

### **GENDER AND COLLECTIVE ACTION Policy Implications from Recent Research**

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Collective action plays a vital role in many people's lives, through such areas as income generation, risk reduction, public service provision, and the management of natural resources. However, men's and women's interests often differ because they have different rights, resources, and responsibilities. Due to these differences as well as socially constructed norms of what it means to be male and female, men's and women's voices are often not equally represented or valued in collective action institutions. Including a gender perspective in these institutions can lead to more effective and equitable outcomes.

This brief summarizes findings from an international workshop on Gender and Collective Action organized in 2005 by CAPRI in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

#### **INTEGRATING BOTH WOMEN AND MEN INTO COLLECTIVE ACTION CAN LEAD TO GREATER GROUP EFFECTIVENESS**

In many instances, the gender composition of groups is an important determinant of effective collective action, especially for natural resource management in two key dimensions: (1) the ability of groups to meet their immediate purposes, whether that purpose is the management of a natural resource or the disbursement of funds to members of a burial group and (2) the process by which the group works to meet that purpose. Specific measures of effectiveness might include tangible indicators such as economic returns to group members, compliance with rules, transparency and accountability in managing funds, or the incidence and severity of conflicts, as well as less tangible indicators, such as members' satisfaction with the group.

Although strong common identity and interests among members make it easier for groups to establish management rules that are easy to understand and enforce, heterogeneity among members in terms of sex may result in greater compliance with rules. In the

community forests of Madhya Pradesh, India, where women depend on and are extensively involved in the harvesting of forest products, women's participation in joint forest management has substantial effects on resource-related outcomes. When women belong to a forest protection committee, participate in the meetings of that committee and patrol the forest, control of illicit grazing increases by 24 percent, control of illicit felling increases by 28 percent, and regeneration of allotted forest increases by 28 percent.

In Bangladesh, compliance with rules limiting fishing in protected areas is higher when both men and women are actively involved in community-based organizations for floodplain and fishery resources management. Involving women in fishery management is associated with greater community-wide acceptance of management rules and reduced conflict because much of the pressure to ensure community compliance with sanctuaries and fishing rules comes from women, who control what is cooked, discuss fish catches in group meetings, and decide to catch or not catch fish. However, men's participation is also vital for ensuring compliance because men are better able to guard the fish sanctuaries at night when it is unsafe for women to do so.

In many cases, women's inclusion in groups leads to better governance practices. In the highlands of central Kenya, where women are regarded as more trustworthy than men with money, men express more satisfaction with the way group finances are managed in mixed-sex groups, where women frequently act as treasurer, than they do in all-male groups, where men are more vulnerable to corruption. In Nepal, including women in decisionmaking processes minimizes bad governance practices in community forest user groups (CFUGs) because women are instrumental in conducting public audits and hearings on CFUG income and in recovering misused group funds.

#### **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION DEPENDS UPON THE TYPE OF PARTICIPATION WOMEN ASSUME IN MIXED-SEX GROUPS**

Simply adding women to a group does not automatically lead to greater group effectiveness. Participation can assume many forms, from nominal or passive

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participation in which a woman is a group member in name only, to active participation in which a woman plays a key role in decisionmaking and has leadership responsibilities. Even when women can participate more actively, their inclusion may need to be accompanied by measures to strengthen their capacities for assuming such roles.

For example, in Nepal, it is a significant challenge for women in the CFUGs to continue their roles once they are elected to key positions. In two of the CFUGs, women resigned from key positions because they lacked needed skills, and thus lacked confidence in their abilities to do their jobs. In addition, women often face greater time constraints than men and thus may find it more difficult to balance their roles within the household and the collective action group.

While involving both women and men in collective action can help a group attain its goals more easily, it does not necessarily lead to more effective governance processes, or guarantee inclusiveness and transparency. For example, the tribal community of the Kurichyas in Kerala, India organizes collective action to manage traditional seed landraces around a pittan (headman) and his wife, who assume complementary roles in the monitoring, sanctioning, and exchange of seeds and their related knowledge. The pittan organizes official requests for seed from farmers outside of the community, while the pittan's wife supervises the actual handling and storage of the seed. In her capacity as the guardian and custodian of women's knowledge of genetic wealth, she organizes other women within the household to weave storage baskets for the seeds, maintains a storage system to diversify risk, selects the quantity and the quality of seed to enter the exchange network, and cleans the seeds in preparation for exchange. Although this division of labor leads to the effective exchange of seeds, it is only the male members of a household who formally represent the household's interest in acquiring seed. Similarly, in the western Kenyan highlands, the effectiveness of community water projects (measured by the successful operation of piped water supply) is attributed, in part, to a division of labor characterized by reciprocity and complementary roles. As principal users of domestic water, women report vandalism and breakages in pipes while men sanction rule-breakers and fix broken pipes. However, even though wives are instrumental in initiating and implementing the community water projects, they are not recognized as members of the formal project committees. Instead, they have formed their own groups to raise funds for the water projects

and meet certain domestic needs.

Because gender roles change in response to shifting economic, political, and cultural forces, roles within groups are subject to change as well. These changes may create additional opportunities for women's full-scale participation or, alternatively, they may lead to an erosion of women's status, as in the case of the Kurichyas, where a transformation from rice cultivation toward cash crop production risks endangering women's high status as preservers of agrobiodiversity and thus, their crucial role in collective action for seed management.

### **THE ABILITY TO PROMOTE MIXED-SEX GROUPS WILL DEPEND ON THE DEGREE OF GENDER SEGREGATION WITHIN THE COMMUNITY**

One of the biggest limitations of collective action's ability to meet community needs is the entrenched biases in community norms and expectations that disenfranchise certain categories of people. Women, in particular, face significant obstacles to participating in mixed-sex collective action in communities where high levels of gender segregation exist. Such obstacles may include cultural norms that confine women to their homes or dissuade them from participating in public arenas, legal structures that prohibit women from owning property, and governance systems that structure group rules in favor of men's participation and at the expense of women.

In parts of northern Nigeria, women's participation in collective action is limited to all-female caregiving and mutual support activities. In Muslim communities in which women observe seclusion and practice ethnic norms of "appropriate" female behavior including modesty and deference to male household members, women's participation in collective action is restricted to women-only associations designed to teach Islamic education. In Muslim communities in which women do not observe these norms of behavior, women are able to participate in the public arena to some extent, and in clan-based Christian communities that allow for broad-based participation of all community members, women are able to participate actively in community governance through their clan structures.

In Bangladesh, the ability to establish mixed-sex community-based organizations for aquatic resource management is influenced by the acceptance of women's involvement in economic activities outside the home. Despite an NGO's insistence that it would work only with women to create aquatic resource management committees, its efforts in the Muslim community

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failed to involve women in the long run because it lacked a clear understanding of local gender roles.

In other communities with high levels of gender segregation, women themselves may be reluctant to participate in collective action, particularly around issues traditionally perceived as men's domain. For example, when the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) initiated a collective action campaign in Gujarat, India to mobilize women for water management, women resisted participating because they regarded water infrastructure development and management as male territory. Men also resisted women's involvement in the water sector and some men even threatened not to work on water-harvesting structures that would be managed by women or to drink water from a structure built by women. Through interaction with SEWA, women gradually gained the confidence to participate in the campaign and be trained as handpump technicians. As the communities began to experience improved water supplies, men's resistance to women's involvement in the water sector diminished and some men began encouraging their wives to become members of the campaign.

### **THE ABILITY TO PROMOTE MIXED-SEX GROUPS WILL DEPEND ON WOMEN'S AND MEN'S INTERESTS IN AND MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATING**

Even in communities conducive to the formation of mixed-sex groups, women and men may not be interested in joining the same groups since people's motivations for engaging in collective action are linked most strongly to the activities for which they are most commonly responsible. This may be particularly true in the context of collective action for activities other than NRM, in which women and men may not both be resource users.

For example, in Bukidnon, Philippines, men and women do not differ significantly in the probability of joining groups, nor the total number of groups they join, but there are clear differences in the types of groups to which they belong. Men, who are more heavily involved in agricultural production, are more involved in groups related to income generation, whereas women, who tend to be engaged in nonagriculture and are largely responsible for maintaining social networks, are more involved in civic and religious groups.

In the highlands of central Kenya, men and women are engaged in similar group activities (general self-help groups, water groups, and dairy-goat groups) but they have different motivations for joining these

groups. Women, who are responsible for domestic tasks and subsistence agriculture, join groups mainly to build household assets (e.g. furniture, utensils, television sets) while men, who engage more in commercial production, participate in groups for access to markets. Interestingly, men and women have an equal likelihood of joining emergency assistance groups as insurance against risks (illness, death, or lack funds to pay school fees), which may be because such risks are not selective across gender in central Kenya.

### **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The complexity of both gender and collective action means that even if development practitioners, policy-makers and local stakeholders are genuinely interested in using collective action to reduce poverty and foster gender equity, favorable outcomes are not automatic. However, understanding how to influence collective action institutions merits serious attention as part of both poverty reduction and gender-equity strategies. Due consideration should be given to overcoming the barriers to active participation by men and women in collective action. At a practical level this means:

#### **Assess women's and men's motivations for joining groups and whether they differ**

Identifying women's and men's motivations for participating in collective action can shed light on appropriate strategies for organizing effective and gender-responsive collective action. Since development policies and programs are increasingly premised on collective action, a better understanding of women's and men's reasons for joining such groups can help policymakers and practitioners assess whether their programs are hitting or missing their targets. Looking at the motivations of men and women is also crucial for understanding why some groups are more effective than others and why certain processes lead to changes in the way women and men work together and understand each other's roles.

#### **Assess the level of gender segregation in the community. Where strong segregation exists, promoting women's groups may provide an entry point.**

Collective action programs that fail to address gender, or that target women as beneficiaries without a clear understanding of gender relations within the community, risk being ineffective and further disempowering women. In contrast, gender-related programs premised on collective action, as well as programs that see gender equity as an important means of reaching a group's

objectives, can provide real opportunities to foster women's empowerment. To understand gender relations in a given community, existing cultural norms, legal systems, and governance structures need to be analyzed, as well as the gendered rights, resources, and responsibilities that evolve from these frameworks. While gender relations are not static, they also do not change overnight, and attempts to directly challenge such norms may in fact result in backlash and further restrictions on women. Thus, in communities where high levels of gender segregation exist, a more effective initial intervention may be to promote women's groups while sensitizing men about the benefits of women's participation.

### **Promote institutional mechanisms that foster women's inclusion in collective action, whether through mixed or single-sex groups**

Institutional mechanisms that enable women to join groups and remain active members should be intrinsic components of group-based programs. Since the opportunity costs of women's time for engaging in collective action can be extremely high, particularly in labor-intensive collective action schemes, timing meetings to accommodate women's workloads will result in greater participation by women. In other cases, women may feel intimidated to voice their interests in a public arena, or their efforts to speak up may be viewed negatively, as an attempt to subvert gender roles. Ensuring that both men and women have opportunities to voice their concerns, whether in joint or parallel discussions, will help persuade women that their interests are taken seriously. Finally, because women are not a homogeneous group, particular attention should be paid to ensuring that all women's interests within a group are represented, including the voices of poorer and less educated women, as well as women from marginalized communities.

### **Work with women to strengthen their technical and organizational capacities**

Where gender segregation limits women's participation in the public sphere, women's inclusion in collective

action may need to be accompanied by measures to strengthen women's capacities for assuming leadership roles. While effectively integrating women into collective action is likely to come with additional costs and it may take longer to establish mixed-sex groups, the cases described in this brief demonstrate that the active participation of both men and women can contribute to greater group effectiveness.

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