

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND WOMEN'S AGENCY
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ABSTRACT

Following the findings and policy messages of the *World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development 2012*

enhanced action on gender equality.

A component of this work is a review of evidence on the relationship between collective action and 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 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 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, ; 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.

budgeting to expenditure tracking and community scorecards in which citizens claim voice and resources through bottom

whole, and its absence can be a key contributor to

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.

(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 actually results in women bearing the brunt of the decisions such as the banning of for

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 (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 cooperatives.

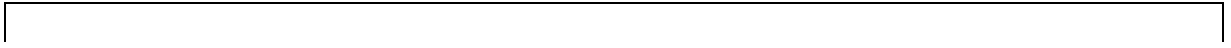
Women derive significant benefits from joining CA groups in the Amhara honey sector. Women group members surveyed earn 81 percent more than women outside groups. This translates to an increase in profit of at least US\$35 per year for women members compared to non-members. For members of the 14 SHGs 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.

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 a big gap between WCA members and non-members.”* These results are even more

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
ween
-linear.

2.2. DECISION-MAKING AND VOICE

In development practice



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

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 100 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.

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 agency and other expressions of agency is the overly dominant engagement of men, 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 work alongside men for exercising voice and agency. Other initiatives confirm that mixed groups, those in which men and women are

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

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 parliament 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.

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

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

organisations

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.

Parliamentary Association has not only engaged directly in the legislative process but also created awareness campaigns, shared information and built networks with NGOs as part of a broader platform of engagement on gender equality.

agency at the societal level are without doubt influenced by the level of 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

everywhere

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 the issues on which they are willing to take

The importance of

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

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 should the World Bank Group be doing more of, or doing differently? The lessons from the

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,

Build a clear pathway or theory of change. For example, 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 --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 :
access to livelihood assets and services;
the ability of women and poor and excluded people to exercise voice, influence and agency;
, h refer to the policies and institutions that
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 ***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.

ortfolio focusing on Violence

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
are likely to be dramatically reduced. System-level institutional reform and policy change can shift the rules of the game i/Lang (e1 2020 1 110.78) 13.020nrctcof

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?

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?
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Access
to/control
over

	<p>Community mobilisation can be key in expanding educational opportunities & 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 complex social issues</p>	<p>link more directly to issues across wom .</p> <p>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>
<p>Freedom of movement</p>	<p>Groups focused on public goods and economic opportunities, as part of empowerment programmes are fairly successful in enhancing mobility in the public sphere</p> <p>Education & economic opportunities 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 promoting the specific needs of women migrants</p> <p>Active partnerships with organisations promoting better practices for women at work</p>

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