



**Empowering Women?**

**CARE's Experience in  
East and Central Africa**

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**Defending dignity.  
Fighting poverty.**

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Photo by Amy Vitale

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# Introduction

— Allison Burden, CARE

“Defining empowerment has been difficult. It is hard to measure the change in people’s lives and determine who actually measures these changes. This requires a level of honesty and trust and our challenge as an organization is to reach that level of trust.”

This information packet is the result of a research undertaken in early 2006 in six countries of East and Central Africa. Research teams in Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda set out to understand the impact of CARE’s work on women’s empowerment.

Although women’s empowerment is a commonly used term, the concept in itself is quite tricky.

Ask yourself the following questions and you will understand why:

- What is empowerment?
- Am I empowered?
- How does empowerment happen?
- Is empowerment a process or a state?
- Who is empowerment for?
- Why does empowerment matter?

As you can see, there are many answers to these questions and a lot depends on who you are, where you come from and the context that you are in. CARE research teams faced the challenge of discussing these questions with men and women, often in a language that does not have a direct translation of the word “empowerment,” in places that have been torn apart by

conflict, where poverty is acute and where social and cultural norms are strongly defended. Sometimes these cultural norms perpetuate existing power structures and stereotypical roles for men and women.

Research findings have highlighted many differences but also significant common denominators across the six countries. The results have challenged us as an organization and as individuals. We have realized areas of change that we need to embrace in order to be more effective in our work with others. And this transformation is not limited to CARE alone. Many of the lessons that came out of the research are pertinent to the development assistance sector/industry as a whole.

This information packet intends to encourage us as development actors to reflect on, question and explore possible ways forward to improve our partnerships with poor women and men and our collective impact upon their lives. CARE seeks a world of hope, tolerance and social justice, where poverty has been overcome and people live in dignity and security. In this context, women’s empowerment is not just a means to an end – it is an end in itself. And it is a goal worth pursuing.

If systems and structures undermine the potential to achieve this end, then we must take on the challenge of addressing the problems that we

have so far accepted as beyond our influence.

As a dear CARE colleague, Elisa Martinez puts it:

“Our project work makes many important contributions to women’s well-being, but it falls far short of the potential impact we could be having if we made some courageous shifts as an organization. For instance, we could move from a short-term and time/project-bound vision to a long-term and program based commitment to achieving strategic impacts.”

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**Our ultimate goal as development workers, regardless of which organization we work for, is to achieve long-term and positive impact on people’s lives.**

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My hope is that this information packet will enable you as an individual who is committed to improving the world, along with your teams and your organizations, to transform the ways we try to do so. It is my hope that this information will inspire you to become more open, reflective, humble, flexible and courageous with the communities that we seek to serve. Our ultimate goal as development workers, regardless of which organization we work for, is to achieve long-term and positive impact on people’s lives.





# The Real Impact of Aid: Do You Ever Achieve Empowerment?

— Catherine Fitzgibbon

Mercy Mugabi now earns twice what she used to after CARE set up a Village Savings and Loans group in her Ugandan village. With her higher income she bought chickens and established a successful egg selling business in what, on the surface, looked like a perfect example of successful aid work. But probe a little deeper and Mercy explains that she actually gives most of her income to her husband, who has used her success to work less himself and now spends far more time and money in the local bar.

Such unintended impacts are fairly common in aid work and challenge development agencies to look carefully at the actual results of their projects both locally and globally. Recognising this challenge and refusing to shy away from it, CARE has embarked on a major three-year Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII), a pioneering study that attempts to measure CARE's global impact in the field of women's empowerment.

"It has become clear to us that many of our development projects merely address the symptoms of poverty but do not necessarily deal with its root causes," says the late Mr. Geoffrey Chege.



"Problems such as conflict, poor governance and inequality are now seen as key factors that undermine the effectiveness of traditional development work."

This means that until women like Mercy in Uganda are empowered

to share decisions about their earnings, CARE's assistance has limited benefit, and perhaps an entirely different impact than what was originally intended. But measuring progress on intangible concepts such as empowerment is quite tricky.



“Poverty largely has a female face. Inequitable relationships between men and women are a deep cause of why poverty is such a problem around the world.”

Kent glenzer

The SII is trying to establish new ways of measuring success that are radically different from traditional quantitative measurements, such as the number of chickens bought or whether income has increased.

“It is about measuring social change, therefore there is a strong focus on listening to communities and creating a dialogue. This is not a tick-box approach,” says Kent Glenzer, director of the CARE Impact Measurement Learning Team, the group leading the SII. “You cannot impose ideas of what empowerment is on women or communities. Such concepts need to be locally defined.”

The SII methodology is being carried out by CARE worldwide, including six countries in East and Central Africa: Uganda, Tanzania, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Burundi.

The research team has been working with CARE staff in the field to explore with communities what empowerment means in different places and how this could be measured in terms that everyone understands.

Not surprisingly, this bold approach has thrown up a host of challenges.

A major issue is how to measure impact at a regional or global level if empowerment means different things in different places. Empowered in Tanzania is defined by some rural women as having a tin roof over one’s head, but in Somalia it means being able to take care of the family, being patient and tolerant.

“It is important to understand and accept that human dynamics are very complex and definitions will differ,” says Elisa Martinez, a researcher on the SII team.

“However, there is a great deal of commonality in many definitions. The critical issue is to work together to develop a consensual understanding that both CARE and communities can work toward,” she added.

To assist field workers, the CARE researchers have identified 23 aspects or “dimensions” of empowerment that can be used to monitor change. These include obvious aspects like girls’ education and women’s ownership of assets, as well as less tangible factors, such as self-esteem and having the skills and confidence to demand basic rights from those in power. But what does this mean for women

like Mercy whose income has increased but control over it has not?

“Let’s face it: it is unlikely that any woman in the world is fully empowered in all 23 dimensions,” says Allison Burden, CARE’s Regional Program Coordinator. “What is truly important is that we move away from seeing issues like women’s empowerment as a project goal and view it more as a continuous process of change that can be measured periodically.”

CARE researchers say that it is unrealistic to expect a two or three year project to fully empower women. For aid agencies such as CARE, whose work is almost exclusively project-based, this poses challenges, as donors and the public alike generally want to see short-term results. What CARE hopes the SII work will provide is a means to identify where programs are having an impact on empowerment and where they are not.

“As certain aspects of empowerment are addressed, new programs can emerge to tackle other areas,” says Burden. “We need to accept that this may take many years and many projects, but



at the very least we will not fool ourselves regarding lasting impact.”

For women like Mercy, future programs may help develop negotiation skills or include husbands and families in sessions on the benefits of joint decision making.

In addition to the question of impact on empowerment, researchers face the challenge of assigning credit for change. In Burundi, CARE recorded the life stories of over 200 men and women, asking them to focus on their experience causing positive change. After 60 interviews, CARE tried to link the stories to project work. However, it became clear there was no correlation between CARE’s work and who claimed success – both participants and nonparticipants shared stories of positive change.

Because achieving success and empowerment is the result of multiple factors, it is important to have a clear understanding of the baseline situation of a target group before a project is implemented. In Somalia, SII research was conducted in both CARE-assisted and control communities. This showed significant differences in the levels of empowerment between women from the two groups.

If empowering women really contributes to reducing poverty, empowerment has to be permanent and not disappear when a program finishes or an agency withdraws.

In Eritrea, the SII team looked at a CARE program that ended two years ago. The study found that savings and loans groups established for women by the project were not only still operational, but new groups had emerged by themselves.

As the late CARE Regional Director Mr. Chege remarks, “The greatest



Photo by Bea Spadacini

lesson that SII has taught us so far is that, although measuring impact in these areas is complex and challenging, it can be done given sufficient time and effort. The test will be to invest time and effort on an ongoing basis. We have to accept that empowerment is about social change, which is a process that never stops.”

## Core Lessons

- There is no one definition of empowerment – it is contextual.
- Quantitative approaches to monitoring and evaluation do not necessarily tell us about lasting impact on people’s lives.
- CARE has developed dimensions of empowerment that could help others.
- Measuring impact on social change is possible over time.
- The project approach and short-term funding undermines our ability to have impact on women’s empowerment.
- Empowerment happens through a variety of causal relationships – attribution to one agency is very difficult.





## How Relevant is Context when Measuring Impact?

— Beatrice M. Spadacini



Fifteen years of civil war and the collapse of the central government have brought Somali women to the forefront of their society. They are de facto breadwinners, traders, entrepreneurs and, on occasion, peacemakers. "Somali women are powerful," says Engorok Obin, Program Advisor for CARE Somalia. "People often think that Muslim women are not strong but in fact in Somalia they control the households and are increasingly involved in clan issues."

But are the women of Somalia actually "empowered" and what does "empowerment" in the Somali context mean? And, to make matters more complex, is an educated woman living in Mogadishu more or less empowered than a Somali woman living in Kenya as a refugee? Though one lives with conflict and uncertainty, the other's experience is bound by her own refugee status, a condition that limits both her freedom of movement and her employment opportunities.

Measuring impact is contextual because social definitions of empowerment vary from culture to culture and, to a certain extent, may clash with individual perceptions and ambitions. For instance, research conducted by CARE on the impact of women's empowerment programs with the predominantly Muslim and pastoralist Afar people of Ethiopia indicates that marriage remains an important rite of passage for Afar women



Photo by Meredith Davenport

“ Poor people themselves should take the lead in determining whether our programs are worthwhile as opposed to us saying they are worthwhile. ”

Kent Glenzer

and is their path to community acceptance and adulthood.

However, marriage cannot happen unless a woman is circumcised.

Although many Afar women understand the harmful health and emotional effects of female genital cutting, they are not prepared to forgo marriage and be marginalized within their own community. They have the medical knowledge to make an informed decision, but they are also keenly aware of the social and economic consequences of not being circumcised.

They weigh the risks and ultimately still choose to circumcise their girls. Even though some women are aware of and wish for certain

rights, because of community pressure and structure, they are unable or unwilling to exercise them.

Research shows that Afar societies are focused on the community as whole, and not on the individual in terms of needs and rights. This is not unique to Afar society but is in fact applicable to many cultures, where collective rights are prioritized over individual ones.

Even in Western cultures, where individual rights are strongly upheld, women are often pressured by society – the collective – to remain young and beautiful. As a result, they increasingly accept the risks and the cost associated with plastic surgery. How is the decision of the Western woman different from that of the Afar woman?

“Afar women define empowerment by being *hilaly* and *dieto*,” explains Asmare Ayele, Team Leader for CARE Ethiopia. “These Afar words mean powerful and capable, respectively. Having *hilaly/dieto* qualities implies reaching the height of social status and acceptance for Afar women, but this position can

be obtained only after marriage, a milestone that, by definition, requires circumcision.”

Legal provisions can either support or hinder the impact of a women’s empowerment program. The fact that, as a result of CARE’s work, the Afar region passed a law that makes circumcision an illegal practice does not prevent Afar women from doing it if they feel it adds value to their lives or protects them from long-term negative social consequences.

Another example is that of an educated Kenyan woman with high self-esteem who chooses to go to the police to report a rape. But if the rape is perpetrated by her husband, the assault is not a crime under the recently passed sexual offense bill, so she is rendered powerless by an unsupportive environment.

Measuring impact in an emergency situation is also quite different from a long-term development context. “Most of our work in south and central Somalia does not address the underlying causes of poverty,” says Obin. “In an emergency setting, we focus on delivering food and water to those in need. There is no time for deep analysis. Merely having a woman’s name on a food distribution list is not tantamount to empowering her in this context. Surely we can do better.”

Furthermore, he adds, targeting women for food distribution may actually increase their vulnerability



Photo by Bea Spadacini



to violence. They could be robbed as they take the food home or asked for a ration by a powerful individual and beaten if they resist compliance.

And when the emergency is over, the context changes and so do power relations. This was the case in Eritrea, for instance, and the same things may happen in Somalia five or 10 years down the road. "In Eritrea, women were heavily involved in the 30-year armed struggle for independence. They fought alongside the men in the bush and were perceived to be equal," says Mohammed Khaled, Assistant Country Director for CARE Eritrea. "This equality vanished the moment the war ended and women were sent back home to take up their traditional roles."

Perceptions also shape and define context. For instance, a married woman in Tanzania and a single woman head of household in the same country are viewed differently by their communities and may value different elements of empowerment in varying degrees.

The married woman may place more value on increased participation in household decision-making, while the single woman household head, who already has household decision-making power, may place more value on gaining increased respect from her community.

The married woman has a higher level of respect from her community compared to a single woman, because social norms approve of marriage. However, research indicates that a single woman who is a member of a CARE Village Savings and Loans group gains increased community respect due to, among other things, her improved financial position.

"Our study shows that women in Village Savings and Loans groups,



Photo by Meredith Davenport

especially single women heads of households, have increased self-esteem, confidence and participate more in social networks as a result of their membership in the group," says Aba Sey from CARE Tanzania. "Their participation in these groups and increased engagement in community activities is contributing to increased recognition by their communities, which is especially important for non-married women household heads."

The six East and Central African countries that participated in this impact study represent very different socio-political contexts, ranging from a stateless country like Somalia to more stable Tanzania, post conflict Burundi and increasingly isolated Eritrea. "The value of this inquiry at the regional

level depends on how effective we are at using the learning from these individual bits of research to draw region-wide lessons about the nature of empowerment, our impact and what we need to improve in CARE programs," says Allison Burden, regional program coordinator.

"A Muslim woman from Somalia and a Muslim woman from the Afar region of Ethiopia may share a value system based on the same religion, but their definition of what it means to be empowered in their own culture will vary according to their personal and social experience," adds Burden. "Measuring the effectiveness of our programs has to take into account all the factors that affect power relations in a given context."

## Core Lessons

- Empowerment means different things in different contexts according to individual perception, social norms, legislation and policies.
- Addressing one area, such as individual perceptions or the legal framework, is not enough to bring about broad social change.
- Development agencies need to understand and explore the context effectively with communities if they are going to contribute to the empowerment of women.
- Emergency situations are particularly challenging contexts for agencies to contribute to the empowerment of women.



# Empowering Women Means Involving Men

— Catherine Fitzgibbon

Ahmed is deeply suspicious of women's empowerment in his tiny village in Ethiopia's Afar region. "It is true. Women are part of the community, but they are weak people," says Ahmed, a pastoralist in this poor, remote region. "Their minds hang down just like their breasts. But now things are changing with the help of outsiders. Nowadays women are free to speak as they wish. Things are getting worse."

Ahmed's opinions are widely held, and not just in the remote villages and poor communities where aid agencies often work. Sometimes his views are shared even by individuals within the aid organisations that are trying to bring about change.

Yet it is widely stated that women's empowerment is critical for tackling poverty and social injustice. This belief underpins many of the U.N. Millennium Development Goals, which aim to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. Unfortunately, Ahmed and many people working in development do not necessarily see any direct correlation between women's empowerment and the attainment of such goals.



"Resistance to change is often because men perceive that women can only be empowered at men's expense," says Pius Okello from CARE Uganda. "Most men do not think that empowering women can bring a win-win situation for everyone in the community, including themselves and their own children."

Gender experts stress that gender is not about women, but about men and women, and the relations between them. Therefore, efforts to achieve gender equity through a process of women's empowerment must include men. Yet CARE's recent research on our impact on women's empowerment in East and Central Africa has revealed that we



“I have no idea whether or not it is important to empower women. What do we mean when we say women? You must be clear about the context you are working in.”

Tony Klouda

have too often failed to include men in programs that aim to shift power relations.

“The study indicates that field offices continue to focus on women’s projects to bring about women’s empowerment, but the issue is really about social change. This must incorporate all members of society, including men,” says Rabab Baldo, gender advisor for CARE Sudan. This narrow approach often excludes men like Ahmed, quoted above, thereby reinforcing their suspicions, and causing resentment and resistance to change.

In one CARE program in Eritrea, men complained they were suffering reverse discrimination because they were not allowed to join savings and loans groups. In Uganda men complained CARE was “turning women into rebels” because they were concerned women were being trained on human rights, gender-based violence, negotiation and

financial management. Field offices are now reviewing programs to include men more fully in all aspects of women’s empowerment activities.

“Another issue that emerges from the study is the failure to consider the political, legal, religious and other factors in a country or community that limit the empowerment of women,” says Elisa Martinez, who leads the CARE study.

Many of CARE’s projects do excellent work at the grassroots level, but benefits may be limited if wider power structures are not also targeted as part of social change. There may be limited benefit for women whose income increases if they are still not allowed to legally own property. Similarly,







really understand the term gender – although many can recite the definition learned from a text book. They don't apply it to projects or to their life," says Eyob Gezae, a gender advisor with CARE in Eritrea. Even when staff understands the problem, he explains, many feel the issue is just too challenging and complex to address.

Facing such complex realities is part of CARE's study. Elisa Martinez says, "Our lack of progress in mainstreaming gender stems from a failure to prioritize the issue. Ensuring staff have sufficient acceptance and understanding of what women's empowerment truly means to apply it in their daily lives is hard. It involves significant resources in staff training and support that can only be achieved if the issue is prioritized by senior management."

supporting women who experience domestic abuse will be undermined if police and legal structures fail to prosecute abusers.

Success in reducing the prevalence of female genital cutting (FGC) in Eritrea was a result of advocacy with Imams and other male elders. "These men effectively hold power in the communities covered by the project. We realised that only if they could be convinced that stopping the practice was not against religious teachings could change possibly happen," explains Mohammed Khaled, CARE's Assistant Country Director in Eritrea.

Inclusive approaches are essential given the widespread resistance

to empowering women. However, challenges are even greater when resistance comes from within the very aid organisations that are trying to bring about change.

"Many staff members do not accept that women's empowerment is an issue or should be a goal. Few

### Core Lessons

- Empowerment is not a zero-sum game.
- Bringing about women's empowerment involves working with men – not just investing in "women's projects."
- Empowerment comes about when we work at various levels: individual, social and legal/political.
- Empowerment is about us. Development agencies need to have high level commitment to invest in staff development if they are to be effective.







Photo by Sarah Bones

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## Learning to Listen both Inside and Outside of CARE

— Catherine Fitzgibbon

The voices of poor women are increasingly reported, but are they actually being heard?

Sound bites and testimonies from women all over the world are used to highlight the success stories of aid agencies or to raise funds from donors and the public, but it remains unclear if the individuals sharing their stories really benefit from this process.

“If an organization claims to be a voice for the poor or to represent them, it is essential that they really do consult and listen to them,” says Bouare Diawary, Assistant Country Director with CARE Burundi. Effective and honest dialogue between aid agencies and the people they claim to represent is critical to really understanding how to help improve the lot of the poor. But this takes time and effort.

“I worked for CARE in Egypt for five years, and when I first started I was only allowed to talk to veiled women from behind a curtain,” says Geoffrey Chege, the late Regional Director for Care in East and Central Africa.

“By the time I left, we were talking face-to-face, often very honestly. It meant we really understood







“ It is not enough to deal with the material side of poverty. You actually have to deal with the political and social forces that development programmes have never really put in the front and centre of our work. ”

Elisa Martinez

these women’s problems. We originally thought they needed improved water supplies, but we later discovered they were more concerned about their security on the way to the water points.”

This discovery, explains the late Chege, changed CARE’s programs and the way staff worked. Their interventions became more relevant.

In Burundi, as a result of CARE’s research on women’s empowerment, some of the original assumptions were challenged through open dialogue with women themselves. For instance, the belief that women

have little or no control over household financial resources was dispelled as it became clear that many have strategies to do so. Women sell their goods at a higher price than they disclose to their husbands and keep the difference for family emergencies.

“One woman told us that she hides some of her goats at her mother’s house without her husband’s knowledge, just in case something happens,” says Kassie McIlvaine, country director for CARE Burundi. And contrary to the original belief that men in Burundi do not recognize the benefits of sharing power with women, the CARE study shows that husbands who share decision-making with their wives report improved economic well-being in the household.

Agencies such as CARE are starting to realize that having a real dialogue with communities often requires greater honesty within the agency itself. “We have to remember that staff who

lead community discussions or consultations are also people,” explains Allison Burden, CARE’s Regional Program Coordinator for East and Central Africa. “We have our own views and prejudices and also have a vested interest in our work being perceived as successful”

In Burundi, a country torn apart by ethnic violence and conflict, CARE realized it was impossible to run effective peace building projects with communities without first addressing the discrimination and ethnic tensions that affected our own staff. “When we looked at the ethnic composition of our staff we found all senior staff to be Tutsis while Hutus had the majority of low paid and unskilled jobs,” Burden explains. “We have made great strides in addressing this.”

In establishing real dialogue with communities, CARE found that trust and openness about each other’s prejudices is crucial. They also found it is vitally important to be prepared to hear things that



Photo by Bea Spadacini



Photo by Nicole Cappello

are difficult and challenging, and respond in a constructive way.

“This is why it is so important to work with staff first to ensure they are aware of their own prejudices and also accept the principle of not just talking, but really listening to communities,” adds Burden. “In Burundi this process has been very intense and extremely successful.”

Some people are natural communicators and good listeners, while others need to develop these skills. Sometimes staff members are willing to listen, but aren’t asking the right questions.

When asked about domestic violence, the women of Zoba Debub in Eritrea were adamant, “No, our husbands do not abuse us.” It was only months later, when trust between CARE staff and the community had been established,

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**Some people are natural communicators and good listeners, while others need to develop these skills. Sometimes staff members are willing to listen, but aren’t asking the right questions.**

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that it became clear the majority of women were regularly beaten. “He only beats me when I have done something wrong. This is right. It is not abuse,” explained one of the

women. Exploring sensitive issues like domestic violence requires time, honest dialogue and the capacity to ask relevant questions in a given context.

“We need a deeper level of analysis on key issues, such as where power lies within the community, what are taboo subjects and other critical social or cultural issues,” says Burden. “A staff person often understands these concepts, but is not always confident or able to apply such knowledge to project work.”

CARE provides training to improve staff ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with communities. A simple approach CARE uses is to ask staff to imagine project beneficiaries as if they were their own neighbours. If a disaster struck, who on your street would you not help, and why would you be reluctant to help?

“This often shows the natural prejudices people have, and helps them examine whose views they are most likely to listen to and respect,” explains Tony Klouda, CARE’s Sexual and Reproductive Health Advisor, who runs such workshops.

“Issues such as gender and women’s empowerment are complex and should not be oversimplified, but that does not mean they cannot be understood by people everywhere,” adds Klouda. “Concepts just need to be put in a language and a way that both staff and communities can relate to.”

### Core Lessons

- We need to be honest listeners.
- We need to be aware of our own assumptions and prejudice.
- We need to be aware of our own power: We might be hearing what people want us to hear.
- Communities are us. We are the communities.





Photo by Nicole Cappello

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Photo by Amy Vitale



## Walking the Talk: Are We Practicing What We Say?

— Nigist Abraha, CARE Ethiopia



Many CARE employees do not consider women's empowerment an issue that needs to be addressed. Few really understand the term gender, although many can recite the definition learned from a text book and they don't necessarily apply this notion to CARE projects or to their lives," says Zewde Ghebretensaye, a gender project

officer with CARE in Eritrea. This is a challenge that many humanitarian organisations face, even those that claim to have "mainstreamed gender" into their organisation.

CARE is confronting this challenge through the Strategic Impact Inquiry – an extensive examination of CARE's impact

on women's empowerment and the organizational factors that contribute to or hinder that impact. "Understanding and support of women's empowerment by CARE staff has emerged repeatedly in all discussions," says Elisa Martínez, Strategic Impact Inquiry coordinator in CARE USA. She further noted, "The effectiveness

Photo by Erin Lubin





“There is a huge variety of women, some of whom understand and are content to remain in their particular social prison, and some of whom want to exchange it for another prison. Development is a very subjective notion.”

Tony Klouda

of any interventions in this area is limited by staff's capacity and commitment, in particular that of senior managers.”

The first step toward increasing commitment is to get staff to examine their own prejudices and understanding of the term women's empowerment. “We need to accept that for many CARE staff, women's empowerment is not seen as a desirable objective. This is especially true for some men,” adds Martínez. For some, she explains, gender is often perceived as women's business, and an issue they feel uneasy discussing.

According to Geoffrey Chege, the late Regional Director for Care in East and Central Africa, often staff fails to see gender equity as an integral component of a rights-based development approach. “We must help all staff see the value and benefits of female empowerment for everyone in society, not just for women,” he says. “We cannot simply assume that everyone accepts or understands why women's empowerment is important.”

This is especially hard when organizations still embody male privilege. CARE country office staff, like that of many other organizations, is predominantly male, a reflection of the broader society in which we work. It is especially challenging to convince staff of the benefits of women's empowerment in society if at the

organizational level CARE does not practice what we preach.

“I don't feel gender equality is a priority issue at the country office level. It is just an option, and one which we are all too busy to take on,” says Salina Sanou, Social Sector Coordinator with CARE Somalia. “We need to give far more attention to it if we want to implement programs that effectively empower women. I have seen far too many women's education programs run by gender insensitive men,” she adds. One of the problems that development workers face is finding the time and resources required to properly address gender issues. Given staff turnover, some programs would need to run gender workshops up to four times a year, every year. Not to mention that, “running gender workshops alone is not enough,” says Martínez. “We need to ensure that the quality of training is consistent throughout, and offer the necessary follow-up support required by staff to deepen and continue learning in their daily work.”

The Strategic Impact Inquiry has enabled countries such as Uganda and Burundi





Many aid workers are fully committed to such principles and believe fervently in their inclusion in development work. Unfortunately, staff often lacks the skills to apply such concepts on a practical level. As a result, some feel that, although important, these issues are just too complex to address.

So what steps should an aid agency take in order to act on their rhetoric?

According to Martínez, there should be senior management commitment to women's empowerment as a critical strategy for ending poverty and achieving social justice. One way to ensure this is to recruit managers who are already committed to this notion.

"Secondly, we need to ensure investment in high quality and consistent staff learning. Workshops alone do not result in mainstreaming women's empowerment either internally or externally." Good gender training programs, she explains, must encourage staff to reflect on their own personal beliefs and behaviours. "Capacity should be practical so that terms like gender lose their intellectual overtones and are presented as real and everyday issues – which they are." Staff should be recognised for trying out new ways of behaving and becoming more self-aware. In other words, people need to stop quoting text books and start reflecting on their own real life experiences.

to build on staff and partners' capacity, and to provide ongoing support for conducting participatory dialogues. "As a result of engaging in dialogue with community members in rural Burundi, our employees now understand that sometimes poor men and women know more about the root causes of their own poverty than university educated staff or experts," says Kassie McIlvaine, country director for CARE Burundi. "For example, one husband, Salvator, told the story of how he realised that since he and his wife made joint decisions about how they used their shared resources, the household was better off."

The SII process is shifting the power balance between CARE staff and community members. "Staff is gradually realizing that they are not better, nor superior to community members and that poverty can only be overcome when we work together as equals to address it," McIlvaine adds.

Sometimes gender issues are addressed only to comply with donor requirements. "Many donor proposals or reports include a

.....  
**...poverty can only be overcome  
 when we work together as equals  
 to address it,"**  
 .....

**- Kassie McIlvaine**

.....  
 section on gender or women's empowerment," explains Sanou. This, she adds, is sometimes completed with a modicum of thought that often barely goes beyond mentioning the number of women or girls reached. This may reflect agencies' willingness to appease donors rather than a real commitment to social change in communities.

It would however be unfair to imply that there is a universal lack of commitment to women's empowerment in aid organizations.

### Core Lessons

- We are all part of the challenge of social change. We too need to change.
- Self awareness is required before we can address social change.
- Investment in skills development is critical in development agencies.
- Leadership commitment is critical in donors and development agencies.
- Transformation is possible.





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