Women’s Participation in Community-Based Organizations’ Development as a Strategy for Poverty Reduction in Kenya

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Introduction

Women’s participation in development and leadership is not an imposition of our times. It is as old as creation itself. In the biblical accounts of creation (Gen 1:26), the command of God to steward the earth is given to both women and men, meaning that they are both to take leadership in overseeing the wellbeing of the population in their care. Throughout the Bible, God gives gifts so that both women and men may lead; therefore, we should recognize those gifts as our “sons and daughters prophesy” to lead us. This is clearly seen in the book of Acts, where both women and men answer the call to ministry as community workers (9:36, 39), as teachers of the word (18:26), and as prophets (21:9). Both women and men were exhorted to use their spiritual gifts fully without restrictions on the basis of gender (Rom 12:14–20; 1 Cor 12:7, 11; Eph 4:6–8; 1 Pet 4:10–11). This shows that men and women participated equally in the service (1 Cor 11:5) as confirmed by the presence of active women such as Lydia (who appears to have bankrolled a church as well as Paul’s ministry). The Proverbs 31 woman is commended for all her businesses (real estate, textiles, etc.). By the same token, today, women’s gifts should be utilized in the marketplace as well as men’s, and equal participation in the development process should be encouraged as a biblical ideal.

Development begins with the release of people’s God-given potential, which is only possible when they are free to use the gifts God has given them. Christians have a mandate for the release of human potential, as affirmed in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. As we increase in biblical attitudes about our potential to grow in ability, knowing the value and worth ascribed to us by God, we become better agents of positive change, resulting in transformed persons and structures. Development is a means to further the human potential we recognize in all people based on the teachings of Scripture, since development aims at strengthening the abilities of people and institutions as agents of great initiative to address their own problems in harmony with the natural environment. Issues of human rights and development also come together. This means that civil and political rights have a developmental dimension, and that, without fulfilling the development needs of the human person, one cannot ensure human rights. We have to think about integral development of individuals and the community where they live as well as their nation.

Our collective future and transformation depends on God’s faithfulness, consistent with our commitment to God’s purposes, as it transforms our behavior and our view of ecological and social realities. This transformation must address three basic needs of our global society: justice, sustainability, and inclusiveness. As God’s Spirit transforms self, changed behavior is the result. As James 1:22–24 tells us, hearing the word is not enough; we must “do what it says.” Knowing something is an opportunity for meta-nokia, a deeper realization of one’s meaning and purpose. The true meaning of development is to enable all human beings to reach their fullest potential individually and to build communities that provide resources they need.

Development should be understood as a liberating process aimed at justice, self-reliance, and economic growth. It is essentially a people’s initiative in which the poor and the oppressed are and should be both the active agents and the immediate beneficiaries. This means that we are called to find ways of empowering the marginalized so they can best utilize the opportunities at their disposal. We need also to unlock the ideological fetters that confine women to the domestic sphere and frustrate their free participation in community activities as well as in the larger society.

Background to the problem

The concept of community-based organizations (CBOs) is not new to Kenya in particular or to Africa in general. In 1963, when Kenya became independent, the founder Mzee Jomo Kenyatta called on people to join together and go back to the farms in order to increase agricultural productivity and boost the gross national product. In African traditional societies, for example, it was not unusual for one to “call for help from his clan members and other relatives in paying for fines; in finding goods to exchange for a wife.” For an African, coming together was seen as the way to make work easier and more achievable. This implies that the success of an individual can be seen as the success of the community. This interdependent spirit is summarized by John Mbiti when he says; “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am.”

The need to come together stems from the fact that human beings are social by nature. But why would people want to come together in such a busy world today? Mulwa and Mala cite four reasons. The first is proximity; people from the same locality will tend to form groups. Second, people connect with groups because they gain something from them. Third, people come to groups because they share the same profession. And, fourth, people come to groups because they share the same ideals. To these, I would add achievement, which is the driving force for joining CBOs.

So, growing out of a background where working together was cherished, CBOs are a conscious, modern expression of African togetherness. A CBO is an “organizational entity made up of
people whose membership is defined by a specific common bond and who voluntarily come together to work for a common goal.\textsuperscript{4} Ideally, a CBO is initiated, managed, and owned by the members themselves in a defined community. It is hoped that those who form the CBO will be able to enjoy the benefits of pulling their resources together and maximizing their outcomes for the betterment of the individuals and the whole community.

CBOs as vehicles for community development took root in Kenya in the 1960s. For example, in Kiambu District, people mobilized themselves in groups and formed CBOs (then known as coffee cooperatives) to increase their purchasing power for supplies and to market their produce more profitably. Many small-scale projects were completed, and, since then, CBOs have secured a place in community development in this area. The use of CBOs in community development is very important as it reduces the biases in rural development. These include spatial bias, where development is concentrated in places that are reachable; project bias, where projects are started for prestige purposes; person bias, where prominent people dominate and have their ideas imposed on the rest; dry season bias, where rural communities are visited only during the dry seasons because that is when vehicles can reach them; diplomatic bias, where development workers are ashamed to expose the poverty that the people face; and professional bias, where development workers only want to discuss issues in their area of expertise.\textsuperscript{6} CBOs can address these biases because they operate within the context of the community, and, at the same time, they "are people’s organizations and will attempt to articulate the members’ needs.”\textsuperscript{6}

To be able to address the above biases, members of CBOs need to understand the biases’ effects on development. Sadly, an understanding of gender has been lacking due to women’s low literacy levels in our country and women’s consequent absence in this conversation. A UNESCO survey in 1982 showed that 64 percent of Kenya’s non-literate residents were women.\textsuperscript{7} However, more recently in a 2004–2008 study, UNICEF reported a literacy rate of 93 for female youth (15 to 24 years of age).\textsuperscript{8} This calls us to explore further the relationship between women’s educational attainment and their participation in CBOs’ development activities. Further, as well as making CBOs more effective in development, increasing women’s participation will also make CBOs more attractive to aid agencies that are trying to reach as many people as possible with their services.

According to United Nations reports, “women are half the world’s population, yet they do two-thirds of the world’s work, earn one-tenth of the world’s income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world’s property.”\textsuperscript{9} We can see this exemplified in Kenya, and especially Kiambu District. It is not uncommon to find women supporting very large families, although the majority of them are still very poor. Therefore, CBOs, which are usually formed with the aim of improving the living conditions of the poor, cannot be effective unless women participate in their projects’ formulation and implementation as contributors as well as beneficiaries. In this area, women are the main providers of basic services such as housing, education for their children, clothing, and food. Most of the homes in the district are headed by single mothers and widows.

Women, however, are faced with many constraints in trying to participate in development activities such as CBO-initiated development projects largely dominated by males. If we want equitable distribution of CBOs’ development benefits, we must remove these constraints. These include sociocultural barriers, religious bias against women’s leadership, limitations on leadership, low educational level, and limitations stemming from women’s reproductive role in the family. Being the principal laborers in many societies, women should also have a share in decision making, implementation, sharing benefits, and evaluation. This is what Bergdall calls “active participation.”\textsuperscript{10} Women’s participation would help bring about equity in resource distribution.

In this article, I will use the term \textit{authentic participation} to mean people becoming highly motivated to take part in the life of their organization. This includes actively taking part in decision making, taking responsibility for those decisions, developing a high sense of self-esteem, and regarding oneself as a valuable resource. If women acquire authentic participation, they can gain more control over their own lives and share in the divine mandate to care for the earth, to exercise dominion over it, and to be fruitful in it alongside males.

\textbf{Factors hindering women’s participation in CBOs}

\textit{Educational level}

The major role of institutions in a society is to reduce uncertainty by establishing a stable structure for human interaction. However, the education system in Kenya has not favored women. The way it was established has a lot to say about its current discriminatory practices. At first, women and girls were educated on taking care of their families, as, for example, in home science courses, and they were socialized to take a secondary place relative to men. Men were educated for jobs away from home and were seen as the main breadwinners of the family.

Today, with many families facing economic constraints, girls’ education is usually sacrificed in favor of that of their brothers. Recently, I have observed cases where girls drop out of school and obtain household jobs to support their brothers in completing their studies. This creates an imbalance in society, as the educated people tend to dominate decision-making processes. The imbalance tends to confine women to their reproductive role, which is normally not valued in quantifiable terms as contributing to the economy.

This kind of system plays a key role in eliminating women from the economic activities of the society (even though women take a dominant role in subsistence economies) and creates a structure where women are made responsible solely for reproductive roles. In most cases, institutions, with their rules for achieving social or economic ends, specify how resources are allocated. Tasks, responsibilities, and value are assigned with the institution determining who gets what, who does what, and who decides. Because men have a better background in education, they dominate most of the social institutions, and women, in most cases, become passive recipients of male authority and preeminence.

In Kenya, women form more than half the population. Although literacy among young women is improving, a substan-
tial percentage of adult women are still illiterate. I witnessed this in December 2002, when I moved around the whole of Kiambu District supervising election monitors. All the reports I received showed that 30 percent of women needed assistance to vote, as they could not read or write. This was a shocking revelation to me as Kiambu is one of the most developed districts in Kenya.

Education and training should equip learners with skills that enable them to live and positively contribute toward the development of their society and environment. It is therefore expected that members of CBOs will have the necessary education and skills to contribute meaningfully to the life of the CBO. However, CBOs’ women members are disadvantaged in an environment that is not conducive to women’s education.

**Internal and external politics**

Internal and external politics also affect women’s participation in CBOs. In most church-based CBOs, women are reluctant to come out and be fully involved. Politics can result in distortion of priorities. It is very common to see external influences expressed in CBOs, especially if community leaders, such as chiefs, assistant chiefs, or even sometimes church leaders, have special interests. When something like a power struggle crops up, most women tend to withdraw, and this weakens their influence in decision making. In this way, unpopular leaders become the decision makers in CBOs.

In some cases, external politics takes the form of leaders nominated by people in government. I have witnessed a case where a district commissioner appoints a person whom he/she knows is in favor of his/her interests, especially so if the CBO is donor-funded. The godfather, therefore, dictates participation, and the godfather controls the benefits. In such circumstances, women have very little chance of participating in CBO development.

**Experience of leadership**

The problem challenging leadership in Africa in general is that it does not put people first. Most leaders are concerned more with their own personal gains than with how they can help the group attain its goals and objectives. Leadership can inhibit a free flow of ideas and restrict the number of options available. The kind of leadership I see in our CBOs is limiting, as it does not give women a chance to participate in CBO development. Sometimes, there is deliberate effort to frustrate women’s participation by setting the meeting times at night while the leaders know very well that, in our area, not many women would attend due to a lack of security.

Another dimension of the problem is that the women themselves shy away from taking up leadership challenges. For example, in 1999, I appointed a woman to be the chairperson in one of the churches I was serving. She declined, citing the fear that it had never happened in their culture and area for a woman to be the leader with so many men available for leadership. I tried to explain to her that I was not looking for a man, but a leader. Still, she refused. This tells me that there is a great need for women to be empowered in our society.

**Sociocultural influences**

Sociocultural influences are very strong tools of group control. All people in a place share similar norms, values, relationship networks, and interactions. Such norms and values, although humanly designed, capture the mindset of people and become the determining factor in the behavior of the society. To transcend our limitations, we must acknowledge that our perceptions are related to our location and interests.

Culture mostly influences the context in which we operate, but, for development to take place, we need to transcend cultural barriers and limitations. In most African societies, women are not expected to speak before men, an expectation that has kept many women’s potential untapped or even unrealized. Women are also not expected to own property or even share in the inheritance of their parents. This limits them from contributing to socioeconomic activities meant to bring about development of the whole society. So, if women are to participate in CBOs, there is a need to alter mindsets fundamentally in order to change practices in ways that result in greater equity between men and women, as well as the integration of work and personal life. Rao, Stuart, and Kelleher aptly state that, “given the stereotypic gender roles, the heroes tend to be men, as the organizational culture they have created has been unfriendly and uninviting to women. As such, women’s interests are underrepresented; and therefore, there is no pressure or constituency for challenging existing gender-biased relations and ideologies.”

This shows that cultural influences are a force to be reckoned with if there is to be a breakthrough in gender balance.

**Domestic and family responsibilities**

As a result of cultural dictates, women are expected to fulfill different roles from those of men in many African societies. The work/family split element of a culture’s deep structure also devalues women’s interests within organizations and women’s work outside them. As women are still largely responsible for care of the family, this deeply held value largely limits women’s participation in public organizations and does not support reorganizing responsibilities within families.

As a result of these domestic and family responsibilities, many women are not prepared socially, intellectually, and even politically. This leads to low confidence levels and lack of self-esteem. This situation denies women the experience they need to be able to participate authentically in CBO development.

**Religious beliefs**

Religion as an integral part of society refers to that society’s shared beliefs and practices legitimizing norms and values that are consistent with it and also condemning those norms and values that are not. Due to its power and influence in society, religion has often been used as a tool for social control. This can be seen in the political arena when some politicians use religion to assert themselves and their ideas. For example, submissiveness can be propagated by religion, creating a barrier to women’s participation in development activities. For women to be able to participate fully in CBOs, such barriers must be broken, especial-
ly in rural areas where illiterate women are easily manipulated through repressive beliefs.\textsuperscript{13}

**Importance of women’s participation in CBOs**

For sustainable development to be attained, women—who are the majority of the Kenyan population and the ones who mainly support the rural population—need to be empowered for active participation in CBOs’ development. My working definition of sustainable development is that given by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED): “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the possibilities of future generations to meet their own needs.”\textsuperscript{14} The concept of sustainable development cannot be complete without the involvement of women. As the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) states, “women at all levels of responsibility have always been involved in activities for the improvement of the quality of life of their families and communities.”\textsuperscript{15}

But why involve women? Most often, communities involve themselves in various developmental programs without involving women, and most often such programs do not succeed in improving women’s lot. The ECLAC report concurs:

> Development strategies, which attempt to improve the economic conditions of the whole community and to restructure the socio-economic relations between classes, have had very little effect on changing women’s status. If they do succeed in integrating them into communities, they are locked into stereotypical and limited household roles. Project development by and for women is one of the ways of building self-confidence, improving skills, and fulfilling needs through collective action.\textsuperscript{16}

There is also need to empower women for leadership, as this would give them the courage needed for participating in CBOs. The leader I am picturing here is not only a manager of the human and financial resources of an organization, but also an organizer, mobilizer, motivator, producer, communicator, and planner. Good planning means that everyone has to participate. To accomplish tasks effectively, responsibilities have to be shared, and for an organization to function effectively, effective channels and tools must be used. To effect a change in any community, the beneficiary’s interests must be taken into account, and this will be achieved through a bottom-up process, not a top-down approach. The involvement of women in CBOs’ development activities is one way of achieving this goal.

It is also necessary that women participate in CBOs’ development activities because, as Saxena says, “the essence of participation is exercising voice and choice and developing the human, organizational and management capacity to solve problems as they arise in order to sustain the improvements.”\textsuperscript{17} Such a posture reflects God’s intention in creating man and woman to oversee the garden together, equal agents of dominion actively caring for the earth. So, the kind of participation that will be transformative aims to bring about women’s empowerment, strengthening women’s ability to make decisions and to act for themselves and maximizing the outcomes of their efforts.

**Women’s participation: enabling factors**

**Empowering women politically**

Significant points can be raised in favor of women’s equal participation in politics. For instance, women’s underrepresentation distances elected representatives from part of their electorate and so can affect the legitimacy of political decisions resulting therefrom. This can lead to public mistrust of the representative system and a refusal by women to accept the laws and policies made without their participation. Another point is that political participation involves articulating, providing, and defending specific interests. Clearly, it is reasonable to believe that women are more aware than are men of their own needs and should, therefore, represent these needs in political bodies.\textsuperscript{18}

Women’s participation in politics is also likely to change the focus of politics. Women are more critical of traditional politics and add new issues and values (women’s rights and equality) to political agendas, making politics more fully human-centered. Therefore, increased participation by women in politics is necessary for improved social, economic, legal, and cultural conditions for women and their families. When women’s needs are ignored, the results include unaccountable population growth, high infant and child mortality, a weakened economy, ineffective agriculture, a deteriorating environment, and a poorer quality of life for all. Involving women in decision making will make a critical contribution toward ending poverty, remedying the gross inequalities among people, slowing the rate of population growth, rescuing the environment, and guaranteeing peace.\textsuperscript{19} Since women, as noted, comprise more than half of Kenyan society, omitting their voice impoverishes all and stunts the growth of a truly democratic society.

The global picture of women’s participation in political activities as contained in the 2003 report of the United Nations entity UNIFEM is not encouraging. Although the goal of increasing women’s political participation is a longstanding one, only eleven nations had reached the 30-percent benchmark in 2002: Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Norway, Iceland, the Netherlands, South Africa, Costa Rica, Argentina, and Mozambique, all of which had used quotas.\textsuperscript{20} Noeline Heyzer, UNIFEM executive director, is correct when she points to the need for women’s presence in political decision-making positions.\textsuperscript{21}

But how do we enhance women’s participation in politics? Governments can do this by changing policies. The Ugandan government, for example, has taken a clear stand in promoting women’s advancement. When creating the Ministry of Women in Development, the president of Uganda stated, “Our policy aims at strengthening the position of women in the economy by raising the value and productivity of their labour and by giving them access to and control over productive resources. By productive resources I mean land, capital, credit, seeds, fertilizers, tools, water, energy, education and information.”\textsuperscript{22}

In Kenya, the situation is improving. If we compare the 1999 and 2002 elections, we see some notable improvements. In 1999, there were only 9 female members of parliament (MPs) in a house of 222 MPs. In 2003, there were 16 female MPs (six of them in the cabinet) in a house of 224 MPs. Although this may seem a very
low percentage (7.1 percent), it is a sign of hope. This result may be attributed to what happened just before the 2002 elections. UNIFEM partnered with local organizations such as the Kenya Women’s Political Caucus to provide media advocacy, election monitoring, training, and capacity building for women running for election.23 By December 2010, a young female lawyer, Claris Gatwiri Kariuki, winner of the 2010 youth essay contest of the Center for International Private Enterprise, was able to report, “Currently, the tenth Kenyan Parliament since independence has the highest number of female legislators. There are 16 elected and seven nominated female members of parliament, out of 222 members in total.”24 Such news is affirming to young women and instructive to young men.

To bring about such a result, many local CBOs were also involved in this process. If these CBOs were led by women, the results would have been influenced by women’s participation and the vote even more in favor of women. This shows that advocacy and training are tools we can use to increase women’s participation in CBOs and, hence, increase their power in decision-making positions related to development. To encourage more participation of women in CBOs, we have to help people understand that the low level of participation of women in politics and public policy decision making has led to the marginalization of and increased discrimination against women in African countries. It is imperative that women participate in policy making, particularly at a time when a fresh vision of gender-sensitive development is needed in African countries.

Participation can be encouraged if we motivate women by sharing with them success stories such as how the women pushed their agenda through during the World Summit of Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002. At the summit, women lobbied for the adoption of the women’s rights issues, especially regarding land ownership. The women used both negotiation and demonstration techniques while participating in the summit’s activities. In Kenya, women can be trained to use these strategies to promote their ideas and to be more assertive. The Bible includes many examples of women who acted assertively and were commended for doing so, including the daughters of Zelophehad, who spoke up for their right to inherit land (Num 27:1–7); Deborah, who led Israel (Judg 4–5); Abigail, who took decisive action to mitigate the consequences of her husband’s bad judgment (1 Sam 25:2–35); and the Canaanite woman who relentlessly pursued Jesus on her daughter’s behalf (Matt 15:21–28). So, more emphasis needs to be laid on representation of women by women in positions of decision making, especially so in CBOs, where most of the development activities take place at the community level. As Margaret Lwanga points out, “In developing countries women are more involved in micro economy.”25 This is also true in Kenya. That is why involving women in CBOs will bring a big boost to the economic growth of the nation, as most CBOs are involved in microeconomic development in rural areas.

**Education and literacy issues**

Education is the tool that can break the structures of male dominance and, in so doing, bring women to a position where they are able to influence policy. To do this, we must address such issues as household socioeconomic status and constraints, sociocultural attitudes and the value attached to female education, delineation of labor at the household level (which, in the African context, over burdens the girl child), early marriage, teenage pregnancy, a lack of alternative forms of education or option for reentry after childbirth, labor market bias, and lack of motivation due to irrelevance, inappropriate organization of the curriculum, and poor teaching. Our role here is to train parents especially to realize the value of educating a girl child. If we start by training young mothers—who are the majority in our churches—we will be able to acquire quick results, as these women can have a great influence on their daughters. My experience in training women for empowerment also shows that young mothers have more influence on their husbands than older mothers do. For these reasons, our training will have a long-lasting effect, and women’s empowerment will have taken root by the time these young women grow older.

This can be done by encouraging girls from early stages in life, that, given the same opportunities, facilities, and attention, they will perform as well as boys, or even sometimes better. There is also a great need to address the reasons that lead to low performance among girls, including poor motivation, teaching, learning environments, expectations, models, opportunities, and demanding domestic chores that limit study time. Here again, as a church, we have a role to play. We can organize courses for girls and teach them about the equality of human capabilities, especially intellectual capabilities, as created by God. We can also use appreciative inquiry to enable them to realize the potential they have and how they can use it to empower themselves by accepting challenges to improve their intellects.

Curriculum is another matter that needs to be addressed to favor women’s education for better participation in development activities. For a curriculum to be effective in promoting change, it should be inclusive, building in role models for girls and sharing experiences, success stories, and case studies.

**Breaking sociocultural and religious barriers**

In Kenya, women are marginally represented at all policymaking levels; everywhere, the rules appear to be for men by men. Each time women try taking steps forward, we hear those against the advancement of women call upon the wrath of culture while forgetting that the same culture includes women. Sexual harassment, lack of day care services, and inflexible work hours hinder women from pursuing their careers and hence participating fully in development activities. These attitudes have their origin in traditional gender relations. In most cultures in Africa, women have never enjoyed equality with men; they have always been considered men’s inferiors physically and intellectually and as property to be handed over from fathers to husbands.

Women are portrayed as lacking in originality and genius. There is a clear need to challenge these stereotypes, which drive African socialization systems. One way to do this is by using more credible depictions of the many positive roles of women, including profiles of positive role models. These should be documented and used as readers or background learning/teaching materials in local contexts.
Another way to encourage women’s participation is bringing to their attention the biblical examples of women who broke the barriers imposed by their religion. A good example of this is the story of the woman with the bleeding disorder who, against all the requirements to stay indoors, went out and touched Jesus’ garments (Mark 5:25–34) and was healed of her disease. This story is a clear demonstration that women have power and potential to act in empowering themselves. But they have to take the initiative and the risk involved. They should take all the advantages at their disposal to liberate themselves. The Christian faith offers many such examples to empower women.

**Gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment**

Gender mainstreaming involves thinking through the impact of any law, policy change, or program on recipients of both genders. To enhance women’s participation in CBOs requires that we advocate for gender mainstreaming in these organizations by advocating for gender balance and ensuring that institutional mandates, policies, and actions are shaped by a gender-inclusive perspective. This can be achieved through training on combining gender policy with a general institutional policy (mandate), as well as introducing clear policies and objectives with an implicit gender orientation. Organizations should also be equipped with good information and gender-disaggregated data. This integrated approach would have the effect of enhancing women’s participation in CBOs’ development activities, leading to a widened share of benefits by all.

Gender roles are learned and are changeable. Gender equality is a goal to ensure equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for women and men, and girls and boys. It is also a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women and men an integral dimension of design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic, and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.

A closer look at the Kenyan situation may help to clarify this. The lack of a gender policy is clear evidence of our government’s need for more commitment to gender equity. The absence of such a policy makes it difficult to monitor the impact of resource allocation on women and shows the government’s lack of clear targets and strategies to eradicate the imbalances. While affirmative action can be a starting point, what women need in today’s world is to be empowered to engage in active participation in all aspects of decision making, not simply stopping their progress when quotas or special reservations have been fulfilled. Leadership keeps on changing, and, if those who come to power are not in favor of women, they can easily change the policy and revert to a situation where women are not given any recognition at all.

My recommendation for gender mainstreaming in CBOs is training for women’s capacity building at both the local and national levels. This should involve capacity building for women in various forms and contexts, including personal empowerment, beginning in the home. In Kenya, the home is valued, and positive changes in family and marriage institutions bring about gender-equity changes in societal institutions in government, religion, education, and the workplace.

**Issues of organizational change**

To enhance women’s participation in CBOs’ development activities, we must understand how institutional biases prevent women from participating in development. The major role of institutions in a society is to reduce uncertainty by establishing a stable structure for human interaction. In most cases, institutions set the frameworks of rules while organizations provide the social structures within these frameworks and act either to reinforce them or to challenge them. We can use the CBOs as our entry point to ensure that organizational decisions, actions, structure, and function are founded in logic, efficiency, and rationality, where equity is given value at all levels. This would be one way of ensuring that gender-equitable outcomes are reached.

To achieve this, three organizational issues should be addressed: traditional power (the power to make and enforce decisions), agenda power (the power to decide what can be talked about or even considered in organizational discourse), and hidden power (power that shapes one’s sense of one’s place in society by orienting one’s perceptions, cognition, and preferences). So, for change to be realized, women’s perspectives must be brought into political access, accountability systems, cultural systems, and cognitive systems that have been internalized, resulting in changing assumptions about internal organizational dynamics and the work itself.

Changes are needed that build an organization’s capacity to challenge gender-biased institutions in the society. These may include, among others, democratizing relations; making women’s voices more powerful in the organization; finding ways to make the organization more accountable to women clients and more amenable to women’s participation; and building relations with other organizations to further a gender-equality agenda. A

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good example of this is Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC), a large rural development nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Bangladesh. The gender team was charged with leading a long-term effort to improve gender equality both within BRAC and in the provision of services to poor rural women in Bangladesh. Altering organizational norms, systems, and relationships was critical to the change effort. The process involved startup, needs assessment, knowledge building, strategic planning, training of trainers, micro-design of the program, and implementation. After two years, the most important outcomes were democratization of BRAC and changes in relationships between women and men and between people working at different levels in the organization.26

Aruna Rao and David Kelleher suggest that organizational change alone is not enough to bring about women’s participation. There is need for institutional change, which involves changes in strategy and programs in order to challenge and alter institutional norms. Such an agenda will be driven as much by women clients or women at the grassroots as by the organization. This involvement of women is needed to achieve institutional and organizational changes that encourage policies that are gender-inclusive in decision making, in land ownership issues, and in leadership positions.27

This type of change will be needed to influence the church as an organization and to effect changes aimed at bringing about gender equality. Achieving these goals will have a direct reflection in CBOs’ performance, as most CBO leaders come from our churches. To enhance women’s participation in CBOs, we must focus on organizational change, as most of the hindering factors are tied to institutional structures.

Leadership training and motivation

Leadership training and motivation cut across all the factors discussed above and are needed in each one of them if success is to be achieved in enhancing women’s participation in CBOs’ development activities. Training is one way to centralize women’s issues and to ensure the incorporation of their collective perspectives, experiences, and contributions to sustainable development. Such training should address the issues of good governance. Together with providing transparency, democracy, respect for human rights, institutional capacity, and resources, good governance should also include equal participation by women at all levels as well as their access to education, training, employment, and benefits. If a holistic training approach is not taken into account, of course, success will be limited.

Empowerment of women through capacity building is another way of enhancing women’s participation in CBOs. Capacity building among communities and empowerment of local women should be aimed at giving voice to their concerns. One way of doing this is to share information on how policies function and how to influence them, as well as legal literacy training. Enhancing knowledge and strengthening skills such as public speaking and human relations can help local women’s groups as well as individuals in strengthening their self-esteem and power in decision making.

Another area of training that can enhance women’s participation in CBOs is on the aspects of peace building and conflict transformation. Conflicts and absence of security have a major impact on the lives, livelihoods, and development opportunities of communities, and have particular effects on women and children. Therefore, peace building and conflict prevention are of paramount importance. Women often play an important role in promoting these efforts. In fact, women play a very major role in the realm of development, and, for any development to succeed, they should not be ignored. If given the opportunity to participate, they bring the balance required in gender complementarity and widen the scope of benefits realized in development activities undertaken—especially so in CBOs, our main development agents at the community level.

Lessons learned

- The position of CBOs is, in most cases, influenced by socio-economic and political realities, but, given a chance, women can help to broaden the vision of these CBOs and, hence, enhance efficiency and productivity.
- Education is a key issue in enhancing women’s participation in CBOs as it has to do with empowerment in that it is a tool for skill development and trust and confidence building.
- Affirmative action and gender mainstreaming are necessary for enhancing women’s participation in CBOs and empowering women at both personal and collective levels.
- Organizational changes in the form of structural and institutional changes are necessary to enhance women’s participation in CBOs. This calls us to examine the current organizations and see where we can implement possible structural changes to accommodate women, thereby bringing in their perspectives in decision making.

The way forward, recommendations, and conclusion

There is a need to incorporate more training programs for women’s empowerment in our organizations. These programs should be aimed at bringing in gender balance by emphasizing the importance of women’s participation in CBOs, as these are the main vehicles of development in our rural communities.

Introducing gender mainstreaming would help to bring about balance in decision making and sharing of benefits between males and females and in society at large.

Transformative capacity building for women could be achieved by enhancing their knowledge and skills with a view toward positively changing their condition and position in the society from being passive recipients of male-dominated decisions to being active participants. This would allow women to have access to and control over societal resources and enjoy equal opportunities with men at all levels.

To achieve empowerment, transformative gender training should integrate an analysis of issues of power, privilege, culture, and tradition with access and control over resources, as well as project-oriented gender training, which is limited to project implementation and aimed at achieving a more efficient delivery of gender equity. If this goal can be achieved, we will have overcome the factors that limit women’s participation in CBOs and more participation would be realized, resulting in balanced community development and a step forward in poverty reduction in our com-
munities. As Tabitha’s acts of service to the poor were acclaimed by her community (Acts 9:36–42), the actions of CBOs can demonstrate the love of Christ for all the people who bear God’s image.

Notes

3. Francis W. Mulwa and Strapol Mala, Management of Community Based Organizations (Nairobi: Premese Olivex, 2000), 9–11.
4. Mulwa and Mala, Management, 4.
6. Mulwa and Mala, Management, 6.
18. See the discussion of these issues in Mira Matembe, Gender, Politics, and Constitution Making in Uganda (Kampala, Fountian, 2002).
25. Lwanga, Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development, 8.
26. For more information, visit the BRAC Web site at http://www.brac.net. Under “Our Priorities” (http://www.brac.net/content/who-we-are), its first priority entry is: “Focus on Women—We work with poor women, who are the worst affected by poverty. But if empowered with the right tools, they can play a crucial role in bringing about changes within their families and their communities. Over 98% of our membership is female; and more than 95% of our volunteer cadre...are women,” accessed Jan. 25, 2012. See also Fazle Hasan Abed, “BRAC: Building Resources Across Communities: The Coproduction of Governance: Civil Society, the Government, and the Private Sector,” http://www.innovations.harvard.edu/cache/documents/10299/102991.pdf.