



Strategy for greater inclusion of women and girls in political and governance processes

Background

The Voices for Change (V4C) programme works to bring about improvements in the lives of adolescent girls and women in Nigeria by supporting the enabling environment which shapes the way in which they live. V4C believes that greater inclusion of girls and women and their interests and needs in political and governance processes can lead to social change and a more enabling environment for young women. A key element to addressing inequality is to ensure that oppressed groups can participate fully in the decisions that shape their lives.

V4C's approach

V4C's approach to work with public institutions and civil society has focused on:

- *Attaining stronger laws*, to reinforce positive behaviours and contribute to sending a message that discriminatory and violent attitudes are not accepted¹.
- *Social platforms pushing collectively for gender equality*, women's political participation and leadership, intensifying collective voices and actions for change to challenge a context where it is thought that women are not supposed to lead.
- *Increasing government spending on services for girls and women*, through which the conditions of lives of girls and women can be improved.

The power to legislate may fall on legislators but outside influences can prompt action. As well as directly engaging with key offices, V4C has also stimulated external pressure through various media products such social media and the 50/50 campaign to instigate the passage of laws (Violence Against all Persons Prohibition Bill and Gender Equalities Opportunities Bill).

With the aim of provoking society-wide change at scale, V4C has worked closely with a broad range of partners, key influencers, social movements and 'leaders of tomorrow' to harness momentum. Activities have included convening diverse clusters of actors (such as students, female politicians, media practitioners, religious and traditional leaders), and helping them to build their collective voice and agenda on women's leadership and political inclusion.

Inclusiveness is a key principle in V4C's approach to working with formal institutions and civil society. For example, at the local level, women from different party lines, generations and socio-economic backgrounds have been brought together under a common agenda. Boys and men have also encouraged to take an active part in promoting change. Men's alliances with women's

¹ V4C identified for support two Bills that had gained considerable traction with both the legislature and civil society organisations.

groups were strengthened as a way to promote equal opportunity and legal reform to prevent gender based violence and leadership discrimination.

Opportunities to exercise empowerment can be difficult in settings where pervasive discrimination is present. V4C believes that each adolescent girl and woman with the confidence to take decisions represents a potential challenge to the unequal structures of power. Counterforces are needed to influence the direction of social change within environments that consistently deny women access to leadership positions and reinforce the perception of decision-making as a masculine concern. Our work has included initiatives that strengthen leadership skills of individual adolescent girls and women as well as opportunities for networking, group learning and development of common strategies. For example, through mentoring, linkages with women's and other supportive groups and engagement in social platforms for change (physical and online).

V4C's position is that greater inclusion of women in public leadership positions will also lead to a better/more diverse representation of women's interests in policy and community decisions – and challenge the prevailing social norm in Nigeria that such positions are for men only. Our work in this area has included initiatives that promote the visibility of women's leaders as role models as well as strategies to promote changes in formal institutions which reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination on women's representation. For example, through women's recruitment, promoting profiles of women on the 'She Impact' online community platform, collective pressure for inclusion, gender pacts and work on legal reform for gender parity.

Budget implementation is carried out to impact the lives of citizens. Government budgets in Nigeria however, do not often reflect the needs of girls and women and are rather gender blind. V4C's approach to making government budgets respond to the needs of girls and women was to cultivate change champions and agents. Change champions are key individuals that are in key decision making positions such as the Minister of Finance and heads of legislative committees who were critical to some of the V4C initiatives that achieved results. Change agents are critical support staff that work either directly or indirectly with change champions who are in most cases political office holders. Working with change agents was critical as they were, in most cases, the institutional memory and will often outstay the political office holders.

V4C's investments in this regard were largely to provide technical assistance to the change champions and agents to identify, design and implement projects that directly impacted the lives of girls and women at both the federal and state levels.

V4C's experience

With V4C's support, different clusters of citizens' networks and organisations have formed to develop vibrant platforms supporting girls and women's empowerment issues, social change and legal reform². Together, they have taken actions to enable change and achieve specific commitments on gender equality with different advancements at the state level. For example in 2015 in Lagos, the platform was able to demand an increase in the number of women appointed into positions by the new Governor. Men's networks and gender champions have also been engaged at various stages (i.e. advocacy campaigns and press conferences). Traditional and

² V4C by working with partners that have existing goodwill in their various states set out to establish the platforms that work as a pressure group on government and political structures to be more responsive and inclusive to women and girls.

social media, and the creation of the online platform 'She Impact Nigeria' has also helped to create broader visibility to the campaigns, achievements and work at the states.

For adolescent girls and women's empowerment, links between young women and students to women's groups, platforms and formal institutions were established to increase opportunities for their leadership. Mentoring was adopted to ensure that girls that have passed through the safe space curriculum and others are provided with more support and the chance to demonstrate their skills and confidence. Mentees have gone on to establish initiatives such as empowerment and skills building for women in communities around Abuja to improve their economic status; a blog on gender issues, a mentoring scheme for secondary school students in Abuja and humanitarian services to support camps for internally displaced people.

V4C's efforts to promote women's presence and voices within public spaces have included support to women's coalitions working with direct advocacy³ for legal reform towards gender equality together with initiatives to challenge negative perceptions around women's leadership and their ability to lead. For example through the development of materials and campaigns profiling and visibility of women that have occupied leadership positions and their achievements across different spheres, targeting state governments and broader audience.

To increase government commitments to girls and women in the budgets, V4C provided on-the-spot technical assistance to ministries, departments and agencies to design, refocus and implement projects that directly benefit girls and women and which institutionalise this process.

The challenges and V4C's response to them

As was anticipated, V4C's work on formal institutions has been most affected by political activities. While government processes can be influenced by civil society demands and pressure, they also respond to other interests and power logics which make them harder to predict – in some cases this affected implementation and results. Despite plans to minimise the risks, election unrest did have impact on the programme, causing delays and changes on planned activities at the state level. While the electoral processes appeared to benefit the passage of the VAPP Bill at the Federal level; leveraging on the previous governments desire to reflect well in the eyes of the voters, campaigning activities negatively affected the progression of the VAPP and GEO Bills in the states as the legislators were engrossed in local level activities.

V4C partners frequently mapped risks at every stage that the Bills got to and there were instances when alternative strategies were designed to prevent a negative outcome. For example, we only got to know that the GEO Bill would be taken for second reading in the House of Representatives the day before the slated date in 2016. There was a huge risk of the Bill being struck down as there were still legislators opposed to the Bill – especially the Leader of the House. After mapping the risks we realised, that we had two options – either to allow the Bill to be taken but work through the night to garner support of more legislators *or* influence the leadership of the House to step down the second reading. We went with option one and despite the vehement opposition to the Bill during the proceeding, the support given by the Speaker and other legislators saved the Bill and it was submitted to a Committee for further deliberation.

³ Based on collective pressure through use of media, one on one and collective engagements with key influencers, mobilisation and development of legislative proposals based on public consultation.

Resistance has been a key challenge to the work of V4C. Strong opposition to the passage of the Gender and Equal Opportunities (GEO) Bill has not only come from the legislature but also from the public – specifically religious and traditional leaders and citizens who believe such rights are alien to Nigerian culture. The legislation started being called ‘the abortion law’ by key influencers who objected to its passage. Our strategies to deal with the backlash involved broad use of traditional and social media together with one on one and group meetings to correct misinformation and challenge negative perceptions, explain the provisions of the Bill and clarify misconceptions. V4C partners and the V4C communications team designed posters and meme’s on the provisions of the GEO Bill and shared them widely on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Additionally, social media influencers and trendsetters were engaged to organise tweet chats that shared the provisions of the Bill.

During the course of implementation we lost some of the change champions engaged from certain public positions and this stalled progress (although they remain individuals committed to challenging discriminatory actions or stereotypes). Because we had already identified the loss of such advocates as a possible risk, the strategy had included working with change agents who, though less senior in authority to the change champions were on hand to brief new decision makers.

At the beginning of implementation V4C strategy on women’s political participation mainly focused on bringing change to political party structures as institutional mechanisms for representation in government structures. While the numbers of women as political party members increased, party procedures and the lack of a sufficient support-base⁴ for women limited the possibilities of increasing their inclusion in leadership positions and effectively influencing internal structures and decision making within a short timeframe. To enhance impact, the V4C strategy was adjusted on creating more movements within and outside the parties that were louder and more visible. The new approach included the creation and support of platforms composed of diverse groups to influence the positioning of women for leadership and political inclusion; together with the use of media to change perceptions and garner broad public support for women’s leadership.

Conclusions and practical implications

V4C’s approach of work with public institutions and civil society to support a more enabling environment to the empowerment of adolescent girls and women combined different strategies of intervention around three key areas, to bring about change in legislation, women’s political inclusion and public budgeting. Among key lessons learned from the interventions:

- Having a collective voice around a demand increases the chances of affecting a shift or an action from actors within formal institutions. For example, in Lagos State in 2015, the sheer size of the group that demanded for a gender pact endeared the Gubernatorial candidates to sign. The pact led to an increase in the number of women appointed by the Governor into cabinet.
- A coordinated approach to advocacy efforts between outside (CSOs) and within strategic state institutions (Government ministries, departments and agencies, National Assembly, State Houses of Assembly) proved to be very useful for results such as progression of supported Bills through legislative stages and the adoption of the Making Budgets to Work for Girls and Women initiative at the state levels. For example,

⁴ This included informal practices of leadership appointments based on favouritism and male networks of patronage together with frequent delays on open calls for candidatures.

mechanisms such as Gender Technical Unit (GTU – a resource centre established to build the capacity and responsiveness of legislators and their support staff supported by V4C) proved to be useful to establish liaison with the civil society agenda and to keep gender issues on the parliament’s agenda. Their advantage lies in their ability to work closely – and establish formal relationships – decision makers committed with equality and non-governmental organisations. It has also shown to be important for technical backing of legislative initiatives and to advocate for gender equality in a sustained manner within legislative house. The work of the GTU was fundamental to the passage of the Violence Against all Persons Prohibition Bill at Federal Level.⁵

- It is critical to work from top down and bottom up within government institutions to respond to risks of loss of institutional memory.

Key results

- Violence Against All Persons Bill (VAPP) assented into law and the progression of the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill at the federal level⁶ and in Enugu State.
- More than 80 legislators at federal level and 10 at local levels have indicated support and taken action(s) to support (either sponsor or endorse or lobby for) passage of 2 key gender responsive bills as a result of engagements supported by V4C.
- More than 800 women recruited into major political parties of their choice, with the support of civil society partners supported by V4C in Abuja, Kano, Kaduna, Enugu and Lagos State.⁷
- 5 Platforms (4 physical in Enugu, Kano, Lagos, Kaduna and 1 virtual) established as pressure groups, through which different clusters came together to have a collective voice on women’s leadership and political inclusion. The actions taken by the platforms brought specific changes per state including public commitments and appointments of women.⁸
- 120 young women paired with mentors specific to their area of interest with improved skills. Benefits shared by mentees include support and access to the network of mentors such as job placements; and that it contributed to challenging negative perceptions around women supporting other women.
- About N1.8bn (One billion, Eight Hundred Million naira) had been released to 5 ministries to implement projects that directly benefit girls and women. Over 5000 beneficiaries that are categorized as hard to reach benefitted from the various projects.
- Kaduna State government approved Executive Council Memo that makes compulsory for all ministries, departments and agencies in the state to indicate projects and indicators that will benefit girls and women directly. This led to a 400 per cent increase in the budget of the Kaduna State Ministry of Women Affairs for the purpose of monitoring the implementation of women and girls specific projects in the state.
- She Impact on-line community with over 81,000 followers receiving updated information and exchanging views related to women’s political participation and leadership in Nigeria.

⁵ Case Study on Gender Technical Unit for passage of laws.

⁶ The GEO Bill was passed by the House of Representatives and then reintroduced and is at an advanced stage in the legislative process of both the House of Reps and Senate.

⁷ This result contributes to the inclusion of women within political party processes, ensuring a pool of women as support base and/or to occupy leadership positions.

⁸ For example, In Lagos, the platform has been able to demand for increase in the number of women appointed into positions and the appointments made in 2015 by the new Governor reflected this increase. In Kano, the platform has built the confidence of women to aspire for leadership positions and this culminated in 2 women winning elective positions within association that regulates their sector.