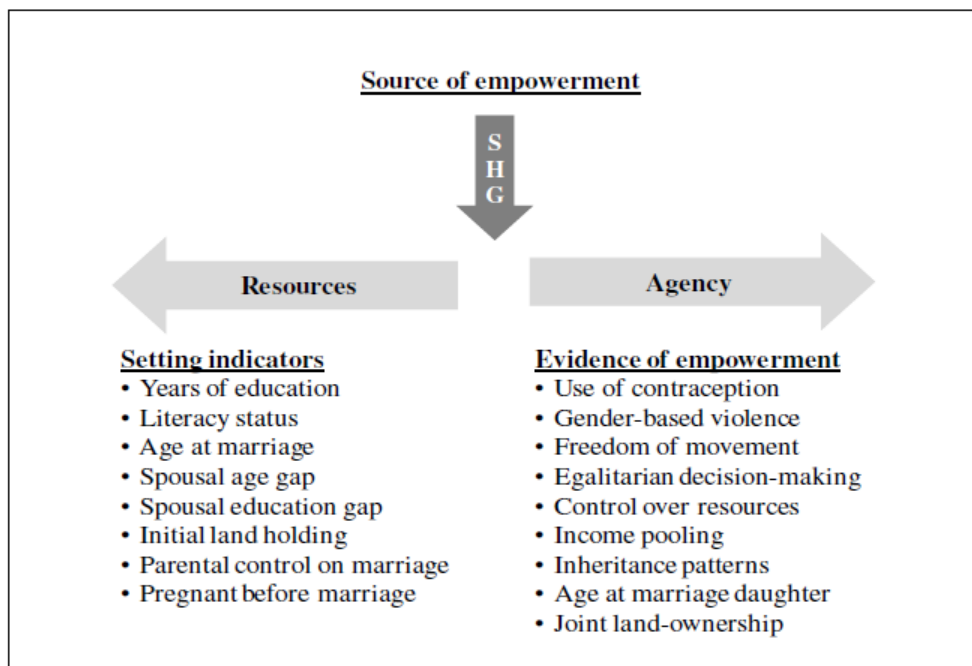
It is vital that all project diagnostics have a clear analysis of the way in which power and politics locally are structured and shaped by gendered social norms: This requires examining both formal and

informal institutions, as well as local power structures and how they influence gender relations. Data on ethnic and class heterogeneity, wealth (income and asset) inequality, and evidence of past or present collective action, are all likely to be important indicators of the propensity to cooperate.

It is important to avoid assumptions that local norms that structure cooperation by men, social class or ethnic group, for instance, also apply read across to women or girls. Neither are all women’s groups equally collaborative. Intra-group differences are as important for women as they are for men. Often it is women of higher social class, more material wealth and good social connections who have the time and motivation to participate. It is also important to gather evidence on the ways in which women are able to act collectively in a positive manner, and find out why these work and what lessons can be transferred, if any, to other activities or institutional settings.⁷

Box 17: Mapping Resources, Collective Action and Agency

Meier zu Selhausen (2013) identifies a number of indicators that capture the initial conditions (or resources) under which women join and participate in self-help groups (SHG) plus initial levels of agency or empowerment. The same set of indicators can also be used to identify the initial conditions of women who do not join or do not remain in groups. The extent to which group membership then contributes to increased agency is proxied by changes on both the resources and agency dimensions of the equation.



Source: Meier zu Selhausen (2013)

Design

Define concrete steps linking context to desired outcomes with a clear focus on the **change variables** most directly associated with improvements in women’s agency.

⁷ For guidance on mapping the local social and political context for social accountability interventions see: World Bank 2013 “Mapping the Social Context,” but questions still need to be more carefully teased out for differences between women and men

Build a clear pathway or theory of change. For example, DFID’s Nepal programme developed a theory of change to inform its gender equality and social inclusion work in the country which is illustrated in its approach to violence against women and girls (Box 18)

Identify different domains that are important to support women’s collective action and agency--from political and advocacy support to the changes in the broader policy and legal framework. Link actions in multiple domains (see DFID example).

Box 18: DFID Nepal: Implementing a Theory of Change to Deliver Better Results for Women and Girls

DFID Nepal (DFIDN) developed a theory of change to underpin its work on gender equality and social inclusion. This is used in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of DFID programmes. The theory is conceptualized as a framework with three interlocking “domains of change”:

- access to livelihood assets and services;
- the ability of women and poor and excluded people to exercise voice, influence and agency;
- and “rules of the game,” which refer to the policies and institutions that mediate and regulate people’s participation in state life and their access to livelihood opportunities.

A key feature of the approach is that it seeks to bring about system-level institutional reform and policy change to remove inequities in the external environment alongside more direct targeting of resources to assets and livelihoods. DFIDN’s theory of change is premised on the understanding that *change that does not occur in all three domains will not be transformational*--it will have less impact and be less sustainable than change that occurs in all three domains. For example, assets may be increased and consumption smoothed temporarily by providing food or cash for work, but unless and until poor people can claim their rights to social security, education, health care, and decent work, there will be no sustainable improvement in livelihoods, people will not be empowered and social exclusion will remain.

This is put to the test in a small “exploratory” portfolio focusing on Violence Against Women and Girls with a particular focus on adolescent girls. The portfolio has three elements:

- increasing the access of women and girls to integrated and quality VAWG response services at the district and sub-district level, through paralegal programming, health and education SWAs, the police programme, and a new VAWG Response Programme
- working with men and, in particular, adolescent boys, to support more positive attitudes and behaviours surrounding VAWG, through a Civil Society Challenge Fund that will be part of the larger VAWG Response Programme
- scaling up successful approaches to eliminating harmful traditional practices (again through the Civil Society Challenge Fund)

Source: DFID Nepal 2010

Work with what is already in place and processes that show real promise, based on an informed assessment of the local situation and the lessons of history. Do not induce new ways of organising without a very careful reading of the social and political context and give due consideration to costs/risks as well as benefits. If groups have not formed organically, there are usually good reasons why.

Enabling environment reforms that seek to remove inequities in the external environment are vital in “levelling the playing field” for women’s agency. For instance, reforming women’s legal entitlement to property, to legal redress and to social protection may be as, if not more, important to

promoting collective action than bottom-up measures seeking to build local accountability or inclusion (Box 19).

Box 19: Enabling environment reforms supporting collective action

The prospect for collective action to change development outcomes depends significantly on the external environment and the legal and regulatory “rules of the game” (Corduneanu-Huci et al. 2013). Where these rules are systematically biased against gender equality concerns, the prospects for positive change in women’s agency are likely to be dramatically reduced. System-level institutional reform and policy change can shift the rules of the game in support of women’s agency. The focus of such reforms can be classified into three categories:

1. **Removing legal/statutory inequalities:** reform of discriminatory laws shifts formal institutional rules in favour of increased agency, for example removing discriminatory divorce, age at marriage, spousal selection, inheritance and property laws.
2. **Encouraging positive compliance:** policy changes can shift the rules of the game towards more equality of opportunity and access. This increases opportunities for non-state actors to test executive compliance, for example around constitutional access to public goods (as in South Africa), political quotas, equal pay, enforcing legislation on domestic violence and the entitlement to social protection.
3. **Monitoring and sanctioning:** the establishment of independent ombudsmen, political committees and service delivery contracts can create space for collective actors to expose shortfalls in public goods delivery and to challenge the failure to implement equality policies and laws.

Consider the role of men in interventions designed to promote women or girls empowerment. Include opportunities to do community-education with men and youth on promoting gender equitable attitudes.

Implementation

Pilot, evaluate and then implement wherever possible. Piloting points to the value of experimentation but also of risk-taking. Taking risks—in both action and non-action—is likely to be an important part of supporting women’s collective agency.

Adapt, be flexible and don’t assume quick results. Be prepared to change project design on the basis of learning by doing and work on indirect and enabling measures as well as, or instead of, direct supports for groups.

Ensure stakeholders have local legitimacy and the authority to support norm change. Where necessary, step back to allow frontline women’s groups and alliances to work directly with change processes. Assume an indirect and facilitative role in more cases than not.

Above all, avoid harm.

Monitoring and Evaluation

To date there are few commonly accepted methodologies for monitoring and evaluating collective action. By its nature, collective action is complex and influenced by a high number of factors. Often it can only be measured indirectly. There is a case, therefore, for the Bank investing its considerable research and analytical capacity in proposing suitable metrics for monitoring the process of, and outcomes related to collective agency capacity.

New metrics need to distinguish between the processes and purposes of collective action— (i) how and under what circumstances do such actions take place, and (ii) what are the outcomes and impact

of such actions for women collectively and individually (this is newer, less certain territory where the effects may only be revealed in the long run and indirectly)?

Most importantly, data are needed that recognise both the intrinsic and instrumental value of collective action and the wide variety of expressions of collective agency, from mutual support groups to savings and loans groups to autonomous social movements and social media platforms.

3.1.2. What might the Bank do differently?

There are few easy answers for how the Bank might best support changes in women’s collective agency through its operational work, not least because the record on donor practice in support of collective action by communities is so mixed. Nevertheless there are clearly some things that the Bank can do differently, but much depends on its ability to invest in new data, operate more flexibly, consider the long term and, crudely, stick its neck out in support of positive change for women.

Table 2 draws out some further practical implications suggests ways in which the Bank might think of doing things differently.

Table 2: How Might the Bank Do Things Differently?

Expression of Agency	Lessons/insights from the evidence	Practical implications	What might the Bank do?
Access to/control over resources	<p>Context matters; local institutions are heavily gendered, Disadvantaged women face biggest obstacles.</p> <p>Women’s informal associations</p> <p>Building on local norms of trust & mutual interdependence can bring important benefits.</p> <p>Group-actions oriented to solving local public goods problems in health, education & access to finance can have positive effects on agency, but rarely is participation through collective action the only solution.</p> <p>Access to information legislation, top-down supports from local & state governments important, as are opportunities for form networks e.g. migrant workers or business groups, to influence policy.</p>	<p>Enhancing control through local resource management & service provision must be grounded in analysis of gendered nature of rules & norms.</p> <p>Clarity about aims/purposes of supporting collective action – better social provisioning vs. more accountability vs. challenging power relations.</p> <p>Agency is multifaceted & interventions need to be too; recognise long term nature of social change – build on existing initiatives.</p> <p>“Short-impact” collective action tends to be incremental not transformative. Incremental changes can reinforce over time. ‘Patient’ government or external support can help.</p>	<p>Better data & evidence on the interactions and outcomes of interventions using groups and changes in women’s agency.</p> <p>Gender analysis of local institutions made central to the design, implementation and M&E.</p> <p>Support women’s social & political capabilities not just technical expertise</p> <p>Where possible learn from and build on existing informal associations rather than forming new groups & do no harm</p> <p>Focus enabling reforms in policy areas that support action on women’s agency – labour laws, physical infrastructure, budgets etc.</p> <p>Experiment with flexible project and programme modalities to provide ‘patient’ support to local efforts</p>
Decision-making over family formation	<p>Context matters.</p> <p>No automatic link between collective action outside the family and norm changes within. Feedback loops do exist.</p>	<p>Efforts to directly enhance decision-making power through group formation are enough on their own.</p> <p>Multiple points of entry are needed,</p>	<p>Fill evidence gaps on effective entry points for tackling child marriage, son preference etc.</p> <p>Revamp empowerment programmes to</p>

	<p>Community mobilisation can be key in expanding educational opportunities & strengthening women's economic position, in turn influence beliefs around on child marriage, FGM, use of contraceptive services etc.</p> <p>Legal changes can support, but root of problem is complex and differs across lifecycle, unlikely to change quickly.</p>	<p>multifaceted programmes with a deep understanding of norms that inform gender relations</p> <p>Education, information and technology all play a key role</p> <p>Enabling environment reforms may assist women's groups tackle complex social issues</p>	<p>link more directly to issues across women's lifecycle.</p> <p>Support initiatives and women's groups across a range of sectors.</p> <p>Encourage focus on enabling measures that provide necessary top-down supports to local collective action e.g. referral networks, coordinating bodies, joint departmental strategies.</p>
Freedom of movement	<p>Groups focused on public goods and economic opportunities, as part of empowerment programmes are fairly successful in enhancing women's mobility in the public sphere</p> <p>Education & economic opportunities tend to support women's mobility, but engagement in paid work can also lead to restrictive norms in the workplace. Migrant women workers often exposed to additional risks (violence in particular) in new environments.</p>	<p>Increased mobility tends to be a product of other things, such as increased income and control over assets, engagement in the labour market etc.</p> <p>Women often underrepresented in associations representing low paid workers, seasonal workers etc.</p>	<p>Focus on education and incomes for women to enhance mobility.</p> <p>Experiment with mobile paralegal & related social services for groups supporting migrant/domestic workers.</p> <p>Support international dialogues with women's groups/associations promoting the specific needs of women migrants</p> <p>Active partnerships with organisations promoting better practices for women at work</p>
Freedom from violence	<p>Multiple causes. Social norms move slowly. Engage men.</p> <p>Potential of women's collectives—sharing information, legal advice, crisis support, self-confidence and resources. What works and why?</p> <p>New thinking points to importance of communication across individuals, groups, security, police and government plus growing women's bargaining power and self-confidence in the economic & social sphere.</p>	<p>Tackling GBV is a huge arena that is widespread but often tied to localised norms and behaviours.</p> <p>Collective action is an important part of the response as much for its intrinsic purposes – self-esteem and self-confidence – as its instrumental purposes.</p> <p>Experimentation, innovation & learning still needed to identify casual links and evidence of what works.</p>	<p>Delivery and pathways of change working with local women's organisations and professional groups</p> <p>Policy lending instruments to support changes in laws and encourage intra-governmental coordination.</p> <p>Use sectoral programmes to facilitate women's groups, service providers and the judiciary to work together</p> <p>Encourage full adoption of CEDAW & support evidence building as part of UN Trust Fund to End VAW</p>
Voice & societal influence	<p>Community/political leadership crucial, but not always representative.</p> <p>Quotas have some positive effects, but not a magic bullet. Women's caucuses improve the number of policy proposals focusing on women's issues/interests</p> <p>Broader legal/regulatory changes important to shape policy process and chances for women to influence</p>	<p>Reinforcing actions work best, but change may be slow and unpredictable</p> <p>Enhancing group social and political capabilities as important as funding their technical capacity</p>	<p>Provide flexible and adaptable funding</p> <p>Gender budgets and public expenditure tracking</p> <p>More evidence on quotas and affirmative action measures</p>

4. Conclusion

As outlined in the preceding discussion, collective action is an important demonstration of agency and it can lead to progress in other areas of women's lives. It is fundamentally about mobilizing around common or shared concerns. Mobilization can take a number of forms. It can be routine or sporadic and take place through an organization, government structure or entirely outside formal structures. It can be localized or transnational; it can focus on the articulation of rights or delivery of services; it can be induced from outside or it can evolve organically. There is a long history of collective action for and by women. We find that collective action is important in the development process but it is not always enough on its own to transform discriminatory social norms that fundamentally increase women's agency and gender equality. To better understand these processes more and better data are needed that recognise both the intrinsic and instrumental value of collective action and the wide variety of expressions of collective agency. While collective action can be effective, context is critically important in determining its outcomes and changes in social norms often follow a slow, non-linear trajectory. This means there are no silver bullets, but treated flexibility and within context, collective action processes are a vital contributor to efforts to promote agency and empowerment.

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