

**LEARNING PAPER** / December 2019

# Increasing women's participation in community-based peace and security structures



Community group, South Sudan  
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**Women's participation in peacebuilding and security is crucial, and not just because they make up half of the population of fragile and conflict-affected communities. Women are often more affected by conflict and suffer particular forms of violence on the basis of their sex and gender, fuelled by harmful gender norms and gender inequality. Because of their specific needs and experiences, determined mainly by these gender norms, they have a different understanding of safety and security issues affecting the communities in which they live and a different perspective of the conflicts that occur within their communities. Women's voices must be heard in order for effective solutions to be found, and for peace to be both inclusive and sustainable.**

Including women in community-based peace and security structures like local peace committees or community action groups/community action forums<sup>1</sup> – and in peacebuilding generally – has been a central aim of many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for many years. However, the extent to which women are meaningfully included and participating in decision-making remains a concern. Quotas for women's inclusion in community structures are frequently set by NGOs, which then either struggle to meet their targets or, where they do achieve them, find that quotas have failed to lead to meaningful participation. In different cases, the numerical presence of women in these structures does not necessarily amount to active participation or an ability to shape the agenda and influence decisions. However, where women are given space and do actively participate, this can lead to the transformation of gender relations within a community, as well as strengthening peacebuilding initiatives.

At a learning event coordinated by Saferworld, the Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA) and ZOA in Uganda on 27–29 August 2019, participants from these three organisations and range of partner organisations across Central and East Africa, shared their experiences and learnings around the meaningful inclusion and participation of women in community-based peacebuilding interventions. The learning event explored the barriers to meaningful inclusion of women and ways to address these barriers, as well as looking at inspiring examples of how community-based peace and security structures can have gender transformative results.

<sup>1</sup> ZOA works with local peace committees, SUDIA works with community action groups, and Saferworld works with community action groups and community action forums in different countries. These are all community-based structures with voluntary members who focus on conflict resolution and peacebuilding in communities.

## Current practice and challenges shared during the learning event

In some contexts, NGOs establish their own community action groups or peace committees, while in others they work to strengthen structures that already exist within the community: local government councils and traditional, tribal and clan-based structures. The cultural context in which these NGOs work varies, with patriarchal religion, traditions, laws and structures strongly influencing and legitimising gender norms and men's and women's power and vulnerabilities in societies. For example, in Karamoja, Uganda, it is difficult for women and men to even meet or sit together in public spaces, with women generally required to sit separately. The misinterpretation and different opinions of different religious groups on religious norms in Somalia also limit women's participation, which means that civil society organisations sometimes encounter religious opposition when encouraging women's inclusion in peace building programmes.

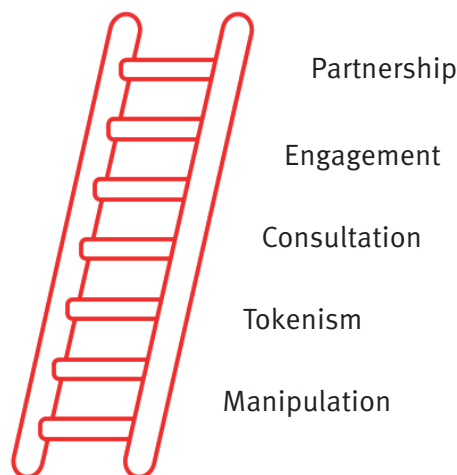
Because of these entrenched social and gender norms and because of how these are enforced by community leaders and structures, NGOs often work in communities where women have very little participation in public spheres. Encouraging women's participation is viewed as counter-cultural and constitutes a slow process, despite many local and women's organisations in these communities working towards this end. Where women have been included in committees and other community structures, it is often at the NGO's insistence and women may only actually be present when the NGO is attending a meeting. Even when women's presence in the committees and structures is more common, it does not always mean that they can speak freely or participate actively in decision-making or planning.

The concept of the participation ladder<sup>2</sup> is often used to explore different levels of citizen engagement and participation. It was adapted during the learning event to explore the engagement and participation of women in community-based structures. The adapted ladder has five steps, starting with non-participation and building to full partnership as the ladder is climbed.

<sup>2</sup> The ladder of citizen participation was developed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969. See: <http://www.citizenshandbook.org/arnsteinsladder.html>

1. **Manipulation:** women do not participate in community committees, their views are not sought and their needs are not even assessed.
2. **Tokenism:** women are members of community committees, but only because it is a requirement of the NGO. They may be informed of their role and what is expected of them but they do not have the opportunity nor the influence to share their views or shape their own roles.
3. **Consultation:** women members of community committees are both informed about their role and asked for their input. Their views are listened to and may help to shape decisions and planning, but exactly how their input is considered may not be clear and they are not included in the actual decision-making.
4. **Engagement:** women committee members are informed, consulted and have the power to make some decisions, but these decisions require approval by men committee members. For instance, they may be given the power to make decisions on subcommittees or about smaller projects that require ratification by the men.
5. **Partnership:** women and men committee members jointly plan and make decisions. Either may instigate a project and the input of both are valued equally.

### Participation ladder



While the degree of participation varies across different contexts, it was acknowledged that, despite the best intentions of many organisations and projects, women's participation in community structures frequently remains on the rung of tokenism or consultation only. Where NGOs and community members have been promoting women's participation over time, this participation rose to the level of engagement. In the cases of women's associations or women's unions, women were in control of the structure and made all the decisions.

## Barriers to meaningful inclusion of women and how to address them

Despite the creative and varied approaches taken by NGOs to include women in community structures and peace committees, there are significant hurdles to meaningful participation for women. Some of the core barriers identified across settings at the learning event are:

- Women have many responsibilities within their household and family. Women are commonly responsible for cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children as well as much of the agricultural work that is done in communities. This leaves them with very little time or energy for participating in community groups, and meetings do not always take place at times that are suitable for them.
- Women often have much lower education levels than men, as men's education is prioritised and women may be married at a young age. This affects both women's skill sets in organising and participating in committees and their self-confidence to do so. Even in spaces where men have the same (lower) levels of education, the exposure that they have from an early age to public and decision-making spaces, and the privileges they enjoy due to gender norms, impact the real or perceived capacities they have.
- Gender norms – which are embedded and driven by culture and religion in many contexts – make it difficult, or even dangerous, for women to take an active role in decision-making at all levels. The patriarchal nature of many communities and religious structures, the religious views that uphold such customs, and the belief that gender inclusion is a Western, neo-colonial concept mean that there is often significant opposition to women's participation. Openly advocating for gender transformation can undermine the credibility of an NGO's work and put staff at risk.
- Women, like men, are socialised into the cultural norms of a community, which engenders them to be submissive, to not speak up or publicly disagree with men, and to be suspicious of other women who do so. Women may face opposition and violence if they do not comply with such cultural norms. The result is that often women will need permission and support from men to be able to participate in community structures.

Peace committee member, Congo  
©ZOA



### Case study

Women may already be exercising power or have cultural or customary roles within communities that can be enhanced and transformed to support peacebuilding. For example in Sudan women, through the use of songs, encouraged men to fight. Peace initiatives have worked to transform these war songs into songs of peace. In Acholi, Uganda, there are both men and women customary leaders, the *Rwot Kweri* and *Rwot Okoro*. The *Rwot Okoro*'s input on customary land matters is already respected and accepted. NGOs have trained *Rwodi Okoros* in mediation and land rights to strengthen their roles in the community. In cultures that resist gender inclusion as a Western concept that is counter to traditional values, building on these local initiatives can give space to women's voice.

NGOs may also have hierarchical and patriarchal structures that reflect those of the communities they work in. Specific barriers within NGOs that are working to improve women's participation in peacebuilding include:

- A lack of gender sensitivity and gender equality within the NGOs themselves. Staff, including management, may not fully appreciate the importance of gender dynamics or why it needs to be proactively addressed. In some organisations, men still dominate leadership positions and women are not involved in decision-making.
- There can be a tendency to overgeneralise on gender issues, without understanding the cultural overtones or adjusting to the particular community context. Terminology, such as gender, gender transformation, gender sensitivity, and gender mainstreaming, are often used without a clear understanding of what is being discussed.
- The language of gender has been politicised and can be highly contested in some contexts. Raising issues about gender transformation or gender-based violence can undermine community legitimacy, cause political problems for an NGO and lead to safety concerns for staff.



Local peace committee, Sudan ©ZOA

A number of tips and opportunities were shared during the learning event in order to address these barriers:

- Address the time constraints and existing responsibilities of women to enable them to participate. This can include arranging childcare by the community, finding spaces and times women already have to meet, and engaging families to better understand the benefits of women's participation. The support of family and the community is crucial to free women to participate, as well as for adapting meeting times to suit women's availability.
- Gender transformation requires a change in the mindset of many communities, and this often begins with influential people. Identifying, working with and sensitising religious leaders, traditional leaders and respected community members as allies or advocates on gender transformation will be useful.
- Continue to use women-only groups to build confidence, develop experience with organisational planning and decision-making, and create safe spaces for discussion.
- Carry out exposure visits to successfully integrated and gender-inclusive committees to demonstrate to other communities not only what is possible but what works well. Likewise, championing women role models shows other women what they can achieve.
- Identify knowledge and skill gaps for women and address them through meaningful training, technical assistance, exposure, exchange visits and interaction with role models. Experienced women staff can mentor women members of committees in order to build confidence and capacity. Additional mentoring and coaching could be provided to women who show natural interest and aptitude in community organisation, to strengthen their abilities and encourage them to take on leadership roles.
- Identify spaces, committees or organisations in which women already have a voice and power in the community and partner with them to strengthen women's inclusion. Gain an understanding of the local context and how local women's organisations work in order to do this in a conflict-sensitive way.
- Theatre, role play and music are also powerful tools to change mindsets and contribute to gender transformation.

## Case study: Sudan

In Sudan there has been a process of gradually increasing and normalising women's participation in community structures. Originally, women did not even attend public meetings to discuss community issues or social gatherings. SUDIA encouraged men to invite their wives, sisters and daughters, and gradually more and more women began attending meetings. After the third or the fourth meeting in some communities women participation became the norm. Women-only structures, such as women's unions and associations, create a safe space for women to organise, make decisions and provide leadership. This leads to increased capacity and self-confidence. The integration of women in community structures like youth groups has also led to greater acceptance by communities of women's participation in decision-making and community organisations. Initially, men were the only decision makers. Now, these communities have come to accept women's right to make decisions and value their input.

One example of this is a local community in the Red Sea State, Sudan, which is known for its conservative attitude; men and women never attend public events together. One woman from the community took the initiative to host a community gathering in her house to discuss community issues in order to propose solutions. She invited both men and women to attend and discuss their issues collectively. A committee was formed at the meeting and she was elected to be part of it. Through her leadership role, the woman has established a good relationship with the local police authority. She is now approached by community members when they have any security issues and helps them to report these to the local police. Because of her, women's inclusion and more meaningful participation in community-based structures are gradually becoming more acceptable and recognised.

## Case study: Somalia

Men's buy-in has also been pursued in Somalia by Saferworld and partner Somali Women Development Centre. In Somalia, the patriarchal context makes it dangerous and difficult to speak openly about women's inclusion. Despite being a women's organisation, the Somali Women Development Centre in Mogadishu, assists both men and women in need in order to ensure men do not feel excluded, which might lead to negative effects for the women. The centre works with community action forums and Police Advisory Committees<sup>3</sup> to address conflict including clan-based conflict, land disputes, sexual and gender-based violence and competition for resources. Women can now not only participate in these forums but some have moved into leadership positions, for example as chairs or vice chairs of the forums. At the local level, women hold dialogues within and between communities and state authorities, work collaboratively on local security issues and plan responses, using seed funds to support implementation. The inclusion of women in these community-level structures has influenced community perceptions on women's leadership at the local level, as women leaders in the CAFs have proved themselves as articulate and accountable leaders, and have been demonstrated their ability to resolve disputes.

## Case study: Uganda

A land security and economic development project in the Acholi region in Uganda, implemented by ZOA, raised awareness of Ugandan national law on women's rights in their communities. Under customary law, women's access to land is dependent upon their relationships with male family members. However, the Ugandan constitution prohibits customs that discriminate against women. The project worked with local government, by building capacity and enabling officials to implement the legal provisions to register customary holdings of land. The project specifically incorporated these constitutional rights into trainings for officials and to sensitise communities on women's rights and encourage women's inclusion in land registration. This resulted in increased recognition of women's rights and a perception of higher tenure security among women (and men). Different studies reported an increase in the participation of women in community processes for land mapping and greater awareness of women's rights among all stakeholders.

## How have community structures contributed to transforming gender norms and values?

Women's participation in committees and action groups has contributed to a change in the way men and women relate. Women's integration and participation in community structures has normalised their participation in the public sphere and created community acceptance of the importance of women being able to make decisions and take up leadership roles. This has changed both men's perceptions of the role of women and women's own self-perceptions, and has increased women's confidence in their decision-making capacities.

Women's associations and unions have given members increased capacity and confidence to organise, plan and make decisions. This has knock-on effects on other areas of their personal, family and communal life. For example, women have more decision-making power in the family and in the community.

<sup>3</sup> In Somalia, community action forums focus on community-level conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Police Advisory Committees are voluntary sub-national groups comprising the police, relevant government authorities, civil society groups, youth and women representatives, lawyers, human rights groups, elders and religious leaders. They work jointly with community action forums on police reform.



Community group meeting, Somalia  
© Saferworld

The community structures have also provided spaces for women to critically discuss with men the social and cultural issues they face. Sometimes this space has been intentionally created by organisations, such as talking circles<sup>4</sup> in Karamoja, Uganda. Sometimes these spaces are a by-product of women's participation in organisations. For example, one women's Village Savings and Loan Association in Darfur was successfully operating as a local bank. Men became interested and wanted to be able to participate and obtain loans as well. As they were included in the association, it provided a safe space for discussions between members about gender-related topics, leading to changes in traditional practices without outsider involvement.

Interactions between women and men in the public sphere can also contribute to increasingly equal access to resources, by stimulating debate and providing space for men to hear and appreciate the impact of gender norms and gendered violence upon women and their rights. For example, public conversations about land access, use and inheritance have led to a greater appreciation of women's rights to land in Uganda.

Local peace committees that have women members are more accessible to women, who feel more comfortable presenting their issues to committees when other women are present and feel that they are more likely to be listened to. This gives women greater access to informal justice, as they can find solutions to conflicts through peace committees and – if the result is also gender sensitive – the positions of women in the community are strengthened. It also provides a platform for women's security concerns to be seriously considered and voiced to government.

4 Talking circles are dialogues set up in safe spaces.

5 See <https://www.carenederland.org/careexpertise/publication/the-community-score-card-toolkit/> for more information about the community score card.

## Case study: South Sudan

In South Sudan, CARE, who also took part in the learning event, uses community score cards<sup>5</sup> to monitor gender justice policies and advocate for their implementation by customary law actors and law enforcement institutions; this helps bring policy implementation gaps to the attention of local government authorities. The community score card is a participatory process that engages service users (both men and women), service providers and authorities (duty bearers) in assessing the quality and effectiveness of public services; this culminates in a joint action plan for improving that service, which is monitored by the community. Cycles of the model are repeated to detect changes in the quality of the basic service delivery. The process enhances awareness of rights, strengthens women's agency and input, fosters dialogue, facilitates a common understanding of potential solutions to problems, helps to raise the quality of services, and promotes accountability and transparency. The community score cards have positively influenced perceptions of women's leadership in the provision and management of gender justice services delivered by customary law actors and law enforcement institutions, such as community courts. The community score cards showed that people were not satisfied with the absence of women in leadership positions, and as a result, the County Commissioner of Kongor appointed six women to leadership positions in the county.



Local peace committee  
Congo  
©ZOA

## Learnings and messages for peer organisations and policy makers

- Setting arbitrary quotas or goals for women's participation is not sufficient; participation can be at different levels, as the participation ladder shows. The ladder is a useful tool for both NGOs and committees to analyse the current level of participation and to develop creative solutions to address the lack of women's participation.
- It is essential to undertake a gendered analysis to understand the context and root causes of conflicts and of the barriers and opportunities to women's participation, both at the community level and within NGOs. Targeted activities should be developed to address these barriers to enable women to fully participate.
- It's not enough for NGOs to have broad goals of gender mainstreaming or gender as a cross-cutting theme; the issue will get lost or diluted. Focal staff based at the field office, as well as at headquarters, including gender inclusion as performance indicators, collecting gender disaggregated data and ensuring specific monitoring and evaluation on gender inclusion is needed to effect change.
- Where gender as a theme is creating resistance, the issue can potentially be reframed as inclusion or participation. For example, gender focal points might be labelled inclusion or participation focal points, while their task description would ensure that gender is their actual priority alongside inclusion of other marginalised groups. In general, current approaches to gender — not least in terms of donor demands for projects — might need to be re-shaped or re-framed in order to overcome resistance to gender mainstreaming approaches. This can entail more culturally sensitive communications as well as explicit orientation towards behaviour change strategies.
- Staff are subject to the same socialisation and cultural norms as the society in which they operate. Ongoing training and sensitisation for all staff is necessary. Providing training, mentoring and capacity building for female staff, engaging women in decision-making at all levels and encouraging them as leaders are several ways NGOs can facilitate gender transformation in their own organisations and be role models in the community.
- Gender inclusion can be particularly difficult in certain societies where religion continues to dominate and shape communities' norms and practices, and where erroneous or misunderstood interpretations of religious text is often at play. Engaging with enlightened and moderate religious leaders and finding meaningful references and narratives from religious texts and teachings in relation to gender inclusion, transformation, and representation represents one of the ways forward. Finding a successful pathway needs further research and will likely be highly contextual.

### About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. For more information see: [www.saferworld.org.uk](http://www.saferworld.org.uk)

### About SUDIA

Founded in 1996, the Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization working for peace, development and good governance in Sudan. The organization works with a broad cross-section of actors and stakeholders implementing programmes and providing services that build peace and human security, improve the management of natural resources and conserve the environment, promote democracy and human rights. Youth engagement, innovation and technology, and sustainable livelihoods represent cross-cutting themes across SUDIA programming areas. For more information see: [www.facebook.com/SUDIAorg](https://www.facebook.com/SUDIAorg)

### About ZOA

ZOA is an international relief and recovery organization supporting vulnerable people affected by violent conflicts and natural disasters in fragile states, by helping them to realise dignified and resilient lives. ZOA operates in challenging locations where our field staff together with our partners provide assistance to the most vulnerable victims of displacement and conflict. ZOA works in the area of Food Security and Livelihoods, WASH, Education, Shelter and Peacebuilding; ZOA is present in more than 15 countries in Africa, Asia, Middle East and Latin America. For more information see: [www.zoa-international.com](http://www.zoa-international.com)

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