

# Social Mobilization: Women Organizing for Positive Change

Gender Matters



round the world, women are joining together to improve their lives. In the process, they are identifying ways society fails to give them an equitable stake. They are questioning community institutions, laws, and customs. Working with others in their communities, women are challenging long-held attitudes, behaviors, and traditions. They are doing this by generating widespread awareness and by mobilizing for action.

Such advocacy efforts often are described as “social mobilization campaigns.” Social mobilization campaigns can address a variety of issues in development. However, those that take on issues of concern for girls and women in particular can be the first step in addressing institutionalized gender inequities that impair development. A campaign serves as a means for the disenfranchised to articulate their concerns and sensitize people at all levels of society.

## Three Campaigns

In 1992, a group of women in India, frustrated with men’s widespread alcoholism, joined together to ban *arrack*, the prominent alcoholic beverage, in their village. This ignited an anti-alcohol campaign that spread from one village to other districts and finally across the state of Andhra Pradesh in just 12 months. Three years later, the movement had gathered such momentum that the state government was forced to concede to the demand for prohibition.

In Senegal, a group of women banded together to promote women’s health by ending the practice of female genital cutting. Their success in banning the practice in their village encouraged women in other villages to strive for the same. The movement eventually caught the attention of the country’s president, and a practice that before was accepted without question is now the subject of

nationwide debate. In both cases, a relatively small group of women with a shared passion united around an issue of concern to effect sustainable change within their larger communities.

In Malawi, a campaign to increase girls’ school participation was initiated by the national government. Officials identified the low participation rates of girls in school as a problem in their country and sought assistance from USAID. After determining that most community members wanted change, the government and USAID created a program with several components, one of which was a social mobilization campaign. The campaign, started in 1993, was designed to mobilize communities to increase girls’ enrollment rates. The goal was to use effective community participation techniques in the research, formulation, and dissemination of messages focused on girls’ education. Two years after the campaign began, the percent increase of girls enrolled exceeded that of boys for the first time.

Although these campaigns started differently, all three were successful in raising awareness and initiating broad changes in society. Why? In each case, transformation was driven by the desire of community members and stakeholders to institute change. They were ultimately the ones who took ownership of the problem as well as the subsequent campaigns.



Photo Courtesy: Creative Associates International, Inc.

Malawian children and adults, both female and male, gathered together to display their public support for girls' education.

### The Seed of a Movement

Frequently, the issues that drive a social mobilization campaign are not new but have evolved over a long time. Widespread alcoholism does not happen overnight. Female genital cutting has been practiced in many countries for hundreds of years. Trends in educational attainment are apparent only over many years. Although individuals may become frustrated with these problems, a campaign will develop only when a person or group of people takes the initiative to translate individual frustration into collective action.

In Malawi, the government set the process in motion through Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE), a program supported by USAID funding and technical assistance. GABLE, in collaboration with local community members, designed and implemented a social mobilization campaign to increase girls' participation at the primary school level.

In India and Senegal, women initiated campaigns using nonformal education programs as a springboard for action. In India, the idea was born in a village literacy program. This program provided an environment in which the women felt at ease discussing their concerns. Although social issues were not officially a part of this program, informal conversations among the women soon unveiled a shared concern about the prevalence of men's alcoholism in their community. Empowered by a collective desire for change, they ceased to think of themselves as helpless victims of abusive alcoholics and took action. The story of their success in banning alcohol in the village became part of the official curriculum for literacy programs in other villages. This sparked the growth of the movement.

In Senegal, the campaign was catalyzed by a non-traditional education course developed by an NGO, Tostan (which means

"breakthrough" in Wolof). The course taught women reading, writing, and math. Women also learned technical skills for implementing community improvement programs to bring about positive change in the family and village. The modules of the program incorporated elements of traditional culture, ensuring that it was relevant and interesting for the participants. The modules also included a strong human rights component.

As with India's literacy program, this course provided an environment conducive to open discussion. Women who had been reluctant to express their ambivalence about female genital cutting became more confident when learning that others shared their doubts. The course also educated women specifically about the health risks of this practice and provided technical guidance for developing a campaign.

In all three cases, individuals joining forces for change created the critical mass essential to social transformation. Realizing that they were not alone in their concerns, women in these three countries felt empowered and committed to work together for change.

### From Seed to Full Flower

The more widespread a social mobilization campaign becomes, the more likely it is to generate national dialogue and subsequent modification of social norms. A nationwide campaign can be planned meticulously in advance. The success of the girls' education campaign in Malawi was in large part due to formalized preliminary research, planning, and pilot testing. This helped guide the campaign design's three components: field worker training, community-based sensitization, and village-based initiatives to address constraints

to girls' education. The campaign was set up also to include mass communication interventions, a role model initiative to inspire primary school-age girls, and involvement of key stakeholders from the government and private sector.

A wide-reaching campaign can also develop from the momentum of a relatively small protest or movement. The Senegalese women in Malicounda Bambara, the village that initiated the campaign, drew on what they learned in Tostan's two-year basic education program to convince others in the community to agree to end female genital cutting. Their success reinforced a movement that gathered strength as it spread to other communities. As in Malawi, Senegal's campaign growth also was facilitated by mass communications interventions—in this case media attention. Although media coverage was generated in part because of the movement itself, it was also actively solicited as part of the campaign strategy.

In India, the campaign did not benefit from any advance planning. It shares similarities with the Senegal campaign, however, because the actions of women in one village emboldened others to follow their lead. The print media quickly caught on to the story, which drew more people into the movement. This snowball effect finally forced the hand of the government, which until then had been reaping the benefits of the revenue from alcohol.

### Winning Over Resisters and Those with Influence

Efforts to transform attitudes and behaviors that underlie long-standing social norms will inevitably meet resistance. Although an issue may be particularly compelling for women, sustainable change depends on the involvement of the entire

community—and that includes those with influence, those who are ambivalent, and those who might resist change. Social pressure can be a powerful force. People who are indifferent about an issue are more likely to join a movement if enough people have done so before them. Resisters—those who have a stake in maintaining the status quo—can eventually become advocates if they are brought into the fold, included for the positive contributions that they can offer, and shown what they stand to gain from the change.

In Malawi, GABLE worked with community members to identify key target groups with influence. These included community leaders, school committee members, and teachers who could affect decisions about the education of young girls. Representatives from these groups participated in community-based training programs on techniques for mobilizing communities. These groups then worked to sensitize parents and the wider communities about the importance of girls' education.

The GABLE campaign also included groups that might otherwise have resisted the girls' education initiative. Islamic teachers, for example, were apprehensive that formal education for girls would come at the expense of their religious training. When asked, however, the teachers were proud to be involved. They helped explore mutually beneficial solutions and became advocates for girls' education.

The anti-alcohol campaign in India started with a group of women working to ban *arrack* against the will of men in the village. However, enforced sobriety made men realize they could live without alcohol. They also realized the destructive force alcohol had on their families, friendships, and communities. This set the stage for dialogue between women and men and the growth of the movement. Mixed groups gathered at community meetings to discuss the effects of alcoholism. Most village men agreed with the women, while those who initially resisted were shamed into giving

The following is an outline of the basic structure of Malawi's social mobilization campaign to increase girls' attendance in primary schools. Those involved in the campaign did the following:

1. Defined the issue.
2. Identified the specific causes of the problem (through the use of questionnaires and interviews and through participatory methods such as focus groups and role-playing).
3. Identified target groups—those who were influential and those who would be either positively or negatively affected by change resulting from the campaign.
4. Developed a simple message that captured the essence of the social mobilization campaign.
5. Customized a campaign strategy appropriate for the issue and the country context by examining cultural themes and available technology.
6. Did a pilot test and refined the campaign where necessary.
7. Once the campaign started, monitored and assessed its progress, and adapted the campaign where appropriate.

up alcohol themselves. This led to a village oath, sustained by social enforcement, to ban alcohol. Gradually, villages rebuilt their traditional strong sense of community that was being destroyed by alcoholism.

The women who initiated the campaign in Senegal emphasized the negative health consequences of female genital cutting—which was not common knowledge—over its value as a tradition. Once they became aware of the dangers, the women engaged in dialogue with their husbands and other men, the *imam* (the Muslim religious leader), and the village chief. They convened meetings to discuss the issue and shared personal stories about problems resulting from this procedure. Once the health repercussions became more widely

understood, many influential and well-respected leaders became advocates of banishing the practice. Soon, entire villages pledged, through a formal public declaration, to end female genital cutting. As in India, this public display of commitment marked a significant shift in convention that discouraged dissenters through social pressure.

### Making an Impact

Changing attitudes and behaviors that may be deeply embedded social norms is an ambitious task and a gradual process. Ultimately, it is up to local individuals and communities to decide what is not an acceptable part of their lifestyles. In social mobilization campaigns, women or other groups become agents of change to address societal problems, making them active participants in development. By raising awareness

and generating discussion among *all* people affected by an issue, social mobilization can be the first step in the process of improving not only the lives of women, but societies as a whole.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**India:** International Center for Research on Women (ICRW):  
(202) 797-0007.  
E-mail: nduvvury@icrw.org

**Malawi:** Creative Associates International, Inc. (CAII):  
(202) 966-5804.  
E-mail: janet@caii-dc.com

**Senegal:** Molly Melching, Tostan, B.P. 326, Thies, Senegal:  
(221) 951-1051.  
E-mail queries to Imrana Khera:  
ikhhera@cedpa.org