

Promoting girls' participation in development

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CHILDREN'S participation in all matters that affect them is absolutely critical- indeed it is a fundamental human right. Yet the participation of children continues to be one of the least prioritized areas of development programming, and is generally treated as an 'add-on' or specialized / sectoral issue.

Furthermore, in cases where children's participation is integrated into programs, the participation of girls is not promoted consistently, and the strategic engagement of girls throughout the entire program cycle is largely neglected. While individual initiatives have provided excellent models for mainstreaming gender-sensitive children's participation, more often than not the focus remains on developing children's potential to be future community and world leaders, overlooking their incapacity to contribute to present-day life in their families, communities and nations.

In many cases girls see their participation as a privilege, a rare opportunity to be on an equal footing with boys, and a chance to exercise their right to express their views and share in decision-making processes. For many girls, especially those in rural settings, the opportunity to participate in family discussions and contribute to planning a local initiative is a fairly new concept that may conflict with or challenge local cultures and customs. This highlights the need to engage not only girls, but also their parents, siblings, and indeed the entire community, in a process of recognizing the value of girls as individuals, and identifying the tremendous contribution they can make to family and community life.

The participation of boys and girls in development programs has proven to increase the efficacy and sustainability of programs. Moreover, research in World Vision's Area Development Programs has indicated there is a clear link between children's capacity to participate and their capacity to protect themselves from exploitation: when children understand their rights and responsibilities, they are empowered to speak up and take action when their rights are violated. This finding has particular importance for girls, who are typically the most marginalized and exploited members of their communities. Promoting the participation of girls helps to uncover situations in the community requiring greater prevention and protection measures, thus improving the quality of life not only for girls but also for the entire community.

Overcoming barriers

Creating opportunities for girls' participation should not, as some might think, be promoted at the expense of or to the exclusion of boys, but it must be seen as a means for establishing a level playing field. In Guatemala, World Vision's program *Sembradores de Esperanza* (Sowers of Hope) works in indigenous communities, seeking to develop the abilities of boys and girls to advocate together for children's rights, and address violence against children and youth. Ramirita, a 78 year-old

community volunteer in one of these communities, commented to World Vision staff that 'we must train boys and give them the opportunity to accept girls as leaders.' It is only through fostering an environment where boys and men value girls that girls will ever be able to fully realize and exercise their rights.

Overcoming the barrier of parental attitudes is one of the greatest challenges girls face in exercising

their right to participate in family and community life. Creating opportunities for girls to participate in all spheres of life can be a major challenge, but has been proven to have a significant positive impact on the community.

There are additional challenges to developing effective programmes for boys and girls to engage with people of influence, such as policy makers, *yet* there are many examples to draw hope from. Liridona, age 13, is involved in World Vision Kosovo's Kids for Peace program as a group leader, mobilizing children to be peacemakers and overcome ethnic divisions. She says that 'before, we [girls] did not have conditions or experience for participation-maybe in the family we were not given the right to participate, or even in the community or my country. And there were no big changes in the family, but now my opinion counts, and I am very happy that I have the right to participate.'

The challenge for the future is to move from promoting children's participation and gender transition as sectoral issues, to a place where they are integral components of development programming. In so doing, girls and boys will begin to see their opportunity to participate as a means of exercising their rights as equal citizens of their communities and nations, rather than as a special privilege. .

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