

Guidelines for a Gender Sensitive Participatory Approach

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What is a gender sensitive participatory approach?

The participatory approach in development emerged almost two decades ago and is now widely recognised as a basic operational principle for sustainable development. Participatory approaches and tools are used in baseline surveys and research, and in the planning and implementation of development programmes. The approach requires involving people who are directly concerned or affected by the issue to be addressed in identifying the problem, defining and implementing the potential solution, and, moreover, in decision making and control over resources. The approach proposes a set of tools to facilitate interaction with and analysis by the population.

However, despite the basic principle of participation of all concerned parties, experiences show that the usual 'silent' members of a community remain excluded from the process – and this is often the case with women.

A gender sensitive participatory approach acknowledges the numerous obstacles to women's participation and sets up mechanisms for lifting those obstacles. Particular attention is given to the differential experiences of women and men, and, thus, their different opinions, concerns, needs, and priorities.

Why a gender sensitive participatory approach?

Communities living in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region are facing several environmental, social, economic, and political challenges that are affecting their livelihoods, living conditions, and even their safety. They have to adapt quickly to these changes and build their resilience. Some traditional practices are no longer relevant, new livelihoods options are emerging, new technologies are becoming accessible, and communication channels are opening that facilitate the movement of people. To be able to adapt, communities need the contribution of all their members – and all their members must benefit from the changes. Mountain women are playing an important role in ensuring the survival of their households in the harsh environment of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. However, their contribution is still rarely recognised and they seldom participate actively in important decision making concerning their communities.

Participation can increase the impact of development interventions, increase programme efficiency, and lead to sustainability. Both women and men involved in the process become committed and feel increasingly capable of improving their living conditions.

However, because women and men have different roles, they have different experiences and different needs. Women's perspectives are often overlooked because women rarely fully participate in public forums.

The participatory approach offers a better way to engage stakeholders to take part and share their ideas through interactive learning and sharing. The key element to facilitate the learning process is to use participatory tools that enable people to visualise and understand issues, to communicate with each other, analyse options, and make decisions. Participatory tools can support the dialogue between different stakeholders and provide an opportunity for people with different interests to find common ground to work together.

Involving women in identifying problems, finding solutions, and making decisions helps them to understand the issues at stake, discover and value their own experience, skills, knowledge, and strengths, and increases their self confidence. These are crucial elements of empowerment. It also enhances the visibility of women's capacities and contributions to men and to organisations involved in development and environmental programmes.

Guidelines for a gender sensitive participatory approach

There are several obstacles to women's participation in development and environmental programmes. However, the participation of women is even more important when working in the mountains where women have extensive knowledge and experience in managing natural resources and play an essential role in farm production and food security. Moreover, in many mountain areas, men are very mobile and are away from the household for several weeks or months for either grazing livestock, trading, or working abroad; thus, mountain women have been taking over men's responsibilities.

Many experiences have shown that the participatory approach, as it is usually utilised, is not always gender sensitive because women's participation in discussions and decision making is usually limited. Although we have very

limited capacity to affect gender roles and power relations in the short term, we can put in place mechanisms and create an environment that favours their access to information, expression of opinion, and involvement in decision-making processes.

Being aware of gender roles and power relations

While collecting and analysing information, discussing issues, identifying solutions, negotiating, implementing programmes, and making decisions, we need to be constantly aware of the differential experiences and perspectives that women and men may have, and how these differences can affect the issue to be addressed and the outcomes of the planned intervention.

Provide equal opportunity to participate in the process

Both women and men should have the opportunity to participate. However, their conditions and capacities may be very different. In some cases, it is not possible for women and men to sit and discuss together due to social and cultural barriers.

Meaningful participation is possible

- ...when women have access to information
- ...when they are expressing their views
- ...when their views are listened to and discussed
- ...when they ask questions for clarification
- ...when they can influence decision making
- ...when decision making integrates their concerns
- ...when decisions addressing women's concerns are implemented

In most rural communities in South Asia, women are usually withdrawn from the public sphere because of lack of confidence in dealing with their male fellows and with new people. Considering these constraints it is usually more effective to work with women in separate groups in the beginning. Working in separate groups and the use of participatory tools can help women to build confidence through interactive learning and exercising collective power.

Time and place should be suitable for women

An appropriate time and suitable place are crucial for the full and active participation of women. Often the time for meetings is set by men, who usually have more free time than women, or free time at different times than women. Facilitators must choose a time when both women and men are available; or conduct different meetings for women and men at times convenient to both.

The venue for the meeting is just as important. Men are more comfortable meeting in public spaces, while women may feel very uncomfortable in the same place. When separate meetings are held with women, it may be important to choose a place where they feel free to speak without being afraid of intrusion by men: it is not unusual to see a man observing a session for women and interrupting to impose his idea or to contest a women's view.

Use local language

In the Hindu Kush-Himalayas, very few women have access to education and their mobility is often quite limited; whereas men are travelling more and are, therefore, more exposed to different languages. Facilitators must be aware that the national language may not be understood by mountain communities. Thus, to enhance the participation of both women and men, meetings should be conducted in the local language.

Collect sex disaggregated data and conduct gender analysis

Sex disaggregated data are important to identify the gaps, and gender analysis helps to understand women's access to and control over resources, labour patterns, resources use patterns, the status of women's rights, and the distribution of benefits between and among women and men. It is not enough to analyse women's priorities; their views and concerns should also influence the objectives of the development initiatives. Gender disaggregated data must be used to identify problems and priorities. The benefits and costs of an intervention should also be disaggregated by sex to understand the effects of the intervention on different groups of people. Sex disaggregated data is an essential part of gender analysis, which should be carried out at all stages of the project cycle,

Integrate gender perspective in participatory tools

Each participatory tool should integrate a gender perspective: the usual 'community' or 'household' approach tends to reflect the views and interests of men from the dominant group, more than of women.

Obstacles to women’s participation in public meetings and decision making

- Ignorance and illiteracy, which is emphasised by both women and men.
- The mockery, criticism, and brutal attitudes that confront women who speak out.
- Distrust from development workers and other members of the community.
- Traditional roles and power divisions.
- The monopoly by men over information and resources.
- Meetings are organised in places and at times not suitable for women.
- Meetings are conducted in a non-local language.
- Lack of access to or control over financial resources.
- Lack of solidarity among women or conflict in the community.
- Undue pressure on women to succeed.
- Lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem.
- Ignorance of their rights.

Adapted from Leduc (2006)

A gender sensitive participatory approach encourages the participation of both women and men, either together or separately. It is an excellent way of collecting sex disaggregated data and views of both women and men. Participatory tools, for example, social mapping, wealth ranking, the use of VENN diagrams, and transect walks, are most appropriate for poor, marginalised and illiterate people (mainly women), because these tools enable them to visualise and understand the issues, communicate with each other, analyse options, and make decisions.

Avoid using general concepts and language like ‘farmers’, ‘traders’, ‘herders’, ‘communities’, and so forth. Instead, state precise who is being talked about: ‘women farmers’, ‘male traders’, ‘male herders’, and ‘wealthy women’. Try to highlight differences and similarities in opinions, viewpoints, experiences, and expectations of women and men.

Ensure that the tools chosen are culturally, socially, and politically appropriate to the situation. In some societies, for example, women are not supposed to discuss public issues openly in front of men from their family, or with men from outside. This has created a barrier in communication and led to the opinions and experiences of women being

neglected. The use of participatory tools in separate women and men’s groups with the help a female facilitator may be necessary to address this situation.

Participatory tools for gender analysis

There are many participatory tools that can be used for gender analysis. Development practitioners and facilitators may use these tools to analyse stakeholders; explore power relations and discrimination; raise awareness on different issues; devise action plans; and monitor and evaluate development initiatives. The table below presents the key steps in gender analysis and potential tools for conducting the analysis.

Gender analysis step	Participatory tool
1. Condition and Position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wellbeing ranking • Participatory map • VENN diagram • Daily activity calendar • Transect walk • Seasonal calendar • Focus group discussion • Force field analysis • SWOT analysis
2. Division of Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily activity profile • Seasonal calendar • Transect walk • Focus group discussion
3. Access and control over resources and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource mapping • Wellbeing ranking • Rich picture • Focus group discussion
4. Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility map • Flow diagram • Stakeholder analysis • Level of participation • Power relations • Focus group discussion
5. Practical and strategic needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Venn diagram • Visioning exercise • Mapping of gender-based division of labour • Influence and importance matrix

Checklist for gender sensitive participatory approach

1. What is the respective knowledge, skills, and experience of women and men related to the topic to be discussed? (Think about which activities are carried out by women and men.)
2. Do women usually participate in public meetings and discussions?
3. What are the potential obstacles to women's participation in public meetings?
4. What can be done to overcome these obstacles?
5. Why do women not want to participate? What can be done to accommodate them?
6. When women participate in a meeting, how do men regard their participation? How do they react when a woman expresses a view that is discordant with theirs?
7. Are there women who are more vocal, seem more confident, or who can influence men's decision? Which ones? Why are they more vocal (age, education, marital status)?
8. How much free time do women have to participate in a meeting?
9. What time during the day is more suited for women to meet?
10. Where is it more suitable for women to meet?
11. In which setting is it easier for women to participate? What are the conditions that would make it easier for women to participate (women-only group, group discussion facilitated by a woman, other conditions)?
12. What is the level of education of the women? Would they be able to understand written material?
13. Which language do the women speak? Can they understand and speak the language you use?
14. Do women and men have the same point of view about the issue?

Additional reading

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