REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Jo Cox Memorial Grants: a UK Aid Direct learning paper

Photo credit: Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE)
In March 2018, the former Department for International Development (DFID), now the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), paid tribute to MP Jo Cox and launched the Jo Cox Memorial Grants (JCMG) in her memory.

These grants were to come from a one-off £10 million pot within UK Aid Direct, a fund designed to support small and medium sized civil society organisations based in the UK and overseas to contribute to sustained poverty reduction and achievement of the United Nations’ Global Goals.

Jo Cox Memorial Grants were created to support projects working across two themes: women’s empowerment and preventing identity-based violence (IBV) and conflict prevention.

These projects are now one year into implementation and UK Aid Direct has been carrying out qualitative analysis of grant holders’ understandings and insights into these two themes, as well as the concepts that underpin them.

This brief results from this research and focuses on theme one: women’s empowerment, and the key elements involved in pursuing this for the JCMG grant holders.

The following analysis was informed by conversations with 11 grant holders in early 2021 (a full list of organisations can be found on Page 21 of this document).

About this publication

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Photo credits: Christian Blind Mission (CBM) and Womankind Worldwide
Overview: Defining women’s empowerment

As outlined in the former Department for International Development’s [Strategic Vision for Gender Equality](#), gender equality and empowered women and girls are not only ends in their own right, but fundamental to the achievement of the [Global Goals](#). Existing frameworks for women’s empowerment tend to look holistically at individual, relational and institutional elements, cutting across social, economic, and political arenas. The term ‘empowerment’ however, has become a widely used and misused term, covering a diverse range of meanings, understandings and actions that dilute the core focus on challenging and changing unequal power relations.

Considering this, UK Aid Direct explored what women’s empowerment means in practice with Jo Cox Memorial Grant holders and how they seek to empower those they work with.

By discussing what activities and approaches grant holders are taking, it was possible to break down what empowerment means for them and the individuals they work with.

Despite a range of different focuses - from female carers to women with disabilities, to supporting women’s representation in local government – the definitions of empowerment that emerged from grant holders’ projects had strong commonalities around the combination of individual skills, assets and resources, individual and collective agency, and enabling environments (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Critical elements to be addressed for women’s empowerment

In terms of individual skills, assets and resources, this covers the practical skills and access to basic infrastructure and services that enable women and girls to engage in any area of society on an equal footing and pursue a life of their own choosing. This might include equitable access to education and the skills and knowledge this provides; having access to sexual and reproductive health services that support their rights and bodily autonomy; the vocational or technical skills and training to secure their own income; or equal access and rights to land as a basic asset for their security and livelihood.

Linked closely to this area of assets and resources is the area of individual and collective agency. Building up self-esteem and self-confidence is a critical part in enabling women and girls to demand their rights, realise their power to make their own choices and to utilise the skills and assets that they have.
Given the positions of marginalisation and systemic discrimination that women and girls face in many contexts, however, the importance of solidarity, connection and collective support amongst women and girls is also vital to build and sustain these individual changes and to provide a greater collective voice to demand changes to systemic inequality.

The final element in tackling gender inequality is addressing the formal and informal environment that determines the broader structures of this inequality. In the formal sphere this refers to the legislation, policies and institutional structures of the public and private sectors that can perpetuate or provide a drive to eliminate various elements of inequality based on gender. In the informal sphere, this covers the social and cultural norms and behaviours between men and women and boys and girls, in households, communities and wider society. These norms and behaviours affect the day to day experience of women and girls and can provide a continual barrier to the realisation of skills, assets and self-confidence unless challenged and transformed to be supportive of gender equality.

This framework reflects the widely used four powers framework - power within, power with, power to and power over - and the importance of not only working individually and collectively with women on their assets and collective power, but also directly tackling the social, institutional, and cultural norms and barriers that have deprived them of these elements in the first place.

It is this interdependence of individual, collective and institutional / societal arenas that all grant holders emphasised in how they have designed and developed their projects, recognising that progress in one arena will only have limited success without supportive progress in the other arenas.

Rooting definitions in women’s realities

A further aspect that was clear across all grant holders was that while they are passionate about their definitions of empowerment and how it guides their work, such definitions are meaningless unless directly informed by - and responsive to - the views and perspectives of the women they are working to support.

Without this direct input from the women themselves and / or the translation of frameworks into the realities of the women’s experience, they may fail to address, and even exacerbate, the unequal power dynamics of that context.

This also applies to how interventions are implemented. For example, Forum for Women in Development (FOWODE) have strong connections with women in the five districts of Uganda where they work, and their Jo Cox Memorial Grant project workplans were built based on feedback from them. One of the key issues they identified was time poverty. Women may want to attend workshops and trainings but simply do not have the time to do so. Therefore, FOWODE’s work is based around understanding and leveraging what women are already doing informally at the grassroots, rather than creating extra work and time burdens for them.

It was clear from our research that local relationships and community buy-in are central to any success. Such relationships build trust with women themselves and their communities and help to create an enabling environment for empowerment.

The importance of having experience in the geographical and thematic areas the grant holders work in, was highlighted by all
organisations. Without it, they cannot understand the power relationships and dynamics at multiple levels - households, communities, institutional - and subsequently, cannot effectively or strategically start to challenge and transform these relationships.

**Empowerment in practice**

The Jo Cox Memorial Grant holders focusing on women’s empowerment, are diverse in their specific focuses and approaches. Yet there is much to be learnt and shared in how more abstract definitions and frameworks of empowerment are being practically enacted within these projects.

In the following sections of this paper, we present a series of practical examples and approaches from across these projects that bring to life the different elements of the framework outlined above. They are broken down into the following sub-themes:

1. **Individual agency and voice**: Increasing self-esteem and confidence
2. **Collective agency**: Creating networks and support systems
3. **Leadership**: Highlighting and supporting women in power
4. **Assets and resources**: Increasing access to economic empowerment, services and skills
5. **Formal institutions and frameworks**: Advocating for gender sensitive budgeting, programming and inclusion
6. **Social and cultural structures and norms**: Facilitating an enabling environment
7. **Social and cultural structure and norms**: Facing and mitigating backlash – how to include men and boys.

Whilst we have separated these out, it is important to reiterate that none of these elements of empowerment work in isolation and all grant holders highlighted the need for integrated approaches for meaningful, sustainable empowerment.

**The longer-term journey of empowerment**

Ultimately, empowerment is seeking to address the fundamental power imbalances within social, political, and economic structures.

Individual, time-bound projects must be placed within this context and recognised as contributions to this broader and longer-term journey.

Whilst important steps can be progressed within a project, equally important is the support and networks facilitated between international, national, and local women’s organisations such as those involved in the Jo Cox Memorial Grants (JCMG). Through such support, these organisations are able to maintain pressure and sustain focus over time, and across multiple projects on the larger, transformational goals of gender equality.

During the implementation of the JCMG projects, UK Aid Direct are seeking to contribute to this by providing space for grant holders and their partners to learn from one another, discuss key issues and share experiences from their work.
1. Individual agency: Increasing self-esteem and confidence

Observations

When approaching women’s empowerment there is sometimes a patronising suggestion that a change in attitude can alter an individual’s life experience. However, even with the sunniest outlook, a lack of finances or the threat of gender-based violence (GBV) limits empowerment. Therefore, it is right that practical elements like economic opportunities, education, or support networks, are central to empowerment programmes, as highlighted by Jo Cox Memorial Grant (JCMG) holders.

This does not mean that increased self-esteem or confidence cannot or does not occur alongside such steps, however. It is naïve to expect one without the other, but given its personal and changeable nature, it is unsurprising that this type of personal growth is often overlooked and difficult to capture.

Many grant holders anecdotally report a change in attitude because of their programmes. For example, the Child and Adolescent Resource Centre (CARC) operating in Zimbabwe, suggested that through learning and developing business skills, women’s self-awareness and confidence improved, although they do not formally measure these changes. Sometimes this increase in self-esteem is linked to improving a practical skill, access to services or loans systems, or feeling listened to. This is often the case in microfinance or employment schemes, such as in Zimbabwe Educational Trust’s vocational training and employment approach.

MIFUMI reported that gender-based violence (GBV) survivors they work with in Uganda, move from a place of almost no confidence, to one in which they can take proactive steps to improve their own position.

The first time MIFUMI meet GBV survivors varies, and, in some cases, they will have already gone through the police, a champion in the community, or another referral pathway. This is often with little
emotional support. MIFUMI offers help to report the crime/s, find safe accommodation, pursue work opportunities, and join support groups, depending on what is needed.

After their support services are no longer required, MIFUMI do an immediate follow up, followed by another at six months and a year later. They also get self-reported feedback, and one of the most evident changes seen, are women going into positions of leadership, both informally and formally. Crucially they are having the confidence to do so.

Many survivors want to help and tackle the issues of gender-based violence (GBV) for others. They often go on to create support groups within their communities, which help to engage and support others. These women are visible, have respect, and are listened to in the communities as there is a growing understanding of the need for shared responsibility. There is a Ugandan Ambassador who makes a point of always saying that it was a result of MIFUMI that she has the confidence to be in such a position.

Having the knowledge that one has the right to speak out or be in a certain place, is central to a change in attitude.

Organisations focusing on the political empowerment of women, such as the Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), cited that having this faith, as well as the support from others is part of this more intangible success.

FOWODE, operating in Uganda, records that women report a sense of increased confidence due to the support they gather from others and this gives them the belief that they can then stand for positions in their community. It allows women to realise their own potential - to make them see what they can aspire to and what they can achieve.

Follow the individual links below to go to any of the other project reflections and practice or return to the reflections on women’s empowerment overview.

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7. Social and cultural structure and norms: Facing and mitigating backlash – how to include men and boys.
2. Collective agency: Creating networks and support systems

Observations

Whether it was identified within their initial methods of supporting empowerment or not, Jo Cox Memorial Grant holders (JCMG) regularly cited the power of networks or groups to catalyse, bolster or enhance the empowerment process for individuals.

As highlighted by Women for Women International working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the discovery or reassurance that one is not alone in an experience or current situation, can be a powerful tool for reinforcing a sense of empowerment and opportunity.

Women’s Empowerment Link (WEL) based in Kenya, work to address gender-based violence (GBV) and improve the police’s response to it. As part of this, they bring together GBV survivors into groups and cite this opportunity (for individuals to share and be heard), as crucial to their empowerment. The ability to report or discuss what has happened, even if it is only in a group or to members of staff - as many may still feel they cannot go to the police - is seen as a success.

Some grant holders contextualise smaller support groups as being part of a bigger network, fighting on similar issues, and they reinforce this in their messaging to participants. For example, Women for Women International always provide examples of other places they are working with participants in order to create a sense of shared experience and being part of something bigger. Their conversations and trainings include larger movement building and advocacy methods which link smaller groups to the broader women’s empowerment movement.

Womankind Worldwide, who work in feminist partnership with FEDO, WHR and Tewa in this project in Nepal, also mentioned the power of collective solidarity to provide solace in challenging circumstances, such as the increased rates of violence against women and girls (VAWG) during COVID-19 restrictions. As a result, they consider women-based groups and women-to-women support as critical to their work.

MEMPROW, who work in Uganda, noted a similar effect, and the power there is in creating a young feminist movement which encourages sharing and mentoring others. Individuals create a sense of belonging and mutual support and are known to refer to themselves as the ‘MEMPROW girls’ after going through their programmes. Such networks also create a butterfly effect with both word-of-mouth and formal encouragement. For example, they ask them to try and bring three other new girls to events, thereby growing the movement.

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3. Leadership: Supporting and highlighting women in power

Observations

A key theme which came up throughout the JCMG grant holder research calls - and which mirrors the overarching goals of the Jo Cox Memorial Grants - was the importance of supporting women in power and creating channels for aspirant women to get there. Some have achieved tangible successes.

For example, the Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) supported 88 women to stand for positions of power in recent Uganda elections and 63 of them won. According to the organisation, empowering these women centred around giving them information and role models. As a result, the women challenged their status quo and thought further about what they wanted or could achieve.

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) is another grant holder focused on supporting women to take part in local development and politics. They work across four countries: Eswatini, Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and by creating local government forums in which to network, they bring women already in government positions together, to discuss the key barriers they face. Furthermore, they aim to create a pipeline for future leaders, increasing the capacities of young women and identifying female entrepreneurs.

As well as increasing aspirations, the CLGF focuses on tackling key practical barriers to women joining politics or positions of power in civil society. For example, in Zambia, the two main things which stop women from participating are social norms and economic disempowerment. Money is needed to get into politics, both for influence and paying costs such as the nomination fees. Recently the Zambian government tried to increase such fees but the women in CLGF’s networks presented a petition, forcing it to be adjusted and lowered for women.

However, female political representation is still low and often tokenistic.
Furthermore, women have a fear of not being seen as “feminine” if they pursue politics and believe that
to do so, could threaten their likelihoods of marriage, as being a female politician is often associated with
being divorced or not an appropriate ‘Mrs’. CLGF are pushing to ensure awareness around the legislation
which supports women in power and highlighting those who ‘walk the talk’.

**Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE)** and CLGF, along with **Womankind Worldwide**, all cite
mentoring as central to empowering women to put themselves forward for positions of power.
Womankind’s programme, which works in feminist partnership with **FEDO, WHR and Tewa** - fosters
relationships between aspirant and elected women and encourages them to share the lived realities that
come with positions of power.

As also mentioned by CLGF, one of the biggest issues is that while women are getting elected more,
they are not being supported at home, and it is therefore not economically viable for them to hold
office. Women thus need the right skills to advocate and negotiate for better support at home, as
well as in public spaces. By improving the skills of elected women, it is also hoped that they can be
seen as more effective and garner increased support.

Across all three organisations, **working with the ‘next generation’ and providing role models is central**. While the reality for women in politics or power, anywhere in the world, can be immensely
challenging, such outreach and connections helps ensure solidarity, change, and success.

![Photo credit: Womankind Worldwide and partners FEDO, WHR and Tewa](image)

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   and boys.
4. Assets and resources: Economic empowerment, access to services, and skills building

Observations

Many Jo Cox Memorial Grant holders (JCMG) reflected that meaningful **empowerment must include giving women the tools or opportunity to be financially independent**, and that this in turn, **will bolster other elements such as self-belief or confidence**.

Although **Women for Women International** for example, believe that all women have the empowerment they need within themselves - and offer trainings around human rights and gender equality to help women articulate this - they do make it clear that schemes like village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) are crucial for offering a real opportunity to unlock this potential.

Similarly, **Zimbabwe Educational Trust** sees financial independence and security as the central pillar to their empowerment approach. Their vocational training and work placements are critical not just in providing the practical skills and knowledge for employment, but also in raising young women’s self-confidence, self-perception, and opportunity to decide their own life course.

Some of the smaller JCMG grant holders have very clear economic empowerment agendas. For example, **Child and Adolescent Resource Centre (CARC)** in Zimbabwe, train women on business management and chicken rearing. They are organised into groups of ten and given 50 chicks each to rear. They work in a team and contribute to a mutual fund which they borrow and share money through. Within their groups, they have committees, constitutions, and allocated duties. Enabling these women to harness their own economic decision-making power can further help improve the support given to their children, as well as increase a sense of self. It therefore affects the broader community as well as the individuals.

**Carers Worldwide** focuses on addressing the social and economic exclusion of carers. Carers are often isolated and excluded, and their work is rarely recognised or acknowledged. Most carers are women and so there is a clear gender element in deciding to support carers and improve their positions. As a result of carer responsibilities, there are usually two people in the family who lose income. One being the carer, and the other the person who needs care. Carers Worldwide therefore, consider it crucial to include economic empowerment in their work. They have tools which help to identify what the carers were doing before they became carers and whether they would like to go back to that, or what would be an appropriate alternative. They also develop carers cooperatives to advocate for their rights and provide opportunities to engage in economic activities.

Once again, creating a community and support system for those supported by the grant’s work is central to its methodology but improving economic conditions for those affected is equally pertinent to the project’s success.
Economic empowerment does not only mean the provision of loans or skills but also the ability to live safely and securely.

**MIFUMI**, a grant holder in Uganda, has a range of aims including justice, settlement, a life free of violence, economic empowerment, and confidence. Whilst economic empowerment is listed separately, the aims are interlinked as no woman who is solely reliant financially on another, for their housing or survival, can be empowered.

The organisation works with women who are survivors of violence and delivers services through women-managed safe spaces and advice centres, offering psycho-social support, counselling, and accompaniment. Their services include: emergency crisis support in a purpose built 24-bed house, counselling, legal aid, medical care, as well as help when women return to the community.

The services bridge a gap between dependence on an abuser, and financial independence, and therefore represent a key step on the road to economic empowerment. MIFUMI provides emotional support to rebuild confidence, and this is reinforced by the physical provision of a safe space, services, and support.

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5. Formal institutions and frameworks: Advocating for gender-sensitive budgeting, programming and inclusion

Observations

Beyond creating mutual support for members, being part of a group can also be pivotal for successful advocacy, another element regularly cited as instrumental to empowerment successes by Jo Cox Memorial Grant holders.

Carers Worldwide, for example, have created 93 support groups in Nepal, which have been grouped into clusters. Along with providing solidarity to the individuals involved, these have clear advocacy goals, and they work with local government to make the roles of carers more visible and to create carers’ associations.

Confidence to participate and engage with local government authorities is increasing as a result, and one of the project activities includes providing training in the cluster groups and carers associations, around advocacy skills and applying for funding. Carers are now submitting funding requests to rural municipalities and, because of this and other activities, carers are more visible and able to participate more actively in their communities than they were previously able to.

Through advocacy, better conditions in the marital, domestic, or family sphere can also be fought for. However, it is vital these are done sensitively and framed as beneficial for the broader community, along with the individual.

In Zimbabwe, Child and Adolescent Resource Centre (CARC) creates conversations between community and religious leaders, men, and women, to consider topics such as property rights and domestic relationships, and what is negatively affecting women.

Practical considerations, such as those around property rights - which in Zimbabwe currently dictates that when a woman dies, everything she owns returns to her pre-marital family, and not to her children - can lead to efforts by the community to advocate for change. By combining advocacy discussions with basic economic skills, CARC helps women to gain better positions from which to advocate for their ownership and rights.

It is important, particularly when advocating for changes in the domestic or community spheres to ensure multiple stakeholders are involved and can see the benefit of such changes. As a result of the Forum for Women in Democracy’s (FOWODE) interventions in this area, women report being more involved in household decision-making, and men report appreciating the opportunity to ‘share the burden’ of family and household decisions. In such cases a win-win can be reported for the household.

Womens Empowerment Link (WEL) in Kenya has one of the clearest advocacy agendas of all the Jo Cox Memorial grant holders. They work with the national police service to bridge the gaps around
gender-based violence (GBV) reporting and management. Their goal is that all levels of the police should be able to respond appropriately to GBV cases after in-service training and should have a desk designated to dealing with gender issues. The duty police needs to be informed about reforms to ensure that their practice is aligned to policy, and procedures and regulations are enforced.

WEL also works with the communities and survivors of violence to inform them around their rights and methods for gaining justice. As well as traditional advocacy methods and relationships with stakeholders, WEL has also used media for advocacy. The normalisation of domestic violence makes it difficult for survivors to come forward. However, social media has played a role in sharing stories and allowing others, such as activists, to call for justice and shine a light on GBV and the need to address social norms. WEL have seen how calls for cases to be investigated through online platforms has had a big impact in holding people to account, and therefore consider this now a key part of their advocacy methods.

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Observations

Many of the Jo Cox Memorial Grant (JCMG) projects focus on individuals and their circumstances, whether these are familial, financial, emotional or a combination of all. These elements, however, do not occur in a vacuum. Any meaningful, and crucially sustainable, change can only occur if the environment enables and supports it.

As Women for Women International highlighted, women can be empowered but it is necessary to gradually work away at the rigid community structures that exist around them to ensure long-term gender empowerment.

Broader communities and attitudes must be engaged to bring about change. This can include directly engaging family members and local stakeholders, such as traditional leaders, and/or attempting to use media and advocacy for wider discussions and opinion changes.

For example, Womankind Worldwide, in feminist partnership with FEDO, WHR and Tewa, engage journalists and community leaders in Nepal to improve local attitudes to depictions of women in power in the media.

Examples of practical engagement with community stakeholders also include the work done by the Christian Blind Mission (CBM) and their partner, the Disability Rights Advocacy Centre in Nigeria, to increase support and understanding of women and girls with disabilities. At the beginning of their projects, they share evidence and encourage discussion to ensure others understand what they are doing and why, while holding dialogues with faith leaders, community leaders, and local government.

MIFUMI has a similar approach to ensure improved responses to gender-based violence (GBV). They lobby to gather support from the chief of police, district level officials, medical attendants at hospitals, and political leaders, along with running community sensitisation sessions through churches, local gatherings, or simply door-to-door in the hope of changing views on GBV.
These examples indicate the need to address the environment as well as the vulnerable individual.

Enabling environments are key to project success, not just for practicalities of community buy-in but also to ensure emotional support and sustainable social norm change.

As the Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) highlights, not only can projects be inefficient but they can also be counter-productive if they do not incorporate this element into their interventions. For example, ‘training a woman’ as an action by itself may leave her feeling a little more empowered but it does not address ‘the ground on which she is standing’, and it is important to ‘soften the ground’. In other words, if women are ‘empowered’ but they return home to negative, disempowering environments, they may feel worse and more frustrated than previously.

MEMPROW, who work in the West Nile region of Uganda, used to focus only on girls and young women but soon realised that it can be toxic to return to an environment which is unsupportive of new changes in attitude or ambition. As a result, they developed an ‘ecological model’ which includes the broader environment, involving parents and teachers through intergenerational dialogues.

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Observations

Many of the Jo Cox Memorial Grant (JCMG) holders noted the importance of community/domestic environments, and specifically the impact of engaging with men, to facilitate women’s empowerment.

Organisations Women for Women International and MEMPROW explained how they previously only focused on girls and young women when mainstreaming gender empowerment. Over time however, they realised that as much as you can empower a girl or woman, if she is returning to an environment which is not enabling, is toxic, or unsupportive, no sustainable change can be achieved, and indeed it may cause active hostility and obstruction that undermines or reverses any empowerment gains for those women and girls.

Some of the organisations, like the Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE), have a multi-pronged approach to ensuring that women’s empowerment (and shifts in power dynamics) happen at all levels of society. Community engagement, and particularly male-focused interventions, therefore, play a crucial role in gender equality / women’s empowerment projects, to avoid a potential backlash and ensure a sustainable change is achieved.

One of the main, potential reasons for a backlash as identified by organisations, Christian Blind Mission (CBM) and FOWODE, was the fear that ‘women would be taken away’ from their homes or their perceived “duties”, or that the projects would lead to conflict within families because of disruption to power and decision-making within households (MIFUMI). This highlights the importance of ensuring that a women’s empowerment project is properly understood from the start and men are included in the discussions from the offset, to dispel misunderstandings of the project’s aims and create a common understanding of the positive impact that empowerment and more gender equitable relationships, can have within the community and the household.

When backlash does happen, the response should be conversational and avoid furthering confrontation (FOWODE).

A further important consideration, given the tensions and conflicts that can arise in such projects, is how and who (is perceived) as implementing the project.
Women for Women International, for example, experienced violent backlash when a trainer delivering gender trainings was not a member of the local community. The potential for projects focusing on gender empowerment to be seen as imposing unwelcome and external concepts therefore, needs to be carefully considered, with a strong emphasis on addressing (locally identified) issues, from groups within the community, and embedding local participation within the project design, implementation and ongoing adaptation.

Practical examples
Below is a set of practical examples from the Jo Cox Memorial Grant holders, on how to engage men and boys successfully in gender empowerment projects to avoid a backlash and to ensure that the changes are adopted across all the community.

![Figure 2: Map of practical interventions](image)

Community engagement

Community-led

All organisations noted the importance of change coming from the community itself, working with relevant local leaders, carrying out stakeholder mapping, and ensuring the organisational staff understand local and relevant power structures. The identified stakeholders must be involved at all stages of project.

Women for Women International identified the power that religious leaders had in their communities, and therefore worked with imams to draw on their position of power and respect (within the communities) to achieve influence and change, on certain harmful beliefs and practices around women.
They trained imams to change communities’ views on child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), for example.

Whilst seeking justice for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), MIFUMI worked with community leaders to shift the blame of family and community conflict that was arising from the project, onto gender-based violence (GBV) and the perpetrators, as opposed to the victims or the project itself.

**Engagement with religious institutions**

Organisations such as Women for Women, ABAAD, Child and Adolescent Resource Centre (CARC), Christian Blind Mission (CBM) and Women’s Empowerment Link (WEL) have all engaged with religious leaders to change the narrative and status quo on women in their respective societies.

WEL successfully worked with church leaders in Kenya to question if intimate partner violence was in line with Christian values, and then worked with and through these leaders, to change the communities’ understanding of this behaviour.

**Sharing stories**

By highlighting the positive impact of a women’s empowerment project, the community is more likely to accept and promote an enabling environment.

Womankind Worldwide, who work in feminist principle with FEDO, WHR and Tewa, engage with journalists to share stories highlighting the positive impact of women working in politics. This initiative is contributing towards dismantling stigma in Nepal, increasing respect towards women in politics, and changing attitudes around who deserves, and who can succeed in, positions of power.

Carers Worldwide, in collaboration with their partners, have started to celebrate ‘Carers Day (also in Nepal) to raise awareness and sensitisation on the impact and value that the women have on their families and communities. This recognition has improved the welfare, wellbeing and reach of carers, and enabled them to have a recognised platform to speak up about their work.

WEL have used social media (in Kenya), as a tool to share cases of GBV and to engage with activists, enabling the stories to be amplified and shared more broadly.

**Male engagement**

**Male champions**

Christian Blind Mission (CBM), FOWODE, MIFUMI and WEL all utilise an approach to changing community and individual narratives around women by working with ‘male gender champions’.

Photo credit: Women’s Empowerment Link
These are men who have been carefully selected and directly engage with other men to change attitudes towards women, as “it is easier for men to listen to men.”- FOWODE.

They are trained on how to address stigma, improve inclusion, and encourage others to become similar influencers.

Navigating gender empowerment through men in a patriarchal context is a proven way to start to dismantle entrenched gender inequities in community, household and individual relationships.

FOWODE choose their male champions from community nominations and look out for ‘opinion leaders’ – those people who already hold influence amongst peers. They ensure that the men do not have a history of violence against women, and look for men who already have positive stories of change to do with empowering women. These men are trained on gender issues, ‘unlearn’ certain oppressive opinions, and then share these testimonies with their male peers.

Patriarchy awareness raising:

Seven of the twelve organisations spoken to, identified that addressing patriarchal structures and inequalities, through directly facilitating conversations about gender roles and power structures with men, was crucial to achieve an environment which enables women’s empowerment.

Women for Women International created community spaces for discussions on the role of gender in society. They found that a conversation around gender roles also enabled discussions on the difficulties faced by men on issues like toxic masculinity and fatherhood. The organisation also worked in these groups to develop accountability amongst men to reduce domestic violence incidences.

Women’s Empowerment Link (WEL), working within the police structures, found it was vital to share the struggles and experiences of survivors of domestic violence with the police force, to create empathy and understanding of how to promote gender-responsive police services.

Domestic sphere

Practicality over patriarchy

ABAAD, Child and Adolescent Resource Centre (CARC) and Christian Blind Mission (CBM) all acknowledged that when there was a practical or tangible benefit to the project, men were much more supportive of the gender empowerment intervention. Although adding a tangible benefit to an intervention is project-design dependent - and may conflict with certain feminist approaches if done in a purely instrumentalist way - it has been shown to contribute towards the ultimate goal of a supportive and enabling environment for women’s empowerment.

Both ABAAD and CARC found that when women were provided with additional incomes, their partners were more inclined to overcome their patriarchal expectations, as they acknowledged the tangible benefits of the project.
Encouraging domestic discussions

By directly addressing how gender affects the roles and responsibilities within the domestic sphere, organisations like FOWODE, Women for Women International, CARC, and Carers Worldwide found that they were able to improve more equitable sharing of responsibilities in the home. This applies to domestic tasks primarily affecting women, but also income pressures primarily affecting men.

Carers Worldwide explained how involving the husbands of the women in their project and explaining the strains and difficulties faced by female carers, made husbands more open and cooperative within the home.

FOWODE have had testimonies from husbands who value having a more empowered partner that they can consult, discuss and share making financial and other domestic decisions with.

Follow the individual links below to go to any of the other project reflections and practice or return to the reflections on women’s empowerment overview.

1. Individual agency and voice: Increasing self-esteem and confidence
2. Collective agency: Creating networks and support systems
3. Leadership: Highlighting and supporting women in power
4. Assets and resources: Increasing access to economic empowerment, services and skills
5. Formal institutions and frameworks: Advocating for gender-sensitive budgeting, programming, and inclusion
6. Social and cultural structures and norms: Facilitating an enabling environment
7. Social and cultural structure and norms: Facing and mitigating backlash – how to include men and boys.

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- Carers Worldwide
- Child and Adolescent Resource Centre (CARC)
- Christian Blind Mission (CBM)
- Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF)
- Forum for Women in Development (FOWODE)
- Mentoring and Empowerment Programme for Young Women (MEMPROW)
- MIFUMI
- Womankind Worldwide, who work in feminist partnership with FEDO, WHR and Tewa
- Women’s Empowerment Link (WEL)
- Women for Women International.
- Zimbabwe Educational Trust.

Further reading
Visit www.ukaiddirect.org for more information about the UK Aid Direct fund and for additional learning materials on gender empowerment.