

# Women's Empowerment & Organizing

"Organizations are sites from which movements are built and supported... but movements operate at a scale that no single organization can operate at. So here is a question for each of us: How do we locate ourselves? Do we see ourselves as part of an organization or do we see ourselves as part of a movement, or as parts of both?"

This is an important question because it relates to what we see as our final goal. Is it enough for us to ensure that a woman has a job or do we ask ourselves why she can't decide how to spend the money she earns or why she couldn't get the job in the first place and how can we change all that?

All of us work to change things, but the question is how far to push change, up to what level? In our own NGOs, do we see ourselves as doing the work of movements getting to the roots to create radical fundamental change? Or do we see ourselves tinkering with the symptoms without pushing through to the roots?"

Geetanjali Misra, president of the Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID), posed these questions to thousands of activists, academics and development workers from a range of organizations in her opening speech of AWID's 2008 Forum in Capetown, South Africa. The questions challenge us to think deeply about women's organizing, and the essential relationship between how women organize and to what ends they organize.

Feminist empowerment efforts emphasize the need for collective action to challenge the social ideas and institutions that underpin women's subordination. **But does it matter what kinds of collectives women are in, and how those groups are supported?** Evidence from the SII suggests that it does.

Groups can exclude and oppress as much as they can include and uplift, and women need diverse organizing strategies at different stages and settings of the empowerment struggle.

## Where Do CARE's Organizing Models Come From?

Over time, different theories around poverty and women's vulnerability or strengths have driven waves of competing organizing strategies. However, the donors and international NGOs that drive the development sector tend to rely on simplistic approaches of clustering women in groups, and to favor women's groups formed by projects to provide tightly defined services and results. International development's drive for strategic focus and control carries into CARE's work through the project designs and timeframes that guide our engagement with women, and the measures of success into which our support for women's organizing must fit. Such narrow approaches can deliver practical benefits for women, but have little chance of shifting the structural drivers of gender inequity.

**CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry:** At CARE, we view women's empowerment through the lens of poor women's efforts to achieve their full and equal human rights. Along the way, women strive to balance practical, daily, individual achievements with strategic, collective, long-term work to challenge biased social rules and institutions. Through a three year Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII) on women's empowerment, thousands of women across dozens of research sites shape a rich and authentic story of empowerment, one that challenges many conventions about what it is, how it happens, and what the development sector's project activities have to do with it. Central to this story is an awareness of interdependence – that the lasting empowerment of any given woman relies on a combination of changes in her aspirations and achievements (agency), in the societal rules and customs that shape her choices and possibilities in life (structure), and in the nature of relationships through which she navigates her life (relations). **This brief** seeks to call attention to patterns the SII revealed in how CARE tends to work with women in groups – and to highlight SII lessons about the strengths and limitations of our approaches to women's organizing. Its goal is to help readers become more aware of the many possible levels of women's organizing, and the need to help women find the levels of solidarity and support that address their practical and strategic struggles.

This tactical approach has also limited our engagement with more autonomous and enduring women's rights movements. At its worst, this strategy can distort the agendas of those who partner with us through project-based planning and reporting requirements that conflict with more organic and locally-driven agendas for change.

Drawing from analysis of CARE's work on the ground, this brief probes the theories of change underpinning CARE's approaches to women's organizing, asking:

- What are CARE's typical approaches to women's groups and what do they tend to achieve in terms of women's empowerment?
- What challenges do we face in supporting the struggles and goals of women's movements?
- What key lessons can we draw about organizing women for women's empowerment?

### What is a women's/feminist movement?

Srilatha Batliwala defined movements to be, "An organized set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change through collective action." In her paper, *Changing their World: Concepts and practices of women's movements* (2008), Batliwala outlined 6 key characteristics of a feminist movement:

1. A visible constituency base with a critical mass of women.
2. Members brought together in solidarity through either formal or informal organizations. At all levels of these organizations, women should take on strategic decision-making roles. These organizations should also be more egalitarian: with flatter hierarchies, collective leadership systems and whose structures actively experiment with change. At their core, these organizations should espouse their values for gender equality, social and economic equality, human rights, tolerance, inclusion, peace, non-violence, respectful spaces and inclusiveness.
3. Continuity over time.
4. Engage in collective actions and activities in pursuit of the movement's political goals.
5. Use actions and strategies that build on women's own mobilizing capacities, and involve women at every stage of the process. These strategies may include peaceful protest, non-cooperation, public opinion building or advocacy strategies.
6. Engage clear internal or external targets in the change process, such as:
  - Their own membership or communities (i.e. against discriminatory customs and practices like violence against women);
  - Society at large (i.e. to change discrimination against women);
  - Other social groups (i.e. to claim fair wages from landowners or employers);
  - The state or regimes in power (i.e. to demand democracy, legal reform, or policy change);
  - Private sector actors (i.e. to challenge environmental damage caused by corporations, etc.);
  - International institutions (i.e. the World Bank, UN, IMF, or WTO); and
  - A combination of some or all of the above.

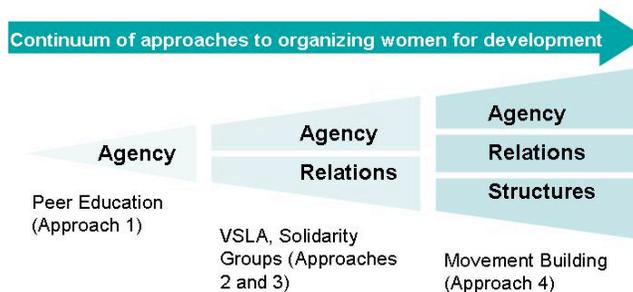
The agenda for women's movements should be rooted in a gender analysis of the situation the movements seek to change. The political goals of a women's movement should not only seek a change in the problem, but a change that privileges women's interests and seeks to transform both gender and social power relations.

Through each approach to CARE's work with women, it is important to reflect on:

- How do these approaches support women to take leadership in pursuing their own agenda?
- In what ways does each approach promote women's solidarity or mobilizing capacities for women's human rights and gender equality?
- How has each approach pursued change in communities, society, other groups, state/private sectors or international institutions?
- How can we strengthen our commitment to women's empowerment?

## What are CARE's common approaches to women's organizing, and what do they tend to achieve in terms of women's empowerment?

CARE's work with women today mirrors the evolution of approaches to working with women in the development field writ large, reflecting a spectrum of beliefs about what development is and how it relates to lasting justice for women.<sup>1</sup> Generally these approaches fall along a continuum, that ranges in both the comprehensiveness of the approach and its focus on consciousness-raising around gender equity and women's rights.



These approaches range from:

- Approach 1: Organizing women as recipients of knowledge, goods and services;
- Approach 2: Working with women in groups to promote economic development;
- Approach 3: Leveraging groups to raise demands for gender equity; and
- Approach 4: Supporting women's groups to mobilize for women's rights.

## Approach 1: Organizing Women as Recipients of Knowledge, Goods and Services

Development has traditionally been about helping the disadvantaged meet their needs. In this model, organizing people in project groups has long been an efficient targeting strategy for those efforts. Many of the projects examined in the SII use groups this way. The approach has some impact on women's sense of agency and intra-group relations,

### Approach One Breakdown: Working with Women as Receivers of Knowledge

**Group Organizing Strategy:** Through peer education, groups represent an efficient means to deliver information. Examples of this approach can be seen in Phase III of CARE's SII (2008), which explored HIV prevention and women's empowerment programming in six countries, including Lesotho and Cambodia.

**Theory of Change:** In this intervention type, women are seen as consumers of information. Equipped with information on HIV and AIDS risks and services, the projects assumed women would change their behaviors to protect themselves against or care for themselves in regard to HIV and AIDS.

**Missing from the Picture:** Project strategies must account for structural barriers (e.g., acceptance of violence) and driving factors in women's relationships (e.g., desire for trust and love) that affect their risk to HIV and AIDS.

and works well for linear transfers. However, this approach has little impact on institutionalized discrimination or social change.

In Lesotho and Cambodia, for example, CARE organized groups of migrant factory workers and sex workers. With these groups, CARE trained leaders from the community to work as peer educators and teach colleagues about HIV and AIDS risk, prevention and care. Neither project had an explicit agenda for women's empowerment, and focused exclusively on HIV and AIDS education and services.

The SII found that without discussions on gender or rights, women remained unaware of their rights and the role gender norms play in affecting their lives. In both Lesotho and Cambodia, women reported greater knowledge about HIV and AIDS but no change in their own sense of confidence, self-worth or skillfulness. Group membership

therefore had little impact on women's decision making patterns or gender ideologies. For example, over 40 percent of women in Lesotho (participants and non-participants) agreed that: "It is more important for a woman to respect her spouse/partner than vice versa."

Furthermore, women did not report any increase in solidarity from their participation in CARE's project. In Cambodia, unaddressed tensions between sex workers and entertainment workers meant that there was no united front when the government initiated crackdowns on the entertainment industry, and project gains dissolved once CARE's involvement ended. A number of respondents recognized the lack of unity among women involved in the project:

"During meetings of the project, sex workers sat with sex workers and karaoke girls with karaoke girls, and beer girls among themselves. We did not like each other. When I knew that there were going to be karaoke girls attending, I would not go to a project meeting."

### Summary Table of Program Impacts and Gaps on Women's Empowerment

Agency Level	Relational Level	Structural Level
Good uptake of targeted training messages and services	Little sense of solidarity among women	Generally, women unaware of the structures and gender norms that constrain their lives
Limited development of own visions for empowerment, little sense of confidence or self-worth		
Growing feelings of social support among group members, but limited outreach to non-members		
Lack of awareness of rights		

## Approach 2: Working with Women in Groups to Promote Economic Development

Since Mohammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank showed that loans to groups of women yielded higher return rates than loans to any other group, women's village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) have been widely viewed as efficient and sustainable ways to promote household economic security, while building solidarity among women and raising their status in society. This economic argument for working with women is expressed by the World Bank (Gender and Development website, 2005):

"Research also shows that women and girls tend to work harder than men, are more likely to invest their earnings in their children, are major producers as well as consumers, and shoulder critical, life-sustaining responsibilities without which men and boys could not survive, much less enjoy high levels of productivity."

VSLAs have become a cornerstone of CARE's approach to women's organizing, and are often a platform on which other interventions – in health, sanitation or environmental conservation - build. A cluster of SII studies explored VSLAs.

### Approach Two Breakdown: Working with Groups to Promote Economic Development

**Group Organizing Strategy:** Through training and organizing women into groups, women can apply their skills to collectively promote economic development in their communities. Examples of this approach can be seen in Phase II of CARE's SII (2006), in which a cluster of studies focused on VSLA projects in India, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Tanzania and Uganda.

**Theory of Change:** Projects assume that with new skills and confidence, women will apply their learning toward the benefit of their households and communities.

**Missing From the Picture:** In reality, women with economic power do not necessarily have freedoms in physical integrity, mobility, religious or political voice. VSLA must examine and respond to how women's growing economic power affect their relationships and what other factors surrounding them continue to constrain their empowerment.

These VSLAs varied, with some traditional models focused on increasing household income and others experimenting with "microfinance plus," a strategy that incorporates rights agendas. The evidence showed that more traditional projects (in Malawi, Mali and Uganda) generally achieved fewer gains for members than those with microfinance plus (in Niger, India and Tanzania).

Women in VSLA groups reported greater confidence, new skills, richer social networks and appreciation for the tangible contributions they make to their households and communities. In addition, due to gains in economic status, women reported heightened levels of agency stemming from their newly recognized capabilities and contributions.

This benefit was limited, however. While some women reported greater voice in household decision-making, for example, these decisions remain bound by gender norms and

women continue to view men's decisions as final. Also, in Mali and Uganda, where the VSLA approach had no particular strategy for engaging men on gender, a number of men felt threatened by the changing status of women. As a result, some husbands prevented their wives from joining groups, and, in a few cases, violence against women increased. Just as men's views of gender norms did not necessarily change from women's involvement in groups, women's awareness of rights and power did not necessarily broaden from their participation. In Mali and Malawi, while women crossed gender norms by entering the economic sphere for the first time, they upheld traditional expectations in their own visions of empowerment – as an obedient daughter, subservient wife or doting mother. For example, the SII in Mali reported:

"As defined by the [VSLA] women, a woman is empowered when she, above all else, is engaged in income generating activities or a job that provides her the means to meet household needs. Secondly, an empowered woman has a husband and children who are productive and able to take responsibility for the woman herself."

### Summary Table of Program Impacts and Gaps on Women's Empowerment

Agency Level	Relational Level	Structural Level
Good uptake of training messages and services on financial management, business development and other targeted topics Increased sense of confidence or self-worth Increased household decision-making power Lack of awareness of rights Increased responsibilities without increased power	Richer social networks with other women Tensions in relationships between women and men	Women generally unaware of the structures and gender norms that constrain their lives. Internalized traditional values around gender and empowerment.

### Approach 3: Leveraging Groups to Raise Demand for Gender Equity

While the SII showed that group-led projects that address women’s human conditions do not lead to women’s empowerment by themselves, it showed that if used wisely, they can be a critical first step. Two cases that worked with groups toward gender equity took place in Ethiopia and Bangladesh. Each case used practical interventions as entry points for deeper discussions on gender, rights, power and social relations with men and women. Need-driven sanitation and healthcare initiatives provided tangible benefits to the household and demonstrated the value of women and men working together without threatening traditional structures of power. What differentiated this organizing strategy from those described earlier, however, is that these projects consciously used these initiatives to increase consciousness among women and men about gender norms. Program strategies challenged women and men, poor and powerful to reflect on rights, equity and gender in their lives.

In Ethiopia, the Female Genital Cutting Elimination (FGC) project worked with interested men and women, and government, religious and traditional leaders to promote women’s rights. Bringing FGC into the arena of debate, community attitudes toward women and sexual health began to shift, breaking a culture of silence. Little by little, women began to raise their concerns in public forums. Accompanying this, communities increasingly accepted girls’ education, and some women rejected forced marriage. Despite changes, the SII found no change in FGC, which remained through traditional demands and gender inequity.

#### Approach Three Breakdown: Working with Groups toward Gender Equity

**Group Organizing Strategy:** Groups are mobilized to both build women’s confidence and skills, and provide space for women to explore patterns and drivers of gender inequity. Examples of this approach can be seen in Phase II of CARE’s SII (2006), through projects like those in Ethiopia and Bangladesh.

**Theory of Change:** Through training, consciousness raising and organizing among women and men, women can gain skills and confidence to negotiate power in community and household affairs. More equitable relationships between men and women and greater acknowledgement of how structures perpetuate gender inequity will ensure gender equity and sustainable development.

**Missing from the Picture:** Promoting change in deep-rooted traditions, particularly those tied to values, beliefs and economic dependence requires long-term commitment and farther-reaching movements.

In Bangladesh, the Nijera project used community-led sanitation work to forge new relationships between men and women, poor and elite, to facilitate discussions on gender, power and rights. By implementing the community-led sanitation initiative, CARE identified ‘natural leaders’ among participants and trained them in analysis, facilitation and negotiation, equipping them to lead groups, mobilize communities and give voice to the economically and socially marginalized. Further project initiatives were formed based on community-identified needs and opportunities. Members drew on Nijera’s support to mobilize for equal wages between men and women, access to justice and more equitable decision making in the household. While some men continue to resist women’s participation, CARE’s work provided space for men and women to discuss how gender and class inequity limit their lives. Through this approach CARE found valuable allies among men and elites for women’s empowerment.

Though both projects demonstrated clear and robust changes in multiple dimensions of women’s empowerment, they continued to face a number of limitations and challenges in their work. In Nijera, for example, group leaders acknowledged the harms of dowry, but could not identify changes in its practice. Members agreed that change in deep-rooted traditions and social norms like dowry required a movement involving communities beyond the project. These findings highlight how projects can support important gains in women’s lives, including greater space, more equitable relationships with men and elites and an environment that enables them to meet with community leaders and administrators to discuss issues concerning their lives. While structural shifts rooted in traditional values, beliefs and economic dependence have proven much more difficult to alter, these changes offer a foundation from which to build.

#### Summary Table of Program Impacts and Gaps on Women’s Empowerment

Agency Level	Relational Level	Structural Level
Good uptake of targeted training messages and services	Increased social networks and sense of unity with other women and groups	Women are beginning –to take positions as local officials
Increased confidence and self-worth	Some group leaders exploited members for personal gains and group members may harbor jealousy toward one another	
Enhanced awareness of rights, power and gender	More equitable relationships between women and men (Some tensions remain)	The environment allows space for women to voice concerns

## Approach 4: Supporting Women's Groups to Mobilize for Women's Rights

The SII has shown that CARE's work with groups follows a pattern of guiding partners and groups toward specific goals through our own resources and policies. The SII showed that while projects with an explicit focus on negotiating new relationships and structures toward gender equity have begun to lay a foundation, robust social change on underlying causes of poverty and gender inequity require broader movements that enable women to organize at multiple levels.

Without affecting collective norms, beliefs and practices, we see the continued prevalence of violence against women in Burundi, despite women's increasing leadership in the community; we see women involved in VSLA who continue to hold traditional values that perpetuate their own subordination – through dowry, early marriage, sex-based abortion and their own aspirations to fulfill gendered roles prescribed to them; we see women risk HIV infection from their partners rather than betray the trust symbolized in not using condoms. Only a handful of projects studied by the SII sought to link women to movements or federate groups in ways that strengthened them in autonomous vehicles that extend beyond the life and scope of any donor-funded project.

*"Organizations and actions can be effective for securing change in formal domains, both individual and collective. But the informal domain, where individual and internalized attitudes, values, and practices live, and where collective norms, beliefs and practices reside, is the purview of mass-based movements. Without movements, we will continue to see failure to implement formal mechanisms. Movements are a necessary analogue to formal institutions – the sustained, under-the-hood social consciousness-raising that can deliver on the promise of formal mechanisms and commitments."*  
Srilatha Batliwala. November 14, 2008, AWID Forum.

### Approach Four Breakdown: Working with Groups to Mobilize for Women's Rights

**Group Organizing Strategy:** Groups were established to grow into their own independent entities for social justice and pursue change on issues they identify for themselves. Women were mobilized to interact with and influence structures affecting their lives. The SII found few examples of projects taking approach, though notable initiatives with explicit aims toward movement building include CARE's: ADIMH project in Guatemala (Phase II, 2006); SHAKTI project in Bangladesh (Phase III, 2008); and SAKSHAM project in India (Phase III, 2008).

**Theory of Change:** Rights movements are essential for fundamental changes in the underlying causes of power. Supporting women to join broader rights movements, rooted in their own struggles for social change, will drive change in collective values and beliefs in way that formal structural change cannot reach.

**Missing from the Picture:** Supporting women's groups to connect to movements and network with one another requires an unyielding focus on women's rights and democratic management. CARE must also remain aware of the multiple roles and diversity comprising women and groups in order to support women in the private and public sphere.

In Guatemala, CARE worked with Mayan women to pursue their rights in light of the country's 1996 Peace Accords, which called for equal opportunities for women.<sup>ii</sup> Following the Accords, Guatemala's first countrywide women's organization, the National Women's Forum, was created. CARE saw this forum as an important opportunity to pursue indigenous women's rights in Guatemala and launched a project to mobilize Mayan women to represent their own interests politically. Because of donor requirements, CARE and the regional women's forum of Huehuetenango registered a new organization to carry forth its work. With a fledgling organization, the project became side-tracked by smaller initiatives and organizational capacity-building. The project's transformative goal of progressing indigenous women's rights lost focus and shifted toward literacy education. Rather than uniting with broader women's rights movements, the SII found that the organization struggled with internal disputes

and began to compete – rather than unite – with other rights groups for funding.

For the SAKSHAM project in India, CARE mobilized community-based organizations to develop leadership among sex worker communities to identify priorities from within the community. Individual sex worker organizations networked with one another to form a registered federation to leverage advocacy and support sex worker rights. The SAKSHAM project asserted:

*"The mobilization and coming together of sex workers as organized groups is crucial in the attempt to change power structures. This eventually reduces a community's vulnerability to HIV infection."*

From this perspective, CARE placed a programmatic priority on altering power structures that oppress sex workers. The project viewed lower vulnerability to HIV as an important outcome from its work with the sex worker community, but not the initiative's ultimate goal. Each sex worker organization took part in advocacy and improving sex worker access to health. As a result, the SII unveiled a number of profound changes in the dynamics between sex workers and communities. One of the biggest changes that women recognized from CARE's work was their increased confidence to resist violence and exploitation and advocate for their rights. In India, women reported that they felt capable and proud as women and sex workers, and observed changes in community attitudes toward them. Furthermore, women strongly valued unity cultivated among sex workers from mobilizing to promote and protect their rights.

Sex worker organizations partnered with government and international agencies to broaden their impact. The local sexually transmitted infection management committee consulted one sex worker association in its decisions and

another sex worker organization began a partnership with the United Nations Development Program to manage a region-wide anti-trafficking project.

However, these interventions have not been without difficulties. While interventions focused on reforming how communities and governments relate to women and respect women’s rights, none of the projects focused on realizing equitable interactions in women’s intimate relationships. As a result, the SII found women were empowered to use condoms with clients and pursue their rights with police and officials, but were unable to negotiate for their rights or practice safe sex with lovers or husbands. Nearly 88 percent of sex worker respondents in India reported that they always use condoms with clients, with rates higher among those more involved in the sex worker organization. However, only 40 percent of women reported regular condom use with lovers and for sex with husbands condom use rates dropped to 16 percent. When asked why, women cited their desire for love, trust and fear of abandonment as key factors against protected sex – despite risks to their physical health.

CARE’s work with women’s groups in India and Guatemala demonstrate how CARE’s partnership groups and movements can help women represent their priorities and concerns at a broad level, but can also side-track movements from their original goals and intents. Today, CARE is still in the process of understanding how best to work with and support movements for broader social change, and this approach has not been widely adopted across the organization.

**Summary Table of Program Impacts and Gaps on Women’s Empowerment**

Agency Level	Relational Level	Structural Level
Good uptake of targeted training messages and services Increased sense of confidence, self-worth and skillfulness Increased awareness of rights, power and gender	Broadened social networks and sense of unity with other women and more prominent roles within the community Some group leaders exploited members for personal gains Relationships with the powerful at community and broader levels improved, but less change in women’s intimate relationships. Local groups built their own relationships with other civil society, government and donor groups	Women crossed structural barriers and represent their interests through mobilization and advocacy Impact was vulnerable to being side-tracked toward short-term technical gains, if projects lose sight of their goals

## **What challenges do we face in supporting the struggles and goals of women's movements?**

Everything we have learned in the SII suggests that enduring impact on women's empowerment requires holistic change at multiple levels and across multiple dimensions of a woman's life. Promoting women's empowerment means upholding women's rights as human rights – socially, economically and politically. The timeframe, scale, complexity and uncertainty of any effort to achieve these goals makes clear that we can only be one of many players in a larger struggle that must be sustained by the women and men who are stakeholders in their own social change movements.

However, committing to impact on the underlying causes of poverty challenges many of the defining features of CARE and the development practices that sustain it. At the heart of the matter is – not surprisingly – the question of power and control in development. Donors and policymakers invest resources for development according to their own understanding of what is good, right, and necessary for the populations they seek to influence. Yet, it is rare to find that those with resources for development are also rooted in the views and perspectives of the poorest and most vulnerable in a society. Women's rights movements involve "people in their own struggle, vested in the change they seek." How equipped are we to stand in solidarity with these struggles, when doing so may mean challenging those who endow us with resources? Can we play a role connecting the two worlds?

Are we ready in CARE to consider Geeta Misra's questions posed at the top of this brief?

- What is our role in relation to women's movements?
- Where do we position ourselves with respect to women's own struggles?
- What are the limits of our engagement?

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## **What is CARE's role in relation to women's movements?**

During the AWID conference, CARE and other large international NGOs were asked to critically reflect on how their positions – as large and well-funded organizations – can affect the work of autonomous movements. From the discourse among activists, local civil society organizations and academics, it became clear that large NGOs like CARE are perceived more often as donors that can distort movements rather than partners in promoting a common agenda. Reflecting on the SII findings, CARE found that our relationships with local groups in Guatemala can influence organizations' directions – sometimes away from the targeted goals of movements. In Guatemala, CARE's role in securing funding and then developing a new organization to meet donor requirements pushed Mayan women away from their original agenda to uphold indigenous women's rights. In the project's struggles to form a functioning organization, women's vision and goals were sidetracked by administrative duties, in-fighting among leaders and competition among movements for donor funding and support. Rather than pursue transformational change through organizing, the project focus shifted toward short-term initiatives with tangible results through literacy training. While these initiatives also benefited women, they did not promote a shift in existing power structures toward gender equity.

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## **Where do we position ourselves with respect to women's own struggles?**

The SII found that oftentimes CARE mobilized groups to support our own goals rather than explore how we can support women's struggles and local movements with their own aspirations. Reflecting on our work and impact, we must examine more closely what behaviors we reward, what changes we pursue and for whom. In CARE's VSLA work in India, while the project asserted that mobilizing women to gain access to financial management skills and services would empower them, the SII team was surprised to discover that many women participants did not consider themselves empowered. Rather, women saw the key to empowerment in education:

"We cannot become like [empowered women]. Education is the main constraint. The difference between knowing what is written on a piece of paper and not knowing is critical in emerging as a leader." "We need a literacy program. We can sign our names, but this is not enough. Anyone can dupe us because we cannot read or write. We want a literacy program along with microfinance."<sup>iii</sup>

On the other hand, in CARE Ecuador's work with radically marginalized women garbage recyclers in Cuenca, workplans seemed to evolve continually, in keeping with the deepening relations of trust and transparency between staff and the women themselves, and with the evolution in women's needs. What began as a technical intervention for sanitation immediately shifted to a solidarity-building initiative among women deeply scarred by conflict in their daily lives. Then came rights awareness and reproductive health training, income generation with support for childcare needs, counseling and community organizing, business development and municipal advocacy... Eventually, donor funding ceased and CARE's priorities had to shift. However, in the intent to grow and evolve with the women, CARE's six-year journey with Cuenca's women recyclers offers an inspiring glimmer of how a programmatic approach might begin.

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## What are the limits of our engagement?

In Bangladesh, CARE found that a sex worker organization it worked with in Dhaka evolved to resemble an NGO rather than a people's movement. The SII found that rather than strengthening sex workers' solidarity bonds with one another, and uniting members to face shared social barriers, the organization's leadership focused its work toward brokering its own relationships with donors and local powerbrokers, mediating access of other organizations to the sex work community and eventually carving an identity for itself as an NGO. With the leadership focus on building relationships with donors rather than strengthening solidarity among women, the SII found little structural change from the work of the organization. In looking back on that legacy, CARE must ask itself, what was it in our model of organizing and programming with these women that led to the replication of power structures in their own society and in the development sector? What did we organize these collectives *to do*, and what did we encourage in them? What did we overlook? And how did our own comfort zones, incentives, and measures of success limit our engagement?

## What key lessons can we draw about groups for women's empowerment?

As we push forward, the SII and broader literature on women's rights in development highlight a number of key lessons on what it takes to harness groups in support of women's empowerment – to not only treat the symptoms, but to get to the roots for fundamental change:

- **Groups are sites of power struggle, too:** Groups and the women in them have their own unique power relations, preferences, strategies, strengths and vulnerabilities. Working with groups we must take into account differences among women to ensure the inclusiveness and effectiveness of groups as drivers for women's empowerment.
- **Groups can be conformist or transformative and can change over time, as they develop:** For robust impact on women's empowerment, CARE must support women to challenge critically their values and gender norms over time. To help women realize their rights and the role of power and gender in their lives, CARE must facilitate discussions to examine their ideologies and belief systems about their societies and places within it, to be challenged on their own hypocrisies as well as the abuses they receive from others.
- **Women are already mobilizing, which our efforts can help or harm:** CARE must recognize women's existing strategies of group engagement and negotiation, and support and leverage existing efforts rooted in local women's movements. CARE should seek to understand and build on these forums in ways that strengthen support, empathy and reach beyond in-group interest to consider the struggles of others.
- **In groups, and especially those federated with one another, women can engage power more effectively:** Women (and all of us) are complex, at the same time juggling multiple roles and relationships. In each, they hold their sources of power and subordination: Recognizing these complexities, we must conceptualize groups on a pathway to more constructive dialogue, engagement and interaction with men and the powerful in women's lives.

The reflections and examples in this brief underscore the reality that, indeed, there are limits to the role that CARE can play in supporting women's empowerment struggles. But it also points a way forward – one that shows our role as a strategic contributor, whose role shifts over time within a wider web of actors whose efforts we can support, influence, challenge and replicate.

To work effectively in cooperation with movements, big international NGOs like CARE must recognize that no matter how large our budgets and staff, we can only ever act as levers, amplifiers and connectors for the work of coalitions larger than ourselves. Our task is to understand the dynamic of those coalitions, what ideas and agendas they are fighting to promote and how we can support them over the long term.

## Annex I: Key Take-Aways

### At a Glance: Group Approaches and their Impacts on Women's Lives

Approaches Impacts	Approach I: Peer Education	Approach II:VSLA	Approach III: Solidarity Groups for Gender Equity	Approach IV: Movement Building
<b>Agency</b>	<p>Good uptake of targeted training messages and services</p> <p>Limited development of own visions for empowerment, little sense of confidence or self-worth</p> <p>Growing feelings of social support among group members, but limited outreach to non-members</p> <p>Lack of awareness of rights</p>	<p>Good uptake of training messages and services on financial management, business development and other targeted topics</p> <p>Increased sense of confidence or self-worth</p> <p>Increased household decision-making power</p> <p>Lack of awareness of rights</p> <p>Increased responsibilities without increased power</p>	<p>Good uptake of targeted training messages and services</p> <p>Increased sense of confidence, self-worth and skillfulness</p> <p>Increased awareness of rights, power and gender</p>	<p>Good uptake of targeted training messages and services</p> <p>Increased sense of confidence and self-worth</p> <p>Enhanced awareness of rights, power and gender</p>
<b>Relations</b>	<p>Little sense of solidarity among women</p>	<p>Richer social networks with other women</p> <p>Tensions in relationships between women and men</p>	<p>Increased social networks and sense of unity with other women and groups</p> <p>Some group leaders exploited members for personal gains and group members may harbor jealousy toward one another</p> <p>More equitable relationships between women and men (Some tensions remain)</p>	<p>Broadened social networks and sense of unity with other women and more prominent roles within the community</p> <p>Some group leaders exploited members for personal gains</p> <p>Relationships with the powerful at community and broader levels improved, but less change in women's intimate relationships.</p> <p>Local groups built their own relationships with other civil society, government and donor groups</p>
<b>Structures</b>	<p>Generally, women unaware of the structures and gender norms that constrain their lives</p>	<p>Women generally unaware of the structures and gender norms that constrain their lives.</p> <p>Internalized traditional values around gender and empowerment.</p>	<p>Women are beginning to take positions as local officials</p> <p>The environment allows space for women to voice concerns</p>	<p>Women crossed structural barriers and represent their interests through mobilization and advocacy</p> <p>Impact was vulnerable to being side-tracked toward short-term technical gains, if projects lose sight of their goals</p>

### Key Take-Away Questions

How can CARE's work support and link to women's movements more effectively? What are the implications on CARE's structure, funding/finance, recruiting/talent management, staff development/assessment and program approaches?

What will it take for CARE's work with women to remain responsive and flexible to the changing aspirations and interests of vulnerable women?

How does our work challenge or reinforce existing power structures? In working with groups, what behaviors do we encourage and why? What have we overlooked? How do our own comfort zones, incentives and measures of success limit our engagement?

<sup>i</sup> History of CARE.

<sup>iii</sup> V Sharma, (2006). *Enabling Empowerment: Strategic Impact Inquiry*. CARE India, p. 25.