

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is part of a wider study by ODI that reflects on the work of the British Council in relation to the empowerment of women and girls between 2010 and 2015, generating recommendations on ways to improve on the existing offer through the identification of strengths, gaps and opportunities in this area. An important dimension of the analysis relates to the British Council's use of its cultural relations approach in its work on gender equality – that is, how much it shows a deep understanding of the context, promotes trust, works in partnership and fosters participation.

The study analyses impact with respect to five outcome areas for women and girls' empowerment to tackle gender inequality:

- (i) increased awareness and agency
- (ii) fairer access to opportunities and resources
- (iii) dialogue, collaboration and collective action
- (iv) supportive policy and institutional reform;
- (v) changes in attitudes, beliefs, practices and discriminatory social norms

Projects supported by the British Council that promote leadership and participation presented in this brief have made important contributions across different empowerment outcomes.



WOMEN AND GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE PROMOTION OF LEADERSHIP SPACES AND PARTICIPATION

Such initiatives have built awareness and agency; promoted collective action to raise women's (and men's) voices in public spheres to promote gender equality; and, importantly, have contributed to generating an enabling environment for women and girls with more supportive institutions. This is particularly important in contexts in which the British Council works where women face significant barriers to participation, so these projects contribute to breaking down some of them. While the scale of the projects is relatively small, they have created useful replicable models with the potential to be expanded.

Several projects supported by the British Council globally offer opportunities for women and girls to build their skills, confidence and capacity for leadership and active participation in public life. By working with different types of partners – from parliamentarians to universities – the British Council seeks to facilitate learning and advocacy for gender equality and to reduce discrimination. Here we present three interesting examples of such work.

ACTION FOR STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITIES IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS (PWR), UGANDA (2014–16)

This EU-funded project (£322,264) was implemented by the British Council in partnership with Action for Development (ACFODE), a national civil society organisation (CSO) with a focus on gender, in four local district governments in northern Uganda. Its overall purpose was to contribute to strengthening the participation of women in social and economic life and to promote a society where women and men have equal access to opportunities, resources and government development. The project worked to increase understanding about women's rights among 140 elected women councillors, 140 social actors (clan leaders, religious and opinion leaders), 1,600 women from grassroots level, 80 district and sub-county local government officials and 40 CSOs working in the area of women's rights.

Promoting Women's Rights (PWR) raised awareness about women's rights and particularly on the Convention for the Elimination of All form of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and as a result participants formed CEDAW committees in their communities. Through these, women leaders and social activists engaged in sensitisation activity, monitoring and reporting of abuses against women. The project also focused on increasing women councillors' engagement on gender and human rights processes by developing their leadership skills. The project also worked to increase women's participation in social enterprises within their communities.

PWR made some contributions at the policy level. One of the outputs was a policy brief presented to the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development as an input into the broader work of addressing women and girls' rights in the country. It addressed issues related to property ownership; domestic violence; imbalances in the ratio of female to male teachers in primary and secondary school; and lack of separate latrines for girls and how this affected the dropout or attendance of girls in many districts. The brief was informed by discussions emanating from the project at district level, and some of the recommendations stemming from it resulted in positive changes at the local level. This illustrates how evidence from the work undertaken at the community level can be used to leverage decision-makers' political will to contribute to change. While several of the issues still need to be addressed, this dialogue with decision-makers was found to be useful.

Through discussions with beneficiaries, it was possible to identify positive results in relation to increased awareness and agency for women participants. For example, one leadership training participant said:

I did not know what to exactly do as a councillor and feared to even [visit] the sub-county office until I participated in training in leadership development skills. The training developed my confidence in public speaking, lobbying and advocacy. After the training, I realised I have a role to monitor government programmes and ensure effective service delivery for the people I represent at the council.

Partners and beneficiaries had a positive view of the British Council's engagement, as it builds trust with its partners in the process of implementation. It also consults its partners and stakeholders in order to establish their interests before involving them in implementation. This is reflective of the cultural relations approach. Stakeholders and staff also felt the British Council was transparent and honest and respected the views of everyone and involved. This has supported women's awareness and agency, as well as strengthening collective action for women to advocate and participate publicly for their improvement.

The British Council, especially through the PWR project, has contributed to enhanced women's participation, ownership and management of social enterprises in Apac, Oyam, Nebbi and Pader districts. PWR beneficiaries have established liquid soap-making, piggery, poultry and bakery enterprises as well as village savings and loans associations, among other initiatives. Although it may be too early to determine the impact of social enterprises on women, the project is increasing the number of women participating in, owning and operating various business enterprises, granting them fairer access to opportunities and resources. Findings thus also showed these enterprises were contributing to increased access to resources and opportunities to generate income by women in local communities.



WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN PUBLIC LIFE (WPIPL), MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (2012–PRESENT)

The WPIPL programme was funded by the British Government’s Arab Partnership Initiative in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, where it ended in 2015, and later extended to Jordan, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where it will conclude in March 2017. The purpose of the programme is to build women’s capacities and broad-based support to increase their active involvement in public life, including national and local political processes. In each country, the project was implemented through three main strategies: developing community leaders, especially women, aged 18–30 in marginalised populations; supporting capacity building of CSOs to conduct action research and to influence policy and practice; and learning, networking and coalition-building- this component aimed to provide platforms for experience sharing and learning between the four countries through regional learning events.

In Egypt, WPIPL was implemented in partnership with a group of CSOs and helped women engage with policy-makers by sustaining their effort at advocating for a women quota in the parliamentary elections to be included in the constitution. As the British Council deputy director pointed out:

WPIPL showed us we could deliver a programme very effectively in getting women closer to political developments in Egypt. We needed UK expertise to do that. The timing was right, there was an entry point to actively and publicly work in that area that is sensitive for Egypt and foreign organisations.

One participant stressed that it was very hard to change perceptions around women in politics in Egypt: ‘Women are seen as voters and not to be voted for. Electoral results show this. WPIPL tried to challenge this but social and cultural norms around women in politics are very hard to change.’ Another beneficiary suggested women in Egypt did not have adequate legislation to secure the protection of women’s rights and guarantee such rights. She also said there was a cultural problem resulting from male dominance. For her, ‘[t]he programme came as a surprise. It was useful as it had legislation at the core of action research,’ which, as a lawyer, she thought important. She added, ‘[f]or the community at large the programme came at a critical time, democratic transformations, elections, new legislation. This necessitated building the capacity of young people to realise this goal and serve the community.’ She also noted how, as a result of the action research, she was able to witness the change in the mind-set, abilities, perceptions and concepts of the group working with her. For example, while previously some of her collaborators did not believe in women’s rights, they now advocate for them.

In Tunisia, WPIPL was delivered in partnership with the Coalition of Women’s Organisations, composed of 30 CSOs across Tunisia. The focus group discussion with members of the coalition highlighted some important findings for this study. Firstly, while women’s political participation is low in Tunisia, the female president of the coalition emphasised the need to support women’s economic empowerment and address the challenge of unemployment and poverty in the country, therefore providing women with means of survival: ‘In some rural areas women work in agriculture as well as in construction but they are paid half the money men are paid and work mostly informally.’ Secondly, she suggested a need to challenge social and cultural norms to avoid the clash between reformed laws and an unchanged mentality among average citizens.

The programme raised awareness through workshops within the community, and locally led social action projects (SAPs) made women more active and aware of the public space. One beneficiary said that, after taking the workshop, she decided to make women more aware of the electoral process in her community and address the corruption observed within institutions. However, the limited funding provided through the SAPs could not sustain some activities, such as electoral campaigning of women candidates. Finally, the male communication officer of the coalition stressed the need to get men involved in activities aimed at empowering women: ‘I am a man and I want women to get involved and be equal. We need to work to train young men and young leaders in their local communities’.

The project contributed to raise awareness and agency of women it reached, and it made some initial progress to improve social norms that typically exclude women from public life, while contributing to institutional change by using robust evidence and civil society engagement.



ENHANCING GENDER AWARENESS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF WOMEN ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES IN THE FEDERAL AND REGIONAL PARLIAMENTS OF ETHIOPIA (2010)

This project, also known as the Women Parliamentarians Project, had two aims: to enhance women parliamentarians’ skills to make them effective contributors to legislative and policy formation within the federal and regional parliaments; and to increase male parliamentarians’ awareness of gender issues so that they become positive partners in pursuing gender in development. This DFID-funded project was a collaboration between the Active Learning Centre (UK), the British Council (Ethiopia) and the Women, Children and Youth Select Committee in Ethiopia’s federal parliament. The project first trained a core group of trainers (men and women) drawn from the federal parliament. They in turn gave training to 105 elected women MPs (including some elected representatives from the regions). 70 male MPs received training in gender. A mentoring scheme involving experienced MPs designed to support newly elected women MPs was also introduced.

The project design, its approach and the results obtained have been praised by women leaders in parliament, trainers and trainees at both federal and regional level and participants in the mentoring scheme. All participants interviewed for the project evaluation in 2011 noted that the activities delivered provided them with practical skills and the technical capacity to speak in public, address and understand media and mainstream gender and concepts of women empowerment. The project activities reached almost all female MPs at federal level and 17 MPs and women’s representatives from the region. However, fund limitations meant only 70 male MPs were trained in parliament. This restricted the ability to scale up project activities at regional level.

The project provided male and female MPs with an opportunity to obtain a common understanding of issues related to gender, such as discussing gender relations within society and the household and learning from each other’s experience.

The project made significant progress towards achieving the expected outcomes such as providing MPs with useful skills on how to mainstream gender. Both male and female MPs gave examples of how their practice regarding gender mainstreaming had changed as a result of the training, for instance by using the gender checklists developed to ask appropriate questions of ministries and demanding disaggregated data in order to assess gender impact.

Women MPs had increased their levels of knowledge of gender issues and significantly increased their ability and their confidence levels when speaking in public. Preliminary findings showed the training has had an impact on women’s ability to intervene and participate in the parliamentary process. For example, standing committees asked for reports and plans to be redrafted because they lacked a gender perspective. Female MPs also demonstrated outstanding performance during the mock debate held as part of the mentoring scheme, as well as demonstrating strong participation skills during several relevant public hearings and discussions. One female MP interviewed noted, ‘[w]e would like to take this to the next level, acquire skill in monitoring gender mainstreaming to supervise progress in the various ministries and on the ground.’

A British Council staff member involved in this project interviewed expressed that prior to the project, women MPs felt they were not representing their constituency well and in order to do better they knew they would benefit from additional training to develop their skills to communicate across parties, on how to engage in debate and on how to argue a case. Thus, through this programme, the British Council trained and enabled women parliamentarians to write a speech, to gather evidence for their speeches and provided information about potential sources of evidence. The British Council also supported training for all MPs on women’s empowerment and gender mainstreaming and the mechanism was adapted to be rolled out to regions, woredas (districts) and kebeles (villages).

This is a good example of how a British Council-supported project can advance several of the strategic outcome areas identified by the framework as contributing to women and girls’ empowerment: it improved women’s awareness and agency – in this case by supporting women to participate politically; it built their opportunities and resources: these women now have a very different professional development trajectory; it promoted dialogue, collaboration and collective action by providing the skills and knowledge to women MPs and to their male counterparts to work in favour of gender mainstreaming and more transparent legislation. Finally, it very clearly helped build a supportive policy environment for women by generating a more gender-sensitive context with female and male MPs who are now in a strategic policy decision-making position and can use their newfound understanding of gender issues to improve policy and legislation.



The projects explored in this brief present different aspects of the British Council's work to promote women's – particularly young women's – leadership and participation. Each of them works differently, forming specific partnerships to achieve its objectives and each has a distinct level of engagement with government and civil society partners to achieve its aims of promoting leadership, stronger knowledge about gender equality and relevant spaces for women and men advocates to promote gender equality. They all, however, make important contributions to several of the empowerment outcome areas. For example, the PWR's social enterprise component had an important focus on promoting economic opportunities for women. The women MPs project contributed to strengthening women's voice and agency by developing their capacity to speak in public and increasing their knowledge of gender equality issues to be better able to bring a voice to them. WPIPL and the women MPs project provided important support to women's political engagement, particularly in challenging institutional, legal and policy contexts that were not working in favour of gender equality. In many of these programmes, participating women and women's advocates – which include men – have been brought together to act collectively and give a voice to gender equality issues and promote them in practice.

