Chiapas, Mexico, 2019

The Hunger Project.

Mobilizing Women's Leadership for Transformative Change

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> **"** **Unless [women] occupy important and powerful positions in decision-making processes, we cannot change anything.**
>
> - Pushpa Devi
> Elected Ward Member, Sevahi Gram Panchayat
> Bihar, India

ABOUT THE HUNGER PROJECT

Founded in 1977, The Hunger Project is a global non-profit organization whose mission is to end hunger and poverty by pioneering sustainable, community-led, women-centered strategies and advocating for their widespread adoption in countries throughout the globe. The Hunger Project is active in 23 countries, with a global headquarters based in New York.

To learn more, visit www.thp.org.

Background

The year 2021 marks a milestone in accelerating the implementation of global commitments to gender equality. Forty-five years since the first Women's Conference, 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and with a decade to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, it is time to critically examine our global approach to fostering women's leadership to bring about transformative change.

Despite commitments made in the Beijing Declaration to take strategic and decisive action, no country has so far achieved gender equality and the COVID-19 pandemic has caused setbacks in many dimensions of gender equality. It has also revealed, and exacerbated, many of the hidden inequalities that women face. This is our new starting point—and an opportunity to accelerate the promotion and protection of the human rights of all women and girls and to achieve gender equality.

The Hunger Project has worked with women leaders in rural communities with high levels of hunger and poverty in Africa, Latin America and South Asia for over 30 years. Drawing on the lessons we have learned from mobilizing their participation and leadership in community-led development activities—holistic, multisectoral activities that are rooted in mobilizing communities for action—we put forward the following policy recommendations to increase the role of women in public spaces and decision-making processes at the community-level. We believe that focusing on the community-level allows the greatest number of women who live with hunger and in poverty to exercise their agency and voice, supporting their ability to bring about transformative change.

Louise in Benin, 2017

Leveraging Community-led Development to Foster Women's Leadership for Transformative Change

The Hunger Project works through a holistic, multisectoral process called Gender-Focused, Community-led Development. This work is rooted in mobilizing communities, a process through which action is stimulated by a community itself, planned, carried out, and evaluated by a community's individuals, groups, and organizations on a participatory and sustained basis. The Hunger Project provides opportunities for women and men in those communities to develop their capacities, equipping them with the skills, methods, and knowledge needed to take self-reliant actions to improve their lives and living conditions.

We recognize the critical role that women play as change agents in development initiatives. They often live in greater conditions of economic, social, and political inequality due to the prevailing patriarchal systems and experience high levels of hunger and poverty. Therefore, The Hunger Project puts special emphasis on

mobilizing women in rural communities to ensure their active participation in decision-making, particularly in decisions defining their local development agendas.When women become full and active citizens, they are able to drive transformative change that can lift their communities out of hunger and poverty.

We are cognizant of the fact that just having a women-centric strategy does not necessarily mean that it will promote a gender-just or an equality agenda. Our programs are designed to advance women and girl's empowerment in a holistic way by using both gender-targeted and gender-integrated interventions. It is the axis on which our entire strategy revolves. In this pursuit of achieving gender equality, enhancing the voice, agency, and rights of marginalized groups, especially women and girls, becomes the all-encompassing priority.

To that end, the objectives pursued by a gender-focused, community-led approach are for civil society and other development actors, such as local governments and development organizations, to:

- Empower the voice and agency of women, youth, and groups that have historically been discriminated against and placed in greater conditions of vulnerability and recognize their particular agendas;
- Encourage local community and sub-national financing strategies and mechanisms to achieve the Beijing Agenda;
- Improve local governance by strengthening local governments and guaranteeing a high level of participation of women and marginalized groups;
- Build resilience to economic, social, and political changes that negatively affect the lives of girls, women, and marginalized groups.

The success of the Beijing Agenda will depend on its implementation at the local level. Community-led development approaches help address the complex web of issues that underlie the barriers women face and provide an opportunity for women to exert leadership in the decision-making process at all levels of society. This results in solutions that are holistic, long-term, appropriate to the local context, and above all, promote and encourage the active participation of all community members to facilitate transformative change.

Barriers to Women's Leadership

The barriers that women in communities with high levels of hunger and poverty face are complex and intertwined. The prevailing patriarchal mindset in society underpins most of the barriers and threatens women's rights and their participation in public life. Gender norms and perceptions of public life continue to be dominated by men, despite ongoing interventions, such as quotas for women's participation in local government structures (i.e. the panchayat system in India). These deep-rooted inequalities require a holistic approach to address the various challenges posed. Effective social, economic, and political change requires that we recognize and work with existing gender differences and prejudices.

The vast majority of women in communities with high levels of hunger and poverty work longer hours than men, due to their responsibility for unpaid home and care work. This prevents them from fully participating in community-led development initiatives or as active citizens in public life. This leads to local development agendas driven by men, which we have observed tend to focus primarily on infrastructure projects or programs targeting women that are developed without their participation.

The patriarchal mindset also increases the amount of gender-based violence in a community. When men exert violence as the only way to relate to women, it makes it nearly impossible for them to coexist with women and to recognize their contribution to society. For women, being the object of violence diminishes their voice and agency and the violence is a

systemic denial of their rights. This begins in the private sphere and extends to the public sphere.

Included in this, human rights law recognizes child marriage as a form of gender-based violence and a harmful practice that continues to take place across countries, cultures, and religions. Deeply-rooted gendered norms and values are critical obstacles to ending child marriage. Denying the possibility for girls and women to decide if, when and whom to marry results in young girls being forced to take on adult responsibilities and creates additional barriers to accessing education and decent livelihood opportunities. Additionally, girls who are married at a young age often lack access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and education. This often leads to unplanned and early pregnancies, further denying girls' ability to participate in public life.

The prevailing mindset also creates a lack of space at different tiers of governance, especially at the local level, for the active participation of women in local democratic processes. This in turn limits the effectiveness of local development policies and mechanisms. It also creates an unresponsive bureaucracy at the local level that is needed to implement local development agendas set forth by various state actors.

Finally, priority is rarely given to the capacity-development needs of women when opportunities do arise. Many women living in communities with high levels of hunger and poverty would benefit from training in business management skills, basic financial literacy and access to credit to expand their existing businesses or venture into new ones. As their economic power increases, women are able to assert themselves in the public space and are more likely to be seen as leaders in their community.

These examples represent only a few of the diverse barriers women face. It is important to acknowledge that each community will have different systemic barriers and social norms.

Additionally, every woman's experience and the challenges she faces will vary based on her own privileges and the power dynamics of her community.

Lessons Learned about Effectively Promoting Women's Leadership

The Hunger Project has been implementing gender-focused community-led development programs for over 30 years. From this we have learned many lessons about effective ways to mobilize women for transformative change.

As mentioned, the barriers outlined above can all be traced back to the prevailing patriarchal mindset of societies where there are high levels of hunger and poverty. Efforts to increase understanding of gender equality and women's right to participate in public life and decision-making, must include gaining the support and political will of male leaders. In order to make sustainable progress in reducing these barriers, the entire community must undergo a mindset shift. At The Hunger Project, we start this process with our Vision, Commitment, and Action workshop. Through this workshop, women are recognized as agents of change, with the opportunity to generate transformation within their community. They lead conversations with other women about their needs and the future

they want. They take an active role in community assemblies, where they contribute with voice and decision. They acquire tools and develop planning, self-management and community management capacities that allow them to mobilize their communities and build local development agendas.

Our programs also focus on ensuring women gain leadership positions within their community. Studies[1] show that when women become leaders in their local community, they transform the development agenda—focusing on water, sanitation, health, education, and nutrition, and combating corruption, social exclusion, and domestic violence. This is done by requiring at least 50 percent of leadership positions in THP-facilitated bodies (i.e. Community Leadership Councils) be reserved for women. In India, our strategy leverages the government's quota system for representation in the gram panchayats. However, representation via quotas alone doesn't automatically guarantee participation and equality. The gendered norms and perceptions of public life remain male-dominated despite temporary measures in place via quotas and legislation. For example, through the introduction of quotas in India, a critical mass of women have the opportunity to contest local elections and take action to challenge the existing gender biases in the public sphere; however, the women elected to these positions benefit significantly from working with The Hunger Project-India to strengthen their capacity and forge alliances for collective advocacy vis-a-vis government functionaries.

A woman's journey in finding her leadership voice can be greatly accelerated by mentoring, building an organized constituency among the women of the community, leadership training, and building federations with other women leaders. These groups become safe spaces for women to actively engage on issues and focus on ways that they can support the sustainable development of their communities. These informal spaces of participation and decision-making for women at the grassroots level can be key ways to strengthen the collective voice of these women and bolster their ability to effectively enact transformative initiatives in their communities.

Awareness-raising processes that target all citizens, including campaigns or dialogues on gender equality, unpaid work, gender-based violence and child marriage, and other key issues that create barriers to a woman's full and active participation in public life are key for women to begin to organize according to their needs, create their own space for reflection and start talking about these issues that are difficult for them to address in their communities. The Hunger Project recognizes that many women living with hunger and poverty have no opportunity to learn their rights and take action to improve their lives. Therefore, our programs create opportunities for women to learn their legal rights as citizens. For example, our strategy in Bangladesh relies on "courtyard meetings," led by "Barefoot Lawyers." In this program, respected women volunteers in each village receive intensive training in the legal and the reproductive rights of women. Given the trust and respect they already have in the village, they bring rights awareness to the doorstep of women currently confined to their homes. The Barefoot Lawyers become a link women living in poverty have to the worldwide movement for social justice, as well as to resources and educational opportunities.

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1 Niño-Torres, Angela. "Female leadership in rural areas: a social innovation review." Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, vol. 359, 2019, pp. 20 - 24.

A woman must also have access to affordable health services, especially access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning support. To ensure that she has time to focus on her own advancement and the development of her community, a woman needs the ability to choose if and when she has children (and with whom) and the spacing of her pregnancies. In order to effectively deliver these services, THP has learned that it is vitally important that healthcare, including reproductive health and prenatal care, nutrition training and access to micronutrient supplements, be available 24/7 within 10 kilometers.

We have also seen that in order to mobilize women to focus on development, it is important to invest in solutions that can reduce the time they spend on unpaid home and care work. At its core, the key solution is an equitable redistribution of time between men and women would allow women more freedom to participate in development processes, economic activity, and decision-making forums. Women's time poverty can also be effectively addressed through community initiatives, such as co-locating public services including child care, ensuring water and sustainable woodlots are nearby, and providing drudgery-reducing technologies such as motorized grain mills.

Finally, we have seen that strategic partnerships are essential to create sustainable and long lasting change in communities. Working with men as strategic allies to change cultural norms that benefit only men is one way to ensure change at the community and system levels. Recently, The Hunger Project and our partners in the Her Choice alliance worked with local governments to end child marriage in 10 countries worldwide. Through this work, we once again saw the importance of holistic, integrated,

and community-led approach. We worked through various strategies simultaneously: from comprehensive sexuality education for boys and girls to creating access to youth-friendly health services, and from influencing policy-makers at local and national levels to setting up safety nets for vulnerable girls and their families: one strategy cannot do without the other. We focused not only on the empowerment and development of girls, but also on an enabling environment together with boys, parents, secondary schools, health workers, traditional leaders, police officers and other inhabitants of their villages. Everyone participates, because girls do not live in isolation.

As a learning organization, The Hunger Project has leveraged our 30 years of implementation experience to refine our approach to mobilizing women. We believe that the inclusive and holistic approach integrated in our strategies is the most effective and sustainable way to ensure development progress, and ultimately, to end hunger and poverty.

Our Recommendations to Foster Women's Leadership to Bring about Transformative Change

In order to foster women's leadership to bring about transformative change, we believe that women need to be involved in all levels of stakeholder engagement—government, donor-driven programming, development implementation. The following recommendations are based on the lessons we have learned in mobilizing women for community-led development.

While these recommendations are focused on the community-level, communities are not

homogenous groups. In fact, even within communities, the resources are sometimes captured by the elites, and power imbalances influence the decision-making process. It is critical that all interventions be tailored to the political, social, and economic context of each community.

For Government:

- Governments should establish participatory democracy at the community-level, where most women living with hunger and poverty are able to participate. There should be established quotas for women's leadership and mandatory mechanisms for inclusive social accountability.

- Remove barriers to women's leadership, meaningful participation, and decision-making. Ensure women and young people in all settings are meaningfully and authentically engaged in decision-making about their own lives and communities where they work.

- Promote enabling contexts where women are part of local government structures, participate directly in the design of public policies, social programs, among others.

- Devolve at least 20% of public resources to the community-level, investing in organizations that carry out local development actions and projects as a strategy to strengthen local communities and organizations. Volunteerism by local citizens can supplement the scarce professional resources of low-income governments – the teachers, nurses and farm extension agents – to ensure everyone can access their services.

- Prioritize gender-sensitive budgeting and allocate more resources towards advancing women and girls rights.

- Uphold and advance sexual and reproductive health and rights as the bedrock of gender equality. Protect and further girls' and women's rights to make informed decisions about their own lives and bodies. Support strong, women-centered health systems that provide universal access to quality sexual and reproductive health services and resources for girls and women in all their diversity.

- Implement awareness raising measures and sensitize community and religious leaders, the media, men and boys and different generations of women to counter social norms that restrict women's rights and participation in public life and decision-making and to take deliberate action to adjust them.

- Promote social and educational policies that lead to new models of masculinity in young people and men. Invest in training, education, campaigns that contribute to the work of the communities and grassroot organizations that are working in the field.

- Disaggregate public service information by gender to help design of public policies in favor of women and girls.

- Put in place protective measures and emergency response services for girls at risk of child marriage and married girls, particularly those suffering from domestic violence. This should include the provision of safe houses and shelters, legal support and redress mechanisms.

- Arm child protection workers at the community-level with an understanding of the risks of child marriage, the mechanisms for reporting cases, and how to connect girls and families to relevant services, such as health, child protection and justice.

For Donor Agencies:

- Invest in the core capacity of grassroots civil society, particularly through organizations of women, youth and other marginalized groups, so that they have a collective voice in decisions that affect their lives. This will require localizing foreign assistance funding beyond the national level and identifying organizations that are building networks in rural areas.

- Increase the quality and quantity of funding available to support women in public life through the creation and financing of specific funds that prioritize direct funding to women's organizations and feminist movements.

- Provide sustained and long term funding for program interventions and strategies to realize the SDGs, specifically SDG Goal 5: Gender Equality.

- Ensure that investments, policies, and programs meet the needs and equally benefit all girls and all women.

- Match gender equality commitments with action and financing.

- Design interventions from a rights-based framework, wherein agencies view women as active citizens, rather than as beneficiaries or vulnerable groups. Furthermore, empowerment needs to be seen as a socio-political process, wherein the interventions address the intersectional nature of gender discrimination and biases that women and girls face.

For Implementers:

- Consider how the nature of women's engagement in development processes evolve over time and any correlation between this evolving relationship and their overall time poverty. According to The Movement for Community-led Development's [latest collaborative analysis](#) of 173 program evaluations, community-led development programs reported a heavy reliance on women's participation individually or through community groups. While this is important for addressing harmful gender norms and ensuring inclusion of women in public and political spaces, it does raise the question of women's time poverty, particularly in the short run. Programs must intentionally reduce drudgery for women and identify ways to redistribute burdens between men and women to allow women greater freedom to engage.

- Facilitate the entry of women into the political pipeline through capacity-development opportunities and awareness raising, and provide targeted support to women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination to participate in public life and politics.

- Increase young women's representation and participation in public life through community outreach, mentoring, capacity development programmes and early exposure to legislative and policy making spaces.

- Implement awareness-raising measures and sensitize community and religious leaders, the media, men and children and the different generations of women to new ways of relating to men, which allows the construction of new social norms that benefit women and men.

- Work with children, youth and men to reflect on the role they play in achieving gender equality and how they can be agents of change in their communities without the responsibility for equality being that of women.

- Conduct a needs-based assessment in each community to understand what areas women would like to enhance their capacity. Following the assessment, interventions should be channeled into projects that meet their needs and interests.

- Promote policies to halt child marriage and strategies to prevent violence against children and child sexual abuse.

- Empower and support families and communities to speak out against damaging social norms that result in gender inequality, childhood violence and child marriage.

- Guarantee the supply and access to health services, especially sexual health and reproductive health for adolescents, young people, and women.

If implemented, the recommendations above would support the mobilization of women leaders in communities experiencing high levels of hunger and poverty. This is a critical step to sustainably ending hunger and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Bangladesh, 2019