



## **The Courage to Change: Confronting the limits and unleashing the potential of CARE's programming for women**

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### ***Synthesis Report: Phase 2 CARE International Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment***

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February 2006

*Just like the moons and like suns  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I rise.*

*Excerpt, Still I rise.*

*Maya Angelou.*

*We dedicate this work to those who struggle,  
and still rise.*

*In memory of Geoffrey Chege.  
In honor of the millions who inspired him  
to rise.*

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## **IMLT note – Why are you reading this report?**

If you are like any of the hundreds of people involved in creating the story we will present here, then you don't have time to waste. You are busy with the business of ending poverty and social injustice. What we share here must help you to grow stronger in your struggle for impact – for a safe and secure future for the young bride and her family now living in the IDP camps of Gulu, Uganda, for the flourishing growth of the Mayan women's network in the highlands of Guatemala, and for the successful evolution of this far-flung organization whose staff and allies have pledged to serve them in the global fight against poverty and social injustice.

We are convinced that the lessons uncovered to date in CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry on women's empowerment can make a huge difference in that fight to become a stronger partner for enduring change. Over a thousand conversations come together in shaping this report – exchanges with and among poor women and men, with powerful actors in poor communities and wealthy institutions, among staff and outside allies. This second year of the Women's Empowerment SII has raised many challenges in our quest to be accountable for impact on the drivers of gender inequity, and led to deep questioning of our assumptions about both the kinds of changes we are looking to foster, and the ways in which we measure change. Embracing this uncertainty is an essential part of our learning and growth.

We cannot pretend to encapsulate in one theory, or one truth, the immense diversity of women's experience uncovered through the SII research. Our job is more humble – to use these dialogues to offer the reader powerful reasons to change: to abandon the comfort of false certainties that will harm us in the long term, without feeling paralyzed by the enormity of it all.

And so, with these few pages, we hope to slice a pathway through thousands of pages of careful research – methods, data, debates, doubts and conclusions – to weave from them all a core set of insights that allow you to do something wonderful, to be inspired and galvanized to pursue the best of our potential. We will do so by sharing what the research has taught us about what matters for women's empowerment, and summarizing a clear overview of how our program portfolio is delivering – what is working, what is not, and why. But beyond diagnostics, this report seeks to take each reader on a challenging but important journey. Its aim is not to simply summarize the data, but to allow the data to tell a story of possible futures for CARE... and to offer busy readers a clear proposal for a better pathway forward amidst those possibilities.

We are optimistic about the prospects for change – with good reason. Over 200 staff across CARE, plus hundreds more partners, participants, and outside allies have done the hard thinking that gives rise to this report. Without their efforts, we would be nowhere – thanks to their perseverance, we have enough insights to take us very far. SII participants are already working to convert their learning into practice; supportive managers are engaging as leaders to make space for their efforts. In this time of organization-wide strategic planning and industry-wide questioning of how we “do development,” we take heart in their example, and hope others will do no less.

*Special thanks and acknowledgements to Michael Drinkwater, Kent Glenzer, and Gretchen Lyons for their invaluable contributions to this report.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes findings from Phase 2 of CARE International’s Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women’s Empowerment. For the second year in a row, CARE has invested our own resources and reputation to dig deeply a question that many in the development business find difficult to answer: What impact, if any, is our work having on women’s empowerment?

This report draws its insights from nearly 30 research sites and secondary data from nearly 1,000 projects in the CARE International portfolio, all of which make some claim to advancing the rights and well-being of women and girls. Pursuing this inquiry has required peeling away what amounts to many myths in our work, programmatically and internally in CARE. It has also required methodological creativity. We have developed a set of inquiry processes that are opening up new channels of more honest dialogue – in, for example, Burundi, Uganda and Ecuador – both within CARE and between staff and the people they serve. Importantly, we find that what we can learn about our impacts is deeply related to levels of trust, reciprocity and mutual respect between ourselves and the women we claim to serve. Those we serve have shown us they have their own ideas about what constitutes women’s empowerment, and their measures sometimes challenge our own and those of our donors. We have confirmed the value of CARE Bangladesh’s relatively simple methods for power analysis and elite mapping, and tested metrics in Tanzania and Mali to capture changes in attitudes and values around gender relations.

The SII is deliberately built as a colorful but considered mosaic of data ranging from deeply qualitative to strictly quantitative, and methods spanning the routine to the reflective. We hope that as a result, it will engage willing learners across all of CARE’s constituencies, and we invite each reader to test the persuasiveness of its findings and the merits of its recommendations.

### *Overview of Findings: A Portfolio in Search of a Pathway*

So what *have* we found? That when we educate a girl, we educate a nation? That a loan we put in the hands of a woman lifts a family out of poverty? That when we get women working together, nothing can stop them? The story, alas, is not so simple.

Indeed, the argument that this report will make is that although the SII’s story is neither simple nor soothing, it is one rich with entry points and possibilities for CARE to shape the wider social transformations that can realistically be called “women’s empowerment.” The heart of its message concerns the urgent need in CARE, and the wider field of development, to step back from the lure of narrow “solutions” for women that are driven more by the logic of limited resources than by the ambition of an uncompromised goal. It will introduce evidence to confirm what many readers will know in their guts – that only by building, piece by piece, project by project, a sustained approach to wider impact on the underlying causes of gender inequality, can CARE and its allies claim with confidence that their links to women’s empowerment are anything more than “just luck.”

The report reveals important benefits that CARE is helping women to achieve – concrete results we consciously seek and unintended impacts that are shaping gendered power

relations in unexpected, and often unnoticed, ways. It reveals the limits of these projects – the opportunities they overlook, and the harms they can create. But it also demonstrates important cases where our programs are closing these gaps. Cases where concrete and short-term benefits that projects produce for women serve as important entry points in a coherent and sustained strategy that addresses the larger social forces that shape gender inequity. If, as suggested in the SII's Phase 1 report, CARE's program to date has been *"struggling to keep partially refilling the cup rather than finding out why it empties with such alarming regularity,"* then these seedlings of impact on the underlying causes of women's poverty are truly exciting. They reveal a handful of practices that, if earnestly pursued, allow CARE to frame a strategic program brand: a world-class learning organization in steadfast service to the poor that helps women secure important short-term well-being and social justice gains, but pursues and asks to be judged against a more ambitious long-term goal to alter the power relations and structures that sustain poverty.

### ***Doing more for women's empowerment than we thought...***

This SII reveals that CARE's work has made real and valuable contributions to women's struggles to overcome the material and social drivers of their poverty – gains which affect more than 20 million men, women and children over the past decade. Programs are expanding women's assets, skills and attitudes, and fostering new modes of social and political relations between women and men in households, communities and social organizations of the state and civil society. CARE and our partners are revealed as adept at basic training, knowledge transfer and skills building of women in all of our work: health, democracy, civil society, organizational management, literacy, human rights and more. In many places, CARE's work to bring local elected officials, customary leaders and women together has led to new spaces for dialogue about women's issues – such as female genital cutting, women's and girls' education, health, dowry, early marriage, work loads and more – where no such space existed in the past. Over and over, in site after site, women said that the skills and confidence they had gained from contact with CARE programs were allowing them to play a stronger and more active role in the household, to talk with their husbands at a more equal level, to participate in public meetings and to enter the public sphere more broadly. We must celebrate these achievements as an organization but, more importantly, spread the word about how these changes are happening so that they can be more widely replicated.

We have a much better understanding of the importance of women's conscious organization in solidarity groups to the success of any women's empowerment or gender equity program, and a much better idea of the difference between a solidarity group and other kinds of organization. We have models now identified of how long it might take – and the steps in the voyage necessary – to begin seeing specific and concrete changes in gender norms, relations and ideologies, for example, through CARE's unique village savings and loan methodology in sub-Saharan Africa. We have good practices in hand for raising awareness, generating discussion and lifting taboos around female genital cutting, practices developed over the last eight or so years in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

### ***yet riddled with missed opportunities...***

SII findings also reveal, however, a portfolio riddled with missed opportunities to achieve deeper, faster and longer lasting changes in poverty and social justice. Good results could have quite easily been much, much better: World class instead of just good.

All of the projects in the SII's sample of **country studies** fall somewhere along this continuum of good-to-great gender work. A few projects showed more significant breakthroughs or blind spots, and the vast majority struggled to bring together the analytics and strategies that would enable them to address more effectively gender and power relations. We see in comparing results in Mali, Tanzania and Niger's village savings and loan portfolios, for example, that microfinance in the absence of a broader livelihood and empowerment strategy yields disappointing results on both economic *and* social dimensions of change. In the Ethiopian FGC project mentioned above, the changes we describe in attitudes, ideas and aspirations risked being lost in two research exercises by evaluators claiming evidence of significant reductions in FGC practice, and by an SII team dismayed by a lack of any such evidence. In Bangladesh, the Rural Maintenance Program that put CARE on the map of every district in the country failed to recognize its true strategic potential – either as a platform for women's more strategic organization, or as political cover for the introduction of smaller and more innovative interventions. In Guatemala, leaders within a fledgling Mayan women's movement found themselves "projectized" in a literacy campaign that, while extremely successful, left them disconnected from the political base that nourished them.

Our analysis of a host of **secondary forms of evidence** largely confirm this general distribution. While the dry numbers may feel harder to swallow than the more nuanced case studies, they offer important insights into why programs struggle at least as much as they succeed. Of 362 projects providing annual project data on their gender- and empowerment-related work, 45 percent claim a gender and diversity focus, and 57 percent claim a focus on empowerment of their target communities. These "glass half-full" data points represent important progress in CARE's discourse, but only 2 percent of these projects did gender analysis as part of project design, and only 12 percent reported having an explicit gender strategy. Beyond their fundamental gender blindness, only 37 of these projects – or about 10 percent – claim to combine the range of approaches that would give us confidence in our portfolio's ability to deliver enduring impacts on women's empowerment.

These brief examples, and the dozens like them that arise across the SII, show that the kinds of short-term, countable results we tend to seek in the development industry have important opportunity costs. They can be important achievements, but in themselves are shaky grounds on which to claim enduring impacts on such a deeply embedded cause of poverty as gender inequity. In the sites explored above, the failure to recognize emergent changes and to nourish them in a longer-term strategy for social change has handicapped both short-term and longer-term empowerment gains. But the problems are not just those of opportunities missed. The factors contributing to those opportunity costs also give rise to deeper harms that should be unacceptable to an organization dedicated to ending poverty and social injustice.

### ***and unacceptable harms.***

We also are on much firmer ground now than we were a year ago with regard to the harms our programs can create when implemented without a robust gender, power and political economic understanding of our contexts. With our accountability for producing benefits more clearly articulated than our accountability for minimizing harms, we remain alarmingly unresponsive to signs of gender inequity rearing up in our work, even as we seek to combat certain of its narrower effects.



We are concerned that increased violence against women participating in CARE projects is suspected in many sites, across many continents, but has not provoked more definitive reflection in our programs. And we worry that our gender work's notable reliance on agency-based strategies makes women solely responsible for their own empowerment, ignoring or excluding men – the powerful – from our programs. It is, of course, always easier to urge the less powerful to expand their capabilities than it is to persuade the more powerful to curb their own abuses of power. But our focus on women as agents of change increases women's workloads and contributes to a crisis of masculinity among men who – like those in the IDP camps of Uganda – struggle with little support as circumstances and global trends chip away at their traditional dominant status.

Women themselves made it clear that they value the structural and relational aspects of their empowerment more than we and our donors tend to support. They name such indicators of empowerment as being consulted in household decisions, broaching new and sensitive subjects with their husbands, being free from gender-based violence, assisting others, talking and sharing with other women, and seeing changes in the harmful practices of marriage and dowry. And so, as women and men across the SII push back on our notions of the changes that will drive gender equality, we are forced to question why our own measures of empowerment so often do not match. Our debates in Phase 2 – from Bujumbura to Guatemala, Nairobi to Oslo, Uttar Pradesh to Mali – took us to the difficult core issue of how far we are willing to push for women's empowerment or, indeed, for a vision of social justice:

1. Aren't improvements in women's individual and group capacities to do, plan, strategize and act good enough?
2. Should one organization even pretend that it can influence (let alone be accountable for) deeper change in social relations, distributions of power, rights fulfillment, control over resources, gender norms and ideologies?
3. Shouldn't the SII be focusing on measuring impacts on poverty and not on underlying causes such as women's disempowerment and gender inequity?

### ***So... how deep is our commitment to women's empowerment?***

In fact, Phase 2 SII discussions have revealed a startling lack of organizational clarity on how gendered power shapes poverty, and how we should respond. We see aspirational country strategies enacted through one-off tactical projects. We see project goals targeting eradication of deep-seated institutions of gender inequality within two or three year timeframes. We see measurement frameworks that apply output-level counts as proxies for deeper aspects of social change almost always without any explicit learning process to check that hypothesis. We see interventions that encourage women to chart their own pathways of change conflicting with logframes that harness women to advance an external goal. And we see – over and over again – projects whose sole strategy for challenging age-old structures of power is to equip women with a few simple skills and a hunger for a better life.

In trying to make sense of the SII data, staff have discovered that we are working with project designs and measures that reflect a grab-bag of contradicting responses to questions like the three noted above. This insight helped them to

better understand the tensions they encounter in their gender work, and has provided some of the most important learning of the SII.

### ***CARE: a conflicted ally to women***

CARE faces deep resistance to change, caught as it is in a wider institutional field of development that sanctions certain ideas about poverty and change, favors certain ways of working over others, and is rife with competing assumptions that play themselves out in our work. In Phase 2 research, we recognize the resilience of the power structures that permeate the very choices, priorities and possibilities that we have as an organization in transition. The obstacles to learning, to innovation, to risk-taking and to a passionate dedication to long-term social change are deeply embedded in the institutional relations of the development enterprise, and in the social relations of all of the societies in which we work.

Evidence suggests that we need to work harder to overcome these barriers, to help staff recognize how larger forces play out in the misalignments between our discourse and practice. The politics of aid are evident in what we recognize and reward as “success,” in the kinds of leadership we promote, in the resources we invest in innovation and learning. Our reluctance to take a directly political stand on the questions of power and justice in our work to end poverty has deep impacts on the ideas, skills and comfort areas that individual staff bring to the core functions of our work. It shapes how we identify job performance competencies, how we dialogue with communities, how we define priority foci and effective strategies, and how we work in alliances or persuade donors to support our work.

To be sure, there is risk – organizational and personal – in admitting the limitations of our areas of hard-won expertise in addressing the complexity of women’s empowerment. Donor demands for reportable successes offer little encouragement in taking that risk. *“We are comfortable,”* says the Latin America regional synthesis *“with the solutions and strategies we know, and hesitant to experiment with new approaches.”* We must learn to strengthen the forces that lead staff to “go the extra mile” to take that risk in order to learn and improve their management practices and their program approaches – and we celebrate the signs that CARE’s own leadership has begun to recognize the urgency of challenging the structures that reproduce narrow-screen thinking.

### ***We see what we seek***

As often happens during a learning process, the things we have learned changed the way we look at the issues we are learning about. All of the findings – programmatic and internal – have led us to consider a new way of looking at the SII data. This new “optic” helps to illuminate how the contradictions outlined above lead us to good (but not great) programming. It also reveals pragmatic strategies and practices to overcome such contradiction and make our programs great. And so we invite readers to look at the data with fresh eyes – through an optic we find transformative.

This optic asks us to understand empowerment as the sum total of changes needed for a woman to realize her full human rights – the interplay of changes in her own aspirations and capabilities (agency), in the environment that surrounds and conditions her choices (structure), and in the power relations through which she must negotiate her

path (relations). Any individual indicator of progress can only be properly assessed and valued in the context of how it advances that whole.

Failure to position individual gains in this wider perspective, we argue, narrows the scope of our commitment to women to a thin slice of what it takes for them to be truly empowered, and narrows our understanding of the true range of changes taking place so that we may miss the heart of the story. Just as the full meaning of an image can only be properly grasped if it is seen against its full context: a wide-screen view. We ask the reader to assess how any given individual gain – in literacy, in health, in income – measures up if we remove the blinders and take on board the full range of drivers and obstacles shaping gender relations and women’s empowerment.

“Wide screen” and “narrow screen” lenses can help us understand when small, incremental gains in women’s individual capabilities and incomes are seedlings of greater impacts on gender inequity (and when they are simply small and probably reversible). They can help us know when indigenous women need a literacy campaign, and when they need a political movement. And they can help us develop the clarity of purpose needed to engage men with empathy and resolve in order to end violence against women and violence’s enablers such as dowry and early marriage. By forcing us to consider what changes matter for women in their particular social, economic and political contexts, they can help us to adapt and align our tactics continually in response to a changing environment and in pursuit of a long-term goal.

In this wide-screen view, we can see a qualitative difference between the many interventions that we successfully deploy to help women to get along in a man’s world, versus the very few successes we can show in making that world more fundamentally equal. We have to face central paradoxes of our work to promote empowerment:

- (1) ***What we can count may not count for women’s empowerment.*** Income does not in itself equal empowerment; nor do morbidity reductions, educational attainment, voting, group membership or even rights awareness. These things can be accomplished in ways that empower or disempower, that are sustainable or easily reversible. We must not mistake the forest for the trees.
- (2) ***Our drive to show attributable results in the short term can blind us to the real progress and pathways of long-term impact on women’s empowerment.*** As one research initiative argues, as we build “motorways to nowhere” we may miss hidden pathways by which social change can advance (IDS 2006).

We argue that at root, Phase 2 research reveals a women’s empowerment portfolio producing important benefits for women, but limited by “narrow-screen” horizons. Seen against a wider-screen commitment to transformational impact, these interventions are revealed as missed opportunities to build toward the kind of impact to which we commit in our vision. Furthermore, we argue that the performance gap can be closed by radically adjusting how we see and value the kinds of results that narrow-screen approaches produce – using them, indeed, as entry points and milestones in a clear strategy for long-term, wide-screen impact. Such an approach, we argue from the evidence of CARE’s work around the world, is eminently possible, and in this report, we spell out what it would concretely entail.

## ***Recommendations we can apply***

In truth, we cannot know today what the final impact of changes provoked by CARE's work will be. We cannot predict the end-result of something as small as a woman's declaration that "now I feel like a person with rights; now I'm not afraid; now I dare to speak in public... now I want to do projects with my group." We cannot guarantee what will become of something as apparently large as the participation of 400,000 African women in financially sustainable community-based microfinance groups. What we do know is that CARE can make more or less intentional and focused efforts to ensure that seedlings such as these are nourished and flourish to their fullest potential.

In the next section, we will explore how such commitments to impact can become a hallmark of CARE's program brand – a distinguishing feature of "the new basics" of program quality. We argue that a new approach is warranted – that our decidedly mixed progress after 10 years of determined efforts to mainstream gender should remind us that "if you do what you always did, you will get what you always got."

What are the solutions proposed? They are simple, but perhaps not easy. At their heart, these approaches require a commitment to systematizing the best of the practices sprinkled throughout this report. The best of our program innovators around the world are already leading the way, but their efforts are fragmented by systemic barriers of knowledge, resources, and culture. We can do more to help them bring these practices together in a pragmatic and coherent approach to increasing our impact on the underlying causes of poverty. Such an approach requires changes in CI member practices, norms, global standards and resource allocations. Its programmatic and organizational features are:

### **Programmatic**

- **Local, Long-Term, Impact Goals:** Each country office commits – and is assisted by CI members – to achieving three to five *local program impacts* that advance the organizational goal, building and evolving strategy over time through cumulative learning from their own work and that of others addressing similar issues. These long-term programs become the organizing principle for our work.
- **Perspectives on Power and a Theory of Change:** All program action is built on a working (and constantly tested) theory of power and change.
- **Reinventing the Project:** Projects are valued equally as platforms for *reflection* on long-term impacts, for *critical engagement* with participants and stakeholders, and for *delivering* high-quality benefits in the short-term. The logframe is used more wisely to map how we believe a project might contribute to a cumulative shift in human conditions, social positions and the enabling environment.
- **Building Women's Solidarity:** Programs move to solidarity models where women organize to build social and political influence around shared agendas.
- **Extending Solidarity to Engage the Powerful:** Programs encourage women and men – in the home, community and external institutions – to surface, debate and challenge the norms and practices that sustain women's subordination.
- **Aligning Accountability:** Accountability is *for impact*, and to the constituencies served by the project in the countries in which we work. The poor play a more prominent role in defining strategy and judging success. We shift our relationship with project donors as a result, marketing and encouraging their investment in long-term programs or project-sized components of these.

## Organizational

- **Unyielding Leadership:** Leaders at all levels take responsibility for finding and sharing creative ways to enact our stated policy commitments and advance a clear organizational goal regarding gender equity. They would manage down, up and sideways to support one another in this difficult journey.
- **Collective Recognition:** Achievement is seen as the product of teamwork across hierarchies and divides in CARE and also in the communities we serve.
- **Responsible Risk:** Programs become sites of struggle, risk-taking and learning, proactively responding to harms as they arise.
- **Stopping the Leak of Knowledge:** We have financial and organizational models that retain our best staff, partners and ideas across project cycles, leveraging knowledge and relationships for change. We use technology in sensible and revolutionary ways to ensure that our knowledge is constantly at the cutting edge of our field practice.
- **Knowledge and Learning Are our Hallmark.** We foster open-ended learning processes that acknowledge that complex changes – poverty reduction or empowerment, for example – can be difficult and hard to measure. We develop metrics that meaningfully capture social change underway. Staff are rewarded for making reflection and critical thinking with all stakeholders a core aspect of CARE’s work. We disseminate our work at all levels to be transparent about our ideas, contribute to development knowledge and learn from others.

If these practices form the backbone of a world-class approach to promoting women’s empowerment and enacting our programming principles more broadly, then the SII gives us cause for great optimism. None is beyond our reach; none is rocket science; all of these practices are scattered across CARE today and some are beginning to come together through deliberate acts of vision in country, regional and sectoral programs around the world. But most encouraging are the various processes in play today to help us harvest and share such innovations more systematically, in ways that encourage their spread and application across a far wider reach of CARE’s work and beyond.

Some of these efforts to strengthen our fundamental capacities and commitment to advance women’s empowerment are the result of the long germination of CARE’s gender equity and diversity work, and of the shift it has called for in our internal operations and in our programming. It is clear that there is strong interest among top managers to hear the findings of Phase 2 in order to move forward more aggressively with the kinds of programming, marketing and human resource strategies that will position us for world-class performance.

It is not in CARE’s history, and some critics would say it is even against our organizational DNA, to be preoccupied with social change. We are – so the critics say – fundamentally a poverty-fighting organization, and we should stick to making concrete, material and practical improvements in poor women’s very precarious condition. We argue that in light of the heretofore unseen positive impacts and latent potential for structural impacts revealed in this study, even the most cynical of unbelievers can find cause to believe that CARE can align our work with our vision. The best of our programs are already responding. They are showing us how to lift our women’s empowerment impacts to a fundamentally new level. We believe there is every reason to rise to the challenge as a concerted global force and, aligning with others seeking the same goals, seize the opportunity.

## I. Introduction: The SII and CARE's Journey of Change

For over 50 years, CARE has touched women as important beneficiaries (and sometime victims) of our efforts, but seldom as subjects of human rights and protagonists of social change in their own right. Women's status as subordinate members of society was rarely challenged or seen as an underlying cause of poverty. Only recently, with recognition of the profound link between development and equity (Nussbaum 2000; Sen 2000; ECLAC 2004), have the incentives begun to shift, and development actors like CARE given priority to women's empowerment in its own right.<sup>1</sup>

This introduction provides an overview of the journey of change that began in that recognition – and of the principles that underpin this Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII) on women's empowerment. We will then turn in Section II to discuss how these principles shape the research design of the SII. Sections III-VI, the heart of this report, presents our key evidence and findings on the extent and nature of CARE's impacts on women's empowerment. In Section VII, we explore the internal, organizational factors that shape our impacts in this way. Finally, Section VIII identifies key recommendations and pathways forward, applying SII learning to improve the quality of CARE's impacts in the future.

### CARE International Vision

We seek a world of hope, tolerance and social justice, where poverty has been overcome and people live in dignity and security.

CARE International will be a global force and a partner of choice within a worldwide movement dedicated to ending poverty. We will be known everywhere for our unshakable commitment to the dignity of people.

### 1. What fuels this journey? “We hold ourselves accountable...”

Six years ago CARE committed itself to an audacious new standard in our work, a pledge to fight to end poverty and social injustice, rather than mitigate their effects.

This pledge commits CARE to addressing discrimination, promoting empowerment, and to being accountable to poor and marginalized people whose rights have been denied. It places a commitment to gender equity at the heart of what we do, triggering new debates among staff, critical self-assessment by teams, and managerial support for gender-sensitive innovation.

### CARE International Programme Principles

- Principle 1:** Promote empowerment
- Principle 2:** Work in partnership with others
- Principle 3:** Ensure accountability and promote responsibility
- Principle 4:** Address discrimination
- Principle 5:** Promote the non-violent resolution of conflicts
- Principle 6:** Seek sustainable results

We hold ourselves accountable for enacting behaviors consistent with these principles, and ask others to help us do so...in all that we do.

<sup>1</sup> The dramatic rise in recent years of a focus on women's empowerment is by no means solely a function of rights-based thinking; a vast literature argues for human rights on more instrumental grounds – for example, that women are an untapped resource for economic growth.



CARE’s SII on women’s empowerment is a direct expression of these commitments to contributing to deeper and more enduring social change. Above all, the multi-year SII is an act of learning and public accountability regarding our pledge to address the underlying causes of poverty and social injustice, and not just their symptoms. This research report presents our findings after Phase 2 of the SII.<sup>2</sup> It reveals the best and the worst that we have found in 25 field research sites, and through desk analysis of over 1,000 additional project and program efforts.<sup>3</sup> We believe that the mosaic of program and project evidence this represents tells us with good precision how well we are doing and, perhaps even more importantly, how we can make an even bigger contribution in the future.

## ***2. Discovering perspectives: not every road leads to the same endpoint***

Evidence, however, does not just speak for itself. Facts can tell many different stories. Anecdotes can hide and reveal. Consider the two following quotes from inside CARE:

<p>Over the past five years, we have sought to integrate gender equity as a strategic element of program design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. We have ramped up our efforts to improve girls’ access to basic education and women’s access to income-generating opportunities, low-interest loans, and a safe place to save their money. We have focused increasingly on preventing gender-violence and sexual exploitation, and improving women’s and men’s access to reproductive health and family planning services. (Peter Bell, former President of CARE USA, 2004)</p>	<p>As our analysis of it has evolved, we have come to believe that poverty cannot be ended unless it is attacked at its deepest levels, what we call underlying causes. These are about power relations as expressed through social, political and economic systems. People are poor not only because they lack assets and skills, but also because they suffer from exclusion, marginalization and discrimination. ( CARE USA 2006)</p>
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How should we assess our impacts on women’s empowerment? Are Bell’s specific, concrete, and measurable gains a reasonable standard for CARE’s impact on women’s empowerment? Or do they add up to little more than “partially refilling the cup rather than finding out why it empties with such alarming regularity”? (Mosedale 2005). Conversely, does CARE USA’s statement of the imperative to attack power relations that shape exclusion and marginalization represent a more meaningful standard for a development NGO? Or is this just rhetoric offered to make us look good, but implying no concrete difference in what we do, achieve, facilitate or produce?

In fact, Phase 2 SII discussions have revealed a startling lack of organizational clarity on how gendered power shapes poverty, and how we should respond. SII research has raised our sensitivity to the competing theories of change that animate, and sometimes undermine, our work.<sup>4</sup> In trying to make sense of the SII data, staff have discovered that we are working with project designs and measures that reflect a grab-bag of these

<sup>2</sup> The research report from Phase 1 of the SII on Women’s Empowerment can be downloaded at <http://csps.emory.edu/CARE%20SII.dwt>.

<sup>3</sup> In-depth analysis of approaches and outputs of 900 projects in CARE’s global annual survey of projects, 31 evaluations, 32 project proposals, 27 gender-focused projects in the Asia regional mapping, and an intentionally eclectic mix of program interventions from across the organization.

<sup>4</sup> Annex 4 describes four key perspectives evident in work on gender, power and change. These are: instrumentalist (seeing and measuring women’s empowerment through its contribution to wider poverty reduction goals), feminist (seeing and measuring women’s empowerment as the overthrow of social institutions that consolidate male privilege and subordinate women), rights-and-justice (seeing and measuring empowerment in the progress of equal rights and social justice for women); and personal-transformational (seeing empowerment as a deeply personal journey of learning and change for women and men, whose outcomes are unpredictable through a priori measures and indicators).

perspectives. This awakening has enabled them to better understand the tensions and struggles they encounter in their gender work, and has provided some of the most important learning of the SII synthesis debate. They raise questions that go to the heart of the development industry's questionable commitment to ending poverty and social injustice; questions such as:

4. Aren't improvements that are at the level of women's individual and group capacities to do, plan, strategize and act good enough?
5. Isn't deeper change – in social relations, distributions of power, rights fulfillment, control over resources, gender norms and ideologies – beyond CARE's ability to influence alone? Why even pretend that we can address them, let alone hold ourselves accountable for them?
6. Shouldn't the SII be focusing on measuring impacts on poverty and not on underlying causes such as women's disempowerment and gender inequity more broadly?

There is power and politics in any choice about how to define impact on women's empowerment and what to accept as evidence of its existence. CARE's leadership will do well to use its own power to foster and deepen these debates, until a working clarity and consensus is achieved. Meanwhile, we who are the authors of this report owe you, the reader, a clear statement about our own politics, and our own beliefs about how gender and power shape poverty. These beliefs guide how we see data, the sense we make of data, and what we believe that data means for CARE.

Following Amartya Sen, we believe – and have organized SII data gathering and analysis accordingly – that poverty is a product of unequal power relations, that women cannot escape poverty in a lasting manner if gender structures and relations of power are not transformed. We believe that shifting those structures must challenge patriarchal structures and the narrow privileges of masculinity they promote – and that these challenges can increase friction and conflict if poorly managed. Though deeply informed by Just Associates' assertion (Veneklasen and Miller 2002) that exclusionary power must be contested, we challenge zero-sum, political economic thinking about power. Rather, we posit that power is expandable, that our programs can increase the total power pie in communities rather than “give” more power to women by “taking” it from men. This is in line with – indeed logically necessitated by – CARE's rights-based approaches. Empowerment is the creation of new forms of relating among women and men that expand the capabilities of both, and achieve more just social structures and relations.

As you read this report, we invite you to consider how your own perspective shapes your response to its key findings. What do YOU believe about power, poverty, gender, and women's empowerment? What do YOU believe constitutes “lasting impact on gender inequity”? We ask you to consider, too, how the forces around CARE (funding, history, staff makeup, geography) contribute to the impacts we have sought, the explicit measures that we have deployed, and the stories we have told ourselves about our gender work in the past.

## **II. Background Check: Our Research Vehicle for the Journey**

Before we outline our Phase 2 findings and recommendations, this section will lay open for consideration the SII research design we built based on the principles and perspectives outlined above. While not a full treatment of method this section will cover



key features of the research design, including the factors guiding site selection, research team formation, and conceptual framework and definition. Because research and its communication is an interpretive act that can never be free from the biases and preferences of its producers, we invite careful reflection on how ideas about knowledge, proof, and power converge in the design choices CARE has made, and in the reader's own response to the study.

### **1. Not your standard model**

First, we must make clear one central aspect of the SII, which shapes all of the choices we have made about the research design and therefore the data and findings produced. While the overarching objective – to know the impact of our work on women's empowerment – is omnipresent, the goal of the SII is not research for research's sake. Rather, it is itself an enactment of our rights-based principles, and we have therefore endeavored to align our resources and strategies for research against four critical implications of those principles. They lead us to construct a research approach that can:

- a) Sustainably change CARE practices with regard to gender programming;
- b) Deepen a culture of critical reflection and continuous learning in CARE;
- c) Change practices of other actors who shape the pathways of women's empowerment; and
- d) Engage women themselves meaningfully in research design, implementation, analysis, and identification of future actions.

Michael Quinn Patton, a pioneer of the field of evaluation, writes that “the power to define is the power to control, to include and exclude” (99). CARE has explicitly sought to challenge power relations embedded in the very process of research by opening up a “dialogue of knowledges” among diverse stakeholders, and questioning whose learning counts, and who should have the power to define and assess what constitutes empowerment for poor women.

It is also important that the SII is voluntary and driven by a willingness of field staff to engage in such critical and challenging reflection. No country office, no project, no regional team has been required to undertake SII research. And in that spirit, every SII team around the world has been free to identify the methods, evidence categories, and even definitions of women's empowerment that it believes most useful and pertinent.

These procedural choices create an analytical dilemma: How to synthesize radically different methods, degrees of rigor, and kinds of data.

We could have avoided much of this complexity and ambiguity by organizing the global SII along more traditional “impact evaluation” lines. However, we are troubled by the way in which this places field staff, partners, consulting researchers, and women themselves in a passive role of *participants in* rather than *producers of* research and critical thinking. The nature of the Strategic Impact Inquiry function in CARE is, and should always be, to support deep processes of reflective learning. Too many aspects of mainstream social science research place the power in the hands of “objective experts” to tell us – and our clients – what we've achieved and what we need to do. While valid for some purposes, this approach weakens the potential for the personal, organizational, and industry-wide soul-searching that is needed if our sector is to achieve the kinds of impacts on poverty and social injustice that have eluded us for 50 years.

## **2. Guiding and refining the SII: research questions and sites**

The SII on women's empowerment is guided by three broad research questions, which are echoed in all of its research sites and streams:

- What are CARE's impacts on women's empowerment?
- How do CARE's internal dynamics affect our impacts on women's empowerment?
- What have we learned about doing global impact research?

The foundations of the SII on women's empowerment (CARE's first-ever SII) were laid over a first phase of research conducted between January and July 2005.<sup>5</sup> Those findings have been reported previously and will not be repeated here. However, methodological learnings on how to organize an SII directly influenced the nature of research done in Phase 2. Above all else, staff and external experts told us at the end of Phase 1 that the in-depth, single-project research model was a handicap to both the persuasiveness of our findings and the scale of our learning. We were urged to test a menu of lighter and more flexible research methods that could be woven into everyday practice. At the same time, the group felt that the radically different socio-political and economic contexts of CARE's operating regions merited more studied attention, and so recommended applying a regional lens and involving regional management in the future research.

In order to meet these demands in Phase 2, the SII expanded its base of research exponentially. To extend and probe Phase 1 learning, the SII's broad research questions remained the same, but its particular aims were to:

- a) broaden the sample of programs investigated;
- b) deepen our understanding of empowerment, its measurement, and approaches for monitoring and evaluation and provide simple, pragmatic guidance to CARE program staff about how they can improve their programs' impacts on women's empowerment; and
- c) test approaches to ongoing critical reflection, forms of inquiry that can become part of the basics of project implementation and monitoring

Annex 2 presents the principal research sites and streams on which this Phase 2 report has drawn. To the original five country studies, the global team added over two dozen new sites. They include six new in-depth field studies, three participatory assessments, three in-depth desk reviews of project documents, two preliminary inquiries to understand and build relevant research methods for empowerment in local context, nine existing donor-funded evaluations modified to integrate empowerment analysis, 14 efforts to embed Phase 1 learning in new project designs, three light reflective exercises, and a repeat of the global analysis of CARE's program information network (C-PIN). Sectorally, these studies explore empowerment outcomes in work on education and child labor, health and violence prevention, economic development, agriculture and natural resources management, disaster early warning, civil society strengthening, sanitation, nutritional security, integrated community development and livelihood security

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<sup>5</sup> In Phase 1, four field sites (Bangladesh, Ecuador, India and Yemen) launched original research, and the global SII Team analyzed a set of project evaluations, proposals, and qualitative data provided by more than 400 projects. For further details and discussion on Phase 1 methods and findings, see Mosedale 2005, Schuler 2006, and Glenzer 2006. These and all SII reports are available online at <http://csps.emory.edu/CARE%20SII.dwt> .

promotion. It is interesting (although not conclusive) to note that the vast majority of the projects volunteered for study are funded by European donors – potentially signaling a greater consciousness and sense of accountability among those projects that can be traced to donor concern for gender equity outcomes.

As research designs ranged widely in their specific questions, and collection and analysis of data, at the point of regional and global synthesis these differences were treated with great sensitivity. By triangulating across sites and methods, we have sought to focus on prevalent patterns, and to accord the studies their corresponding level of weight in order to maximize the validity of our findings.

### 3. Our analytic roadmap: the women's empowerment framework

*Agency* reflects the aspirations, resources, actions and achievements of women themselves. Every woman has agency, and analyzes, decides, and acts without CARE being involved. Sometimes she does so in ways that challenge gendered power inequities; sometimes, in ways that reinforce them. Empowerment entails a journey through which she increasingly uses her agency to expand options and challenge inequities.

*Structures* are the accepted rules, norms and institutions that condition women's choices and chances. Structures can be both tangible and intangible; behaviors and ideologies. Examples include kinship, economic markets, religion, caste and other social hierarchies, educational systems, political culture, forms of organization, and many, many more.

*Relations* are the vehicle through which women negotiate their needs and rights. Empowerment, in part, relies on individual women building relationships, joint efforts, coalitions, and mutual support, in order to claim and expand agency, alter inequitable structures, and so realize rights and livelihood security.

Women's agency is the most visible domain of empowerment, and it draws the most attention by development agencies like CARE who seek to leverage women's action to drive social change. But agency is constantly shaped – advanced and undermined – by the structures and power relations that shape women's choices. The only coherent way to understand empowerment is as a constant interaction across all three domains.

The Phase 1 synthesis report outlines the approach that this SII has taken to developing definitions, dimensions, and indicators of empowerment in each research site. That approach is guided by a global research framework that draws on existing theoretical work on empowerment, but also subjects that framework to challenge by the ways that women themselves define empowerment.

Development of the global research framework began with a broad concept of empowerment, as it is most commonly theorized in the development literature: “**the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable the institutions that affect their lives**” (Narayan 2001). This broad conception was then further grounded in feminist theory as “**the expansion in [women's] ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them**” (Kabeer 1999). It is worth noting that neither of these definitions actually name power directly, a lacuna we will return to in our findings section. However, Kabeer's feminist definition

holds an important key to guide CARE's rights-based inquiry. When women's ability to choose has been denied to them, this represents an exercise of power, and implies the need to address the structural underpinnings of women's subordinate status and the repetitive relationships that perpetuate these structures.

The SII research builds from these ideas to test a theory that enduring impacts on women's empowerment rely on critical changes across three deeply inter-related dimensions: **agency, structure, and relations**. And so the research teams asked: What evidence is there that CARE's programs:

- support the expansion of women’s capabilities to identify, pursue and achieve their basic needs and rights? (**Agency**)
- promote a more responsive and equitable enabling environment, as embodied in cultural constructs, legal and policy frameworks, economic and market forces, and bureaucratic and organizational forms? (**Structure**)
- promote more interdependent and accountable relationships between women and the key people and institutions they engage with in pursuit of their needs and rights? (**Relations**)

The IMLT team identified from the literature 23 “evidence categories” for researchers to consider when assessing women’s empowerment. Most importantly though, local research teams did not use this research framework uncritically. Each team first surfaced women’s ideas of empowerment (or, more frequently, a desired state that differed in important ways from the women’s empowerment framework) – and negotiated a framework for the inquiry that sought to explore the changes that mattered most to women in their context, and that held the greatest promise of impact on gender equity.

#### ***4. Now the journey comes to you...***

And so, we return to the central issue raised earlier in this section. In order to know how to assess the findings presented in the next section of this report, we must understand the guiding logic behind the mosaic of sites and methods explored in the SII. Across both Phase 1 and Phase 2, when we step back from the SII’s variegated weave, we can see:

- an attempt to **promote empowerment** of poor women themselves in the research process, and of the front-line staff who support them.
- an attempt to be open to the ideas and challenges of **partners**, allies, and skeptics from the development field, academia, and the feminist movement.
- an attempt to be **accountable**, not only to the donors who rightly demand to know what difference CARE’s work makes in the long run, but also to the many other stakeholders at local, national, and regional levels.
- a preoccupation with **discrimination**, starting with the fundamental commitment to surfacing and responding to diverse women’s own views of what matters in their lives, and allowing their knowledges to challenge those of the powerful aid industry that seeks to shape their lives.
- a commitment to **non-violence** which seeks learning processes that are sensitive to the traumas that women and men have faced, and not only avoid new harms, but where possible create learning and dialogue processes that heal.
- a search for **sustainable results** by eschewing the comfort of a simple and clear research design that will please some, but alienate others we seek to engage; and by piecing together a mosaic of methods and data that attempts to show, in ways we hope complement and correct for each others’ limitations, an important new way of understanding the nature and drivers of CARE’s impacts on women’s empowerment.

### **III. Learning to Interpret Changes in Women’s Empowerment**

So what have we found? That when we educate a girl, we educate a nation? That a loan we put in the hand of a woman lifts a family out of poverty? That when we get women working together, nothing can stop them? The story, alas, is not so simple.

While the SII's story is neither simple nor soothing, this section will show that it is rich with entry points and possibilities for CARE to shape the wider social transformations that can realistically be called "women's empowerment." While Section IV will present the bulk of that story, in Section III we will try to offer useful analytical hooks to help us make sense of the evidence that shapes the SII story. It is structured as follows: Part 1 introduces the initial findings drawn from Phase 1 of the SII, and paradoxes and puzzles it left us to face as we entered Phase 2. Part 2 offers a new way of thinking about the data that helps us understand patterns of evidence across Phase 1 and Phase 2. This analytic frame suggests that CARE will have the greatest impacts on women's empowerment when we strategically pursue a broader agenda for transformation of power relations between women and men.

### ***1. Starting point: lessons from Phase 1***

The title of one Phase 1 study might serve as a headline for the major findings of that first dip into the Women's Empowerment SII: "Missing in Action – How CARE Programs Shy from Structural and Relational Changes for Women's Empowerment". (Glenzer 2005). In many ways, the portion of the CARE world investigated in Phase 1 seemed to be a portfolio caught between the needs-based, high volume, service delivery projects that made CARE's name in the 1980s-1990s, and an emerging organizational niche seeking more enduring impacts on the underlying causes of poverty and social injustice. On one side, we see a clear aptitude to work at the scale of 9 million women in a single project, fostering changes in women's knowledge, income, skills, participation, decision-making in households and communities, health-seeking behaviors and literacy. On the other, we see the failure to guide those changes to their strategic potential due to weak understanding of gender, power, and the political economic context. The research revealed staff feeling their way with inadequate guidance through rights-based approaches, without clear strategies to address underlying causes of poverty and social injustice, and with internal practice of gender and diversity principles below what CARE should demand of itself.

In this context, while short-term progress in women's capabilities was clear, the cases revealed that these gains were fragile and easily reversible. Our "take-away message" from Phase 1, then, was that CARE was still focused on what we were good at (promoting self-help, characterized as women's agency), but failing to rise to our rights-based rhetoric by avoiding the harder and more political work of structural and relational change.

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, the aftermath of Phase 1 has seen the rise of a much-needed debate in CARE, which has deepened with the progress of Phase 2 research. On one side we hear a plea for realism about our constrained capacity as an NGO to "change the world," for being justifiably proud of our role in women's achievement of better living conditions and higher aspirations, and for faith that those changes will accelerate deeper political, social, and economic shifts in their own time. On the flip side (and often in the same breath), we hear discomfort among those committed to CARE's vision to end poverty and social injustice. The implication of Phase 1 was that, in some ways, we are contributing to women's continued subordination in the gendered power hierarchies – harnessing their labor and exposing them to risk in order to promote socioeconomic development of their still-patriarchal societies.



The findings exposed a lack of critical reflection in our work about larger debates about power and poverty in the rights and development fields.<sup>6</sup> Do we believe that changes in gender relations and equity will be led – fostered and provoked – by economic growth and democratization? Or do we believe that economic growth and rules-based political changes can deepen and exacerbate gender inequality? Are income gains among women automatically indicators of greater gender equity or can gender inequity make short-term income gains short-lived and easily reversible?

And what does it mean to us, for example, that one of the pioneers of feminist organizing for empowerment in South Asia writes today that “...women’s empowerment has been both “downsized” and instrumentalized within (this) neoliberal paradigm.” Or, as one longtime activist in the Indian Mahila Samakhya women’s movement complains, “if you organize women into production units, they are considered empowered, no matter how badly they are treated in their homes or communities!” (Batiwala 2006: 6-7).

And so the stakes for Phase 2 are high. The research had to go beyond confirming the emerging SII storyline to engage with deeper questions of our assumptions about the nature of empowerment, its association with economic poverty, and the conventions and compromises that we use in our daily work to align the advancement of women’s human rights with the competing goals and ideologies of the development enterprise. Perhaps, in moving beyond the headlines to explore the “fine print” of Phase 1 findings, we would find clues to explain why this organization, after 10 years of stated commitment to promoting gender equity, struggles still to focus effectively on this task.

## ***2. Paradoxes and puzzles: thinking beyond Phase 1***

Across the Phase 2 studies, this deeper dig has led staff research teams to a far more complex picture of change than they have been conditioned to expect by the linear and short-term thinking that shapes our project world. Just two examples set the stage of what the SII team as a whole confronted by the end of Phase 2 – a scene full of promise and disappointment, of unintended harms alongside heretofore undervalued benefits. A world of paradoxes and puzzles that challenge us to ponder more deeply, and approach more coherently, the untidy realities of women’s empowerment and social change.

### ***Afar, Ethiopia: Multiple Mirages of Impact***

[I]t is evident that CARE has helped increase women’s awareness of self worth within the community, encouraged women to speak out at meetings, be part of organizations and be recognized as valuable members of the community. CARE has also encouraged education for females within the community. Many...have stated that the work done by this association has been a major contributor to the advancement of the position of women in the community. (CARE Ethiopia 2006: 51)

It appears that physically, FGC [female genital cutting] practices have changed very little over the past eight (8) years....FGC project interventions have brought the subject into the open and allowed individuals, communities and institutions to discuss the subject freely. Once the topic of discussing any issues related to sex was taboo within the community. Now not only women speak openly, but other community members such as government officials, interested parties, religious

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi (2004) for a political analysis of the emergence of rights-based discourse in an era of economic neoliberalism and globalization.

and community leaders and the males in society talk about the issues that were previously only 'private women's business.' All other groups of women, and the female and male interviewees were adamant that there is not female/male equality within the rural Afar communities and this challenges any right seeking behavior. In addition, data from the only mixed group in the research showed that while men felt that previous inequalities of females and males have now changed clearing the way for a woman to seek her rights, the women were adamant that this was not so. (CARE Ethiopia 2006: 55)

In November and December 2005, an end of project evaluation of CARE's project to eliminate female genital cutting among the Afar in Ambara of Awash Fentale districts of Ethiopia, revealed that CARE's work had succeeded. Many thousands of girls, it followed, could be counted as CARE beneficiaries in the present, girls who would not be cut as a result of our work. By extrapolation, we could plausibly argue that our work would benefit future generations. A number of CARE International members put these results on their Web sites.

Around three months later, the SII showed no reduction at all in FGC. How to explain the discrepancy? What does this tell us about both our approaches to fostering greater gender equity and how we determine what success is? Most intriguing: why is it that while project staff and Afar themselves characterize women as subservient, compliant, and timid, the raw data from the impact inquiry reveal women that are constantly seeking room to maneuver, transgressing gender norms, strategizing around patriarchs, and actively carving out larger gendered spaces for action?

More Phase 2 puzzles arise for us from other sites, puzzles of both measurement and what constitutes lasting impact on poverty and social justice.

### ***Dinajpur, Bangladesh: Addressing violence, or provoking it?***

[In most of rural Bangladesh] [v]iolence against women is considered a normal part of life by a significant number of both men and women. It is considered a personal and private affair to be handled within the family or local context. The legal system is distrusted and widely perceived (including by representatives of the legal profession) as unlikely to provide unbiased justice in cases of violence against women. Related factors such as dowry and child marriage are illegal but almost universally practiced. Many villagers willingly express unhappiness with the situation (particularly with respect to dowry) but see no socially viable alternatives...

[W]omen stated that there has been an increase in violence due to the increase in the amounts involved in dowry, which particularly affects women from poor households....The women also felt that younger women tended to suffer more violence than older ones, because older women who stayed with their husbands had developed defensive coping strategies, which usually involved curbing their reactions and placating husbands. The role of the husbands' family members seemed to vary, from actively encouraging or participating in the violence to trying to curb severe violence. The role of local leaders also tended to vary, but less severe violence is widely condoned and seen as part of a "natural" order of men having the right to discipline their wives. (Kanji(1) 2006: 5)

The conjunction of increasing violence against women, increasing dowry, child marriage, and macro economic growth (Bangladesh has been growing at around five percent in

the past five years) should make CARE stop and reflect. How important are “easy numbers” about individual women’s and households’ economic gains – through, for example, Bangladesh’s own Rural Maintenance Program which has increased women’s incomes and self respect through cash-for-work and in FY2006 alone claimed 22 *million* indirect beneficiaries – when they go hand in hand with widening violence against women, male anger and backlash, and deepening of the two strongest kinds of patriarchal control and power over women’s daily lives, dowry and marriage?<sup>7</sup> What does it mean in such a case to demonstrate that CARE programs improved road access for millions?

These brief examples, and the dozens like them that arise across the SII, call us to question more deeply our assumptions about what constitutes empowerment – and how it unfolds in women’s lives. They point to central paradoxes of our work to promote empowerment:

- (1) ***What we can count, may not count for women’s empowerment.*** Income does not in itself equal empowerment; nor does participation in a group. We must not mistake the forest for the trees. When we focus on the changes that we *can* easily achieve, count and report, we often incur an opportunity cost by underinvesting in the kinds of changes that feed structural change, and fail to see these changes when they do arise. As one observer noted, “we risk becoming increasingly skilled in measuring increasingly irrelevant phenomena” (Karp, Emory Exchange).
- (2) ***Our drive to show attributable results in the short term can blind us to the real progress and pathways of long-term impact on women’s empowerment.*** Declaring failure in either of the above projects, based on persistence of FGC or of VAW, means that we fail to see, and to capitalize on, their most significant impacts – in perceptions, creation of new social spaces where gender roles are debatable, new discussions between men and women, between the powerful and less powerful, and practices. We risk a missed opportunity to take them from “good” to “great” if we abandon them before these changes consolidate in the social transformation needed if these practices are to cease.

We will turn now to a new way of looking at the SII data, which helps to illuminate how these paradoxes work to handicap the majority of our projects’ impacts, and also what kinds of strategies are needed to overcome them.

### ***3. Adjusting our Optic: Interpreting change through Narrow- and Wide-Screen lenses.***

CARE currently operates on a spectrum of approaches that can be usefully characterized as “narrow screen” or “wide screen.” We will sketch the basic features of these two paradigmatic models, as they help us understand how the majority of the projects reviewed in this study work, and why they are challenged to have transformational impacts on women’s empowerment.

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<sup>7</sup> But see a more interesting analysis of RMP later in this section. Empowerment gains are likely much higher than many expected in CARE’s long-running cash-for-work project for women building rural infrastructure. Yet a lack of timely gender, power, and political economic analysis and strategizing have massively limited RMP’s transformational potential.



At its core, the difference between “narrow-screen” approach to development and a “wide-screen” approach is about *the relative authenticity of a commitment to ending poverty (at whatever price)*. What this means in practical terms is that achievement of a goal is not determined by the terms of a contract, but in the lives of women and men.

In the extreme case “narrow-screen” means that we tacitly commit to goals that are easily measurable, fundable, and palatable – goals that support our image of effectiveness and efficiency, and thereby earn us political capital to persist in our efforts. We hear echoes of this perspective in the “good enough” debates signaled in section I.2 above. Although we will see that “narrow screen” efforts can seed unplanned impacts on wider structures and relations of women’s empowerment, these benefits or harms are not part of the intervention’s logic, and are often unseen. If they do add up to transformational change, this should be seen as little more than “just luck” – in the words of one SII researcher. The narrow-screen is not simply a resting point in the journey to end poverty; it is a fundamentally reduced ambition about where that journey ends. It may be present in something as “small” as an education project that overlooks inconvenient patterns of exclusion of indigenous girls in order to boost its rates of enrollment and retention; in something as “large” as an industry built around shipping (with aid dollars) surplus maize meal to hungry Africans when what is needed are fair trade regimes that level the playing field for African farmers on the world market; or even in the cynicism of Millennium Development Goals’ recognition that existing (and deeply inequitable) rates of economic growth in China and India alone may allow us to “check off” success against Objective 1, even as we recognize that this leaves vast tracts of Africa, the Andes, and other “basket case” economies – and women everywhere – at the mercy of trickle-down economics. And that the highest international target for Gender Equity Goal 3 will be fulfilled by getting more girls through school.

As stated in the SII evaluation of a disaster early warning project in El Salvador,

*If the women have managed to make advances and recognize these, this takes place outside of any analysis or consciousness of gender; there is no vision affected by gender that permits them to establish the linkage between their gendered positions, poverty, and the project’s interventions. In the same way, there is a weak conception of rights, and a weak consciousness of the women as rights-bearers. (CARE El Salvador: 14)<sup>8</sup>*

In reviewing this evaluation, CARE El Salvador staff made the following notation:

*Very important – a gender equity perspective would use the tools of inclusion and learning TO MOVE A DEEPER CHANGE – something that many times we as professionals do not understand, and we wind up selling the change short.*

In contrast to the narrow-screen approach, the “wide-screen” first seeks to understand how political, economic, and social barriers at multiple levels subvert development and, second, has an enduring commitment to link interventions and opportunities consistently until those causes are transformed. A wide-screen approach demands a coherent idea of how individuals, households, communities, and nations develop – a theory of poverty reduction – and a transparent and refutable theory of change: How CARE efforts will contribute to the desired social, political, and economic changes. In this approach, we tend to embed linear and direct measures of achievement within more complex and

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<sup>8</sup> Quotes translated from the original report language by the author of this report are marked in italics.

qualitative measures of social change. Projects are an important vehicle in wide-screen approaches, but they are supplemented with non-project efforts of advocacy, relationship and coalition building, and organizational development. Where these kinds of impacts are not of interest to donors, we conscientiously market more limited interventions (project and non-project activities) that directly contribute to advance “wide screen” strategies. In short, wide-screen approaches make projects more valuable to the poor and make projects more likely to result in long-term, lasting impacts on poverty and social justice.

We must reiterate the fundamental insight of this narrow-screen/wide-screen analytic lens, lest it be misunderstood in the “either/or” culture of the development industry. We are NOT talking about the classic development debates on constraints of small budgets-versus-large, or about project-versus-program. It is an artifact of our industry that most of our projects *do* tend to adopt narrow-screen perspectives, and that under-funded interventions are often so constrained that they lack the basic analytic or political insight needed to position their work for wider impact. Indeed, in many places, projects do tend to be hermetic entities. They may entail valuable activities that help women to win important short-term gains, but we will seldom know whether the changes wrought will flourish to their full potential or wither on the vine when external support is withdrawn. Once the project ends, if we do not get more restricted funds, we shut down our work in that area. We let staff go and lose what they have learned. We complete formalities with operational partners and say goodbye, waiting until the next contract to contact them.

However, we must register that many development *programs* and long-term projects conform to the same circumscribed narrow-screen logic that some attribute to the short-term project. There are long-lived efforts like RMP that fail to see the political capital they can offer to smooth the way for more innovative initiatives. And there are strategically positioned projects (small and large) that build, consciously and assiduously, the next needed step in a wider social process of transforming gender relations. It is not the vehicle (project or program) that defines narrow- or wide-screen approaches; rather it is the breadth of our theory of transformational change, and the depth of our commitment to working creatively towards this end.

Fundamentally, an organization committed to promoting enduring impact on the underlying causes of poverty and social injustice has only one responsible choice in the face of this narrow-screen / wide-screen divide. It must clarify and subject to debate its strategy for transformational change, and nurture what it theorizes to be seedlings of that transformation across the boundaries of one project, one donor, and one organization.

Few of the projects in this year’s SII fall on either extreme of the narrow-wide continuum, all having made some attempts to understand and address aspects of empowerment. Staff efforts notwithstanding, those that CARE’s programming systems seem to have positioned for “narrow screen” results include Awash FGC, Eritrea’s integrated GBV project, Mali’s community-based microfinance (CBMF) portfolio, Somalia’s Northern Somalia Partnership Project, the Rural Maintenance Project in Bangladesh, the EI Salvador Early Warning System project, and all of the LAC evaluation projects. In Phase 2 of the SII, those that seem positioned to contribute to “wide screen” impacts included Nijera and VAW in Bangladesh, CASHE and STEP in India, Tanzania’s Magu project, and Niger’s VSL portfolio.

Why have we spent so much space developing this metaphor in the context of Phase 2 SII reporting? **We argue that at root, Phase 2 research reveals a women’s empowerment portfolio producing important benefits for women, but limited by “narrow-screen” horizons. The resulting performance gap first appears in our ability to secure short-term benefits – we actually see evidence that the lack of wider-screen commitment reduces impact on the concrete, measurable, and material conditions of women’s empowerment. But more importantly, seen against a wider-screen commitment to transformational impact, these interventions are revealed as missed opportunities to build toward the kind of impact to which we commit in our vision. Furthermore, we argue that the performance gap can be closed by radically adjusting how we see and value the kinds of results that narrow-screen approaches produce – using them, indeed, as entry points and milestones in a clear strategy for long-term, wide-screen impact. Such an approach, we argue from the evidence of CARE’s work around the world, is eminently possible, and in Section V of this report, we will spell out in detail what it would concretely entail. And finally, we argue that the gap between what is currently considered respectable and what could be “world class” with regard to our impacts on women’s empowerment masks harms that should be unacceptable to us once we recognize them, and is a strategic threat to CARE’s global brand, reputation, niche, and comparative advantage.**

#### **IV. Core Findings, Take 1: The Potential (and Pitfalls) of Some Very Good Projects**

Phase 2 research findings reveal a portfolio of projects marked in varying degrees by narrow-screen perspectives – and some glimmers of the potential of wide-screen thinking. While our secondary data makes clear that there are important numbers of projects on either end of the narrow-to-wide continuum, both primary and secondary studies show that the real story of CARE’s empowerment work lies in a vast middle ground of mixed effects – of false starts and seedlings to be nourished to their transformational potential. The heart of the Phase 2 SII story does not lie in projects that never seriously tried to address gender inequity – but rather in those that have struggled to do so with mixed effect.

We will begin our discussion of core findings by focusing on these cases, looking from three different vantage points at the strengths and weaknesses of programs that represent the majority of work explored in Phase 2 of the SII. First, we will introduce the mixed impacts of two very good projects – projects that we can appreciate as having produced impressive results that even enter the realms of structural and relational change, but which could have far greater impacts had they been crafted and sustained within a program focused on gender equity. Second, we will turn up our focus on harms that cut across most of the projects of this genre – harms that move beyond the realm of “tradeoffs,” and represent unacceptable outcomes for any rights-based commitment to women’s empowerment. Finally, we will take a comparative look at three of the Village Savings and Loan projects explored in depth during Phase 2 – all in Africa, all broadly patterned on one model of community-based microfinance, and all shaped by the scale of their ambitions to achieve a distinct level of impact on women’s empowerment.

## 1. *Of potential, missed opportunity, and opportunity costs.*

First, we will probe the mixed effects of two projects: their impressive results, and the missed opportunities and opportunity costs that derive from the untapped potential of their mainly narrow-screen positioning. For this, we return to the Afar region of Ethiopia, and the Awash FGC Eradication project mentioned in Part III.1 above, and then we will travel to Guatemala, and CARE's bumpy partnership with a Mayan women's rights organization.

### *Overlooking important changes in Awash*

So, how shall we interpret the Awash FGC findings? Has the project failed because it did not appear to eradicate FGC in three years? Was it misconceived from the start because it has only the most tenuous links to economic gains (economic poverty reduction)? Is women's empowerment status unchanged because FGC persists?

From a "narrow-screen" perspective, which counts cases of FGC abandonment as proof of impact, it cannot yet claim success. And let us recall that in the narrow-screen perspective, decisions about what matters and what does not matter when it comes to project performance are determined by the very institutional form of the short-term project in which big, concrete, tangible, and countable gains must be promised to a donor who insists on efficiency in project delivery. But the folly of such an assessment is evident on many levels. On the most obvious level, we cannot know today what will become of the revolutionary pledges that some women are making not to have their pre-pubescent daughters cut. Only time and sustained engagement can tell. More importantly, this optic blinds us to changes our work *is* promoting in gender relations and ideologies. And finally, it provides no incentives to question how the changes we *can* see are linked to underlying changes in the local socio-political economies that sustain the practice of female genital cutting. It would be a tragic missed opportunity if all we harvest from the Awash project's rich learning is a premature and narrow-sighted pronouncement of failure or success.

And still, what the Awash SII team found – once they got over their shock about FGC – was that CARE's approaches were delivering very important gains. A law was moving through the Ethiopian regional judicial system to ban FGC, a law in which CARE's work in Awash since 1996 surely was a cause. Lines of dialogue had been formed between previously non-communicating social actors: imams and women, male elders and women's groups, women among themselves (with regard to issues such as human rights). Perhaps most importantly, the CARE work in Awash had opened up a space in which men and women publicly debate FGC and other gender issues. It is difficult to imagine a more important first step towards greater gender equity than actually creating a new social norm that allows for such a conversation. A performance paradigm that pushes us to report out "big numbers" can blind us to qualitative results like these, simply because they are hard to use to justify our work.

"Narrow-screen" approaches when it comes to gender and power also tend to simplify the category of "women," so that all women are seen equally as victims of FGC and ending FGC will benefit "all women." The assumption that women are nothing but victims needing our help is a symptom of patriarchy at work, in our own heads and project planning processes. Once women are nothing but victims, then the only outcome that can "empower" them are things that CARE makes happen...and if those

things that we bring to women don't work, then there has been no significant improvement in women's lives. This casting of women in victim roles makes us blind to women's acts of courage, struggle, heroism, and gender boundary breaking and, importantly, to the actual strategies and interventions that CARE might adopt to assist their struggles and journeys, rather than insist that they adopt ours:

During a field trip while the villagers were gathered around answering questions, the children returned from morning school and joined the group, standing in the background. A young woman from that group approached a member of the CARE Awash team who was quietly observing and started speaking. She wanted to know if anyone could help because she was afraid that, very soon, her parents were going to 'sell' her in marriage and she will have no say in the matter. She explained that her father and others in the community had the right to choose her husband. She explained she did not want this and wished to remain in school to study more because she enjoyed learning and wanted an education.

This beautiful young girl could not have been much more than 12 years old, and was powerless to make a decision regarding her own future. Marriage for her will probably be to an old man and from then on she will be treated as a slave, have no rights or say in anything, particularly child bearing or family planning. She will probably never have the opportunity to be financially independent, never acquire the education she so desperately desires and never know the meaning of the right to choose.

However, she obviously had the courage to speak out, even talk to a stranger about her predicament, and that showed great bravery in a society where women and girls have been conditioned from birth to accept their fate and according to tradition and culture be subservient to her parents or husband.

(CARE Ethiopia 2006: 43)

It is possible to see the above act of courage principally as an oddity, a beacon of hope, yes, but still irrelevant since by the age of 12, this girl will have been cut. Yet the SII's evidence strongly suggests that CARE's efforts to open up lines of communication and dialogue about FGC and women's rights more broadly are a proximate cause for that 12-year-old girl's coming forward and asking for help in such an open and honest fashion. The CARE Ethiopia team itself withholds judgment on this question. They are focused today on digging deeper still in order to hone their approaches and to understand the perspective that Afari women themselves bring to FGC. What is it about a girl like this, or a woman who pledges not to cut her daughter, that enables them to take those steps against the odds?

The Afar SII confronted the CARE research team with uncomfortable realities that challenged oversimplification and defied our staff to engage more realistically with the sometimes circuitous pathways by which women pursue their goals. On the one hand, the team struggled to know how to proceed when women told them that of course they were going to ensure that their daughters would be cut. How else would they find husbands, become women, and earn respect as an adult in their society? And they were challenged by women's description of what they considered to be a description of their own "empowerment": *Hilally* or *dieto* are the local words they would use, they told SII team members. These are words that describe a woman who is married, takes care of her husband and children, knows how to treat guests, to keep a home. A *hilally/diето* woman keeps her tongue, is subservient to her husband. Confronted by local meanings

of empowerment that seemed so contradictory to those in the global SII framework, SII team members struggled genuinely to know in which terms to frame the study.

On the other hand, in the very next breath, SII dialogues revealed a world in which women take on more “male” roles, behaviors and responsibilities that subvert and redefine *hilally/dieto* ideals. And they are admired for doing so. They run away to Djibouti, for example, to earn their own money, see the greater world, and then sometimes return to their village to marry and settle down,<sup>9</sup> but with an intangibly higher status than a woman who has never left.

Once they [the males] used to consider us like slaves but now we are making little changes by looking at Afar women who are back from Djibouti. "A cow which has had an experience of seeing a lion and the one which has not passed through [had] such an experience can't run with equal pace." I have stated this saying to show that our husbands are oppressing us as we have married before visiting urban life. But women married back from Djibouti are living a good life. Males/our husbands are even interested to marry these women. (29)

These contradicting narratives can easily be missed, or written off as outliers. In fact, they point to incredible forms of resistance and subversion by women embedded in a patriarchy so deep that it even denies them the language with which to describe their aspirations. Patriarchy is but one form of domination; development experts can impose another if we are not careful – even with something as apparently benign as a women’s empowerment framework. It is not far-fetched to link these words to insights on discourse and power drawn from another, more consciously feminist community of Afro-Columbian women:

Portraying third-world women either as victims of patriarchy and/or capitalist development or as resisters and guardians of their natural and social environments provides inadequate understandings of the complex and uneven nature of power and resistance” (Asher 2003: 43).

Free from the narrowing demands of results-based-management or the women’s empowerment framework, however, Afar women themselves express no anger or dismay that CARE’s work has not ended FGC. They clearly understand the political and moral economy of FGC much better than CARE staff, and understand how changes in FGC will only occur along with changes in male attitudes about women’s bodily integrity and assumptions about sexual behavior and desire, and changes about marriage and the social and economic safety nets that a “good marriage” and “good family” offers.

It is a sad irony that the FGC work explored in the SII was meant to build on a two-year operations-research effort that was informed by just such an understanding and a more nuanced social change model. We must consider how management transitions and weak institutional learning processes can erase those earlier lessons, which recognized the importance of myriad individual and social changes needed to “add up” to FGC eradication, concluding that:

After 18 months of FGC abandonment interventions, there were significant changes in knowledge, awareness and community attitudes toward FGC...

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<sup>9</sup> And, certainly, often do not return due to any number of forms of human rights violations: trafficking, violence, etc.

Attitudes and beliefs were starting to shift. Once unimaginable, men and women were now having public debates and discussions about alternatives to FGC... To address the issue of FGC effectively, issues of gender and rights need to be addressed. Tackling gender dynamics and power structures requires focusing on underlying social currents that influence a community's attitudes, practices and beliefs. (Rajadurai and Igras 2005: 20).

The point we would like to insist on here is the tremendous missed opportunities and opportunity costs of our work when we miss these perspectives on social change. What if we had based this work on the knowledge that women are savvy strategists, adept at opening up spaces for themselves, rather than an assumption of women as victims and oppressed? Might we make greater progress towards the end of FGC? And sustained progress toward ending the gender inequity that so deeply shapes poverty, mortality, and morbidity in Afar?

### ***Guatemala: organizational strengthening, or weakening a movement?***

In Guatemala, a three-year project to strengthen and promote literacy and rights-awareness through formation and strengthening of the indigenous Mayan women's Integrated Development Association of the Women of Huehuetenango (ADIMH) achieved astounding results. Over the course of the project's life, ADIMH grew to 110 members (from its original 10), fortified its organizational capacities, gained a foothold in the municipal policymaking dialogues, and established its credibility as a partner for development projects targeting this deeply excluded segment of Guatemalan society. Its most spectacular achievements were in the outreach that this group of 110 women obtained: 8,000 women reached in cascading groups with training and discussion of their human rights, and 1,350 women achieving reading and writing literacy in the Spanish language. In Guatemala's context of adult literacy training, this unthinkable success rate of 70 percent literacy among enrollees belies an even more powerful story – ADIMH's success in developing a literacy training methodology that reflects Mayan culture and heritage and yet breaks patriarchal and racist paradigms in ways that enticed women to learn, not only to read, but to examine their lives.

And yet, a “wide-screen” reading of the FODEMH project's impact makes explicit the difference between these narrow development impacts and the foundations of lasting progress towards full rights and citizenship for these women. The SII study's gender and power perspective leaves us wishing for more, as illustrated in these reflections on CARE Guatemala's support to ADIMH:

*The testimonies of these women express important steps they have taken towards their liberation. Even in dimensions that are not of great importance for their community or their municipality, they are of vital importance to the women themselves. And still, they allow us to see the long road they still have to travel to overcome exclusion due to gender and ethnicity, and to have the capacities needed to recognize themselves as active citizens and active agents of change. The pace and dynamic of change amid women's daily struggle to manage their lives in conditions of poverty do not conform to the expectations or operational plans of projects (García Meza 2006).*

It is not simply an accident, or an oversight, that renders this project an important opportunity missed. Its shortcomings are a direct result of the priorities and practices of the aid project itself. FODEMH was not the first instance of CARE Guatemala's

collaboration with the Mayan women leaders of Huehuetenango. An earlier civil society strengthening initiative in the same region had helped these women to organize the Women's Forum of Huehuetenango in a drive for recognition of their full citizenship rights. The young *Foro* was a network for Mayan women's rights that was connected to wider social movements forming in post-war Guatemala to foster women's and indigenous people's rights, and strengthen the country's feeble democratic culture.

This experience, however, could not be carried over to the next project – despite CARE's initial hopes of responding to the donor's call for proposals with a partnership project for strengthening the *Foro* as a social movement. Donor priorities led to the proposal of a more classically “developmental” organizational strengthening and literacy campaign, and donor policies required the movement to splinter off a legally constituted local NGO (ADIMH) to be the recipient of the development contract.

And there the problems began. This new organization experienced the growing pains and internal conflicts that often beset groups formed to win a contract. The constraints of results-based management left little room to strengthen ADIMH's weak leadership skills, and led to exacerbated conflicts between CARE and ADIMH, and among the leaders and members of ADIMH. We see a troubling diversion of the association's attention from its core mission of promoting Mayan women's citizenship rights to the goals, timeframes, and accountability measures required to succeed in the short-term project world. Worse, the group itself was now seen as a rival and competitor to other women's organizations, rather than a sister in the movement from which it had sprung.

*Among the women, it is very common for them to defend their own space, to isolate themselves in the face of other women's organizations and groups, because these are seen as competition and an imminent threat of having to “share” the scarce resources of potential funding from projects... “The others,” if they are not part of the same organization, are seen as a threat for their own interests and the “power” that her organization has... Significant conceptual clarity is needed to engage this cultural situation more strategically, and create in the women the capacity to work together, recognizing their common interests.*

*(CARE Guatemala 2006: 13)*

As a result, despite the impressive results listed above, the FODEMH project missed a crucial opportunity to build on past lessons and experiences, to connect ADIMH more strongly to the national women's movement that could nurture it, and to strengthen ADIMH's voice to advocate for a coherent platform of women's rights. ADIMH today is seen as a useful *development* actor – winning a few contracts and earning some convening power as a result – yet is not financially sustainable as an NGO by the project's end, and is in competition rather than coalition with wider women's and Mayan political movements.

## **2. How narrow-screen approaches mask unacceptable harms**

If narrow-screen approaches often fail to capture important collateral or unintended impacts, they also create and then obscure harms that can only be unacceptable once revealed. Two such harms that are deeply inter-connected and flow directly from the logic of target-driven, short-term approaches to women's empowerment are increased workload for women, and a sidelining of men that exacerbates backlash and a crisis of masculinity. Often, these harms cannot be “blamed” exclusively on the project itself – they reflect pre-existing hierarchies that the project did not, or could not, eliminate. Other



times, they are the direct result of our project approaches. Either way, once we are aware of them, we are obligated to renew our efforts to prevent them.

### ***Women's empowerment = women's work??***

CARE El Salvador's 15-month disaster early warning in the vulnerable Río Jiboa watershed did not begin with any explicit goal or results framework for women's empowerment or gender equity. Despite a largely gender-blind design, the CARE El Salvador team fought with little guidance or support to reach beyond the boundaries of its logframe to promote women's participation in the project from the beginning. They did so to the best of their abilities: committing to hire women on the project's technical team and to partner with gender-sensitive organizations, requiring 40 percent female participation in both the community committees formed to manage the EWS system, and the broader training provided in risk management and response. Their SII study reveals the important shift their commitments provoked by breaking traditional gender roles and treating women as empowered respondents, rather than as helpless dependents. On the other hand, the benefits of agency came with unexpected costs for women:

*The occurrence of the disaster caused by Tropical Storm Stan in these communities, which created an overlap between the Early Warning System project and the larger emergency response and rehabilitation effort, was a factor for women's empowerment. In the first place, the emergency gave women an opportunity to put in practice their newly acquired knowledge, to put it to the test, demonstrate their capacities, be more conscious of the risk and of the necessity and importance of their participation in the response. **In the communities, the emergency was mainly responded to by women (emphasis added)** (El Salvador 2006: 12).*

*Disaster early warning and prevention activities can be more effective if they leverage the potential of women. That said, there is a risk that responsibilities for family and community "caring" and "protection" in disaster-related emergencies will fall exclusively to women. When the project's local Emergency Committees and commissions are largely made up of women, it is women who are called upon to assume the heaviest loads of work (17.)*

The study raises important and nuanced impacts such as these that would otherwise go unregistered, and asks us to consider how we feel about such an important but narrowly-defined positive impact (that women are now seen as capable and responsible for shouldering the difficult work of disaster prevention and response)? It is clear from the comments of male informants that women's assumption of these new tasks is seen, not as a shift to seeing women as equals, but as a welcome transfer of effort. What kinds of successes might this study be describing had the team begun its work with the kinds of positioning that the evaluator calls for?

*That the project design did not explicitly state any intention to affect empowerment of women and gender equity was a factor that limited the reach of its actions in this domain...CARE being an organization that has moved forward the conceptualization and methodologies for a focus on gender equity and empowerment, it is incomprehensible that the design and negotiation of the proposal with the donor agency were limited to the conditions established by the donor (13).*

When our women’s empowerment efforts intensify workloads for women, this is a real harm that we need to take seriously. Consider this list of empowerment indicators that East Africa Region compiled during its regional synthesis workshop in September:

Self-Image/Self-esteem/Confidence	Decision influence
Self-Expression	Freedom from Violence of all forms
Material assets (control)	Ability to mobilize constituency
Source of income or control of income	Ability to hold duty bearers accountable
Active involvement of participants in groups	Negotiation
Ability to identify, analyze issues that impact livelihood	New social forms
Ability to advocate issues that impact livelihood	Inclusive citizenry
	Interdependence

(ECARMU 2006: Annex 2)

Over half of these indicators of empowerment require women to do more, be better, be different, to change their attitudes and practices, and make more use of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> This approach to empowerment and gender equity – of calling forth heroic levels of agency without challenging an unfriendly terrain of structures and relations – pervades CARE’s approaches. These kinds of indicators are driven by narrow screen thinking: in a compulsion to measure changes that we can claim as ours, and then sell to a donor. And we also arrive at them – participatory approaches and all – because in the end CARE has more power to have women agree to them as goals than we have, for example, to promise donors that we will change the behaviors, attitudes, or practices of the more powerful. In the end, at a very profound if subtle level, our programs can reinforce patriarchal power structures by making women and women alone responsible for their own empowerment.

Women themselves, in the SII discussions, frequently surfaced indicators that more closely echoed those in the right-hand column of the ECAR list. These indicators, including being consulted in household decisions, being free from to gender-based violence, and seeing changes in the harmful practices of marriage and dowry, point more to changes in the behaviors, attitudes, and practices of people other than poor women themselves. These indicators suggest that women themselves give greater weight to the structural and relational aspects of their empowerment than we in the aid business tend to support. All, of course, have elements of women’s own capabilities, attitudes, and behaviors, but the most important and long-lasting impacts will be realized only when powerful men change and wide gender ideologies shift in the country.

The power of this difference comes clear when we consider the following quote from CARE Uganda’s consultations in the IDP camps of Gulu:

A key message that came up repeatedly in the workshop as well as the discussions in the camps is the need to involve men in all efforts to promote women’s empowerment. It is clear that men in the camps spend much of their time “socializing,” while the women are burdened with household activities throughout the day... the assumption that a certain economic enterprise such as rice will create food security for all is a wrong assumption... [T]he need for men to be brought on board as part of the sensitization process on women’s empowerment was highly prioritized by female participants.

(CARE Uganda 2006: 28)

<sup>10</sup> ECAR staff themselves noted the very shortcomings we are reporting here. And the region will be working to transform their programs from such purely individualistic, “women need to empower themselves” kinds of assumptions and approaches in the coming year.

### *Men, masculinities, and backlash: violence as control*

One hidden harm, then, is the added workload that empowerment efforts can imply for *women*, if undertaken without a corresponding engagement and support from men. If the women's empowerment optic explores what is happening *to men*, however, we gain new insight on how gender *relations* strained by program-sponsored change can give rise to violence and other harms. We see that men are often caught between the patriarchal and rigidly hierarchical notions of masculinity that they are taught from boyhood, and a changing social and economic fabric that threatens on a daily basis to undermine that role. When interventions to promote women's empowerment do not offer men opportunities to redefine their own identities, they can contribute to a deep crisis of masculinity. In the absence of opportunities for their own positive engagement and growth, psychological support for developing alternative self images, men can express that crisis through withdrawal, depression, suicide, resistance, subversion, or physical or psychological violence. The participatory learning and action work of the ISOFI project in India and Vietnam are revealing in this light:

For example, sex workers told countless stories of what sounded like aggressive (sometimes violent) male sexualities coexisting with men's desires to be nurtured and romanced... ISOFI staff observed the uncertainties, difficulties, and contradictions men face, which shed new light on preconceived notions of masculinity. (*Kambou et al 2006: 43*)

Similarly, women responding to questions about their autonomy in decision-making in CARE Peru's REDESA nutritional security project evaluation were well aware of the boundaries of male tolerance that they must monitor:

*What pertains to sales and soliciting loans should be done by us women, because the men go drinking with their friends if ever they receive the money – but we do need to consult them, because if we don't they'll massacre us.*  
(*CARE Peru 2006: 134*)

In Tanzania's SII study, hints of these unintended harms were enough to worry staff about impacts lurking beneath the surface of their economic development work. When presenting their initial findings, they raised important pending questions about:

- high tolerance for violence from husbands
- increased workload for daughters of village savings-and-loan members
- perceptions among non-members of being looked down on
- threatened feelings from men

In Bangladesh, however, the case-study evidence is more incontrovertible. The pilot project to end violence against women, which supports the uptake of VAW cases by *shalish* (local dispute-resolution councils), found that in some cases, the project was ill-equipped to ensure the quality of action by community leaders and to deal with the exposure this created for women – particularly young brides:

First try and control your wife with words, only beat her in the last resort. But be sure not to leave a spot (mark) on her body (*Teaching given by a project-associated religious leader, quoted in Kanji(1): 31*).

Women who continue to live with their husbands, and this is encouraged by shalish, may suffer considerable vulnerability from the more public attention to their situations... This casework does draw attention to the need for follow-up and counseling, for both wife and husband... Safeguards are needed so that the project is not encouraging public action on violence against women without trying to put in place ongoing support for the individual women's rights and well-being. This does demand CARE staff inputs into a process at the local level, which resources to date have not allowed. (34)

For too many years, our response to male violence against women, or subversion by males of women's strategies for empowerment, has been to back away. This leaves women terribly exposed, to cope or resist on their own as "responsible adults." This represents an abdication of our responsibility – leaving women and men trapped in imprisoning gendered power relations, or leaving women alone to manage the risks of initiating change. Yes, there are ways in which women's empowerment work must provoke "a crisis of masculinity" – of this limiting form of masculinity – but this crisis need not trigger fear and backlash if managed wisely. Indeed, the ISOFI action-research project mentioned above illustrates just one of the many ways in which programming can surface and engage with empathy and foresight the challenges that social change presents for both women and men. The harms to women and men can then be prevented by planning strategies to help each adjust as the power relationships reach a new, and more equitable, equilibrium.

So the narrow-screen approach reveals its analytical weaknesses in the Afar project, its strategic constraints in FODEMH, and its unacceptable failings in these and many other SII studies. Now, we turn for a sense of the more promising pathways that emerge as we widen the screen with another study from Phase 2, this a comparative investigation in Mali, Niger, and Tanzania of CARE's work in village savings and loans

### ***3. Illustrating a range: proud in Niger, hopeful in Tanzania, troubled in Mali<sup>11</sup>***

Can the wide-screen/narrow-screen framing help us understand the variations across three similar approaches? CARE's best-known Village Savings and Loan model originated in Niger in 1991, with a simple but, at that time, revolutionary notion that extremely poor women were interested in and capable of managing autonomous savings-based financial associations. Since then, Niger's MMD approach has spread to 18 countries in Africa, adapting to local program strategies and contexts, but modeled on the same organizing principle of autonomous and self-managing women's groups (CARE 2006). Though existing data allows us to say with confidence that 400,000 people, almost all of them women, have accumulated at least \$8 million in circulating loan capital, it reveals little about impacts we may be having on women's economic security or empowerment. The SII's multi-country comparative study sought to understand both these dimensions of impact of the VSL model, and the ways these vary across context.

What comes through most strongly from two of the three studies (Niger and Tanzania) is the capacity of VSL to change poor women's lives through enhancing their livelihood security, and that this is a necessary pre-condition to them gaining respect from the communities in which they live (e.g. the female household heads in Tanzania). This pathway to empowerment gains more

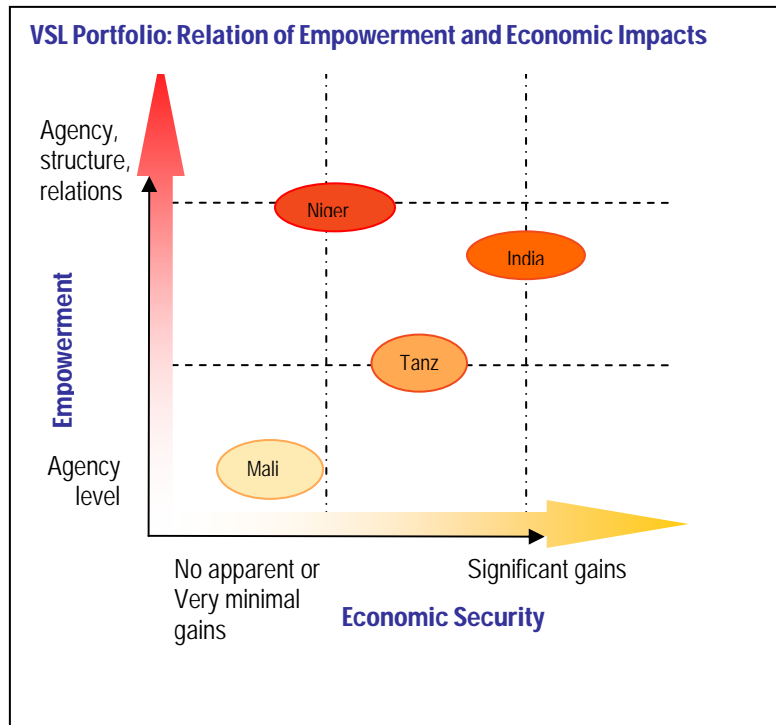
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<sup>11</sup> The final report is still pending from CARE Tanzania.

interest in that the Mali study revealed few significant differences between VSL and comparison group households with regard to economic security and, overall, much less evidence of impact on indicators of empowerment (*Pinder 2006: 8*).

How can we explain the differences in Mali, Niger, and Tanzania (illustrated in the graphic below) with regard to both economic and non-economic impacts of the same type of program? Empowerment impacts of the VSL approach seem contingent on:

a) consistency over time in attending to gendered power dynamics, b) linking of women in groups to other actors, c) deliberate strategies to bring men and women together around the VSLs, d) rural economies, and e) the degree of awareness women have of gender oppression. Furthermore, comparative analysis of both the income and empowerment effects of these three approaches to VSL reveal that not only do the social and psychological aspects of empowerment improve more significantly with the adoption of a sustained and programmatic approach to VSL methods, economic security impacts rise as well.



Niger’s study reveals that while the major gains of the VSLs are at the level of the individual woman and her household, there are small but important indications that confederated groups can play a bigger role in advocating for changes that will improve women’s lives.

Women have no doubt augmented the acquisition of assets (land, household goods...), which enables them to render household livelihoods more secure. For example, the association is used by vulnerable women to feed their children for eight months of the year and allows vulnerable households to buy food regularly because of the benefits gained from women’s economic activities. Women have also been able to mobilize savings to buy up security stocks. Women also used their capacity for financial mobilization to fund the migration of their children, diminishing the responsibility of the family for their upkeep and enhancing possibilities to increase non-agricultural income. Thus, access to association savings permits a judicious combination of agricultural and non-agricultural activities to support the livelihood strategies of vulnerable households and their members (*CARE Niger 2006: 33*).

A crucial finding, however, is that even in long-standing VSLs there is no evidence that participation in these groups actually lifts women to a new category of economic security. This finding is borne out by the comparative analysis of quantitative data from Mali and Tanzania:

In general, the data suggest that there are modest improvements *within* social positions or *within* household poverty level categorizations but no evidence that the VSL programs are lifting women out of poverty or to different and better social positions (*Petrova, personal communication, October 15, 2006*);

From a narrow screen viewpoint, this would imply that CARE is failing at its poverty eradication vision. From a broader perspective, however, in which poverty is not only economic but social, cultural, and psychological, gains for women who have participated in the Niger groups are undeniable, if impossible to quantify in the way that income can be. In effect, reducing Niger's VSL work to a measure of income misses a tremendously large percentage of impacts on underlying causes of poverty that the work is producing.

Belonging to an association...[has] a structural impact. At the community level, MMD groups become a gateway to work with women; they provide a feminine space to initiate projects before moving into a gender mixed space. In its turn, this feminine space allows women to create links with other organizations... The group or its network often serves as the interface for other development actors to undertake village-level interventions... Beyond the satisfaction of practical, short-term needs, women have defined a real strategy of assisting local development. (*CARE Niger 2006: 14*)

Despite Mali's position in the lower-left quadrant in the graphic above, there is no doubt that its VSL portfolio is also producing important gains for women, particularly at the level of self-esteem, self-confidence, and greater roles in their household decisions. VSLs appear to be helping in households with regard to educational expenditures on children and on certain kinds of health-seeking behaviors.

Throughout the course of the [group discussion] the women stated that participation in the [VSL] had a large, positive influence on their children, by promoting education, and by letting the mothers cover more of the costs of education: "Our activities allow us to pay for our children's education, we can give our children 10-25 FCFA (2-5 cents) to buy a snack during recess, without our children having to leave school (*CARE Mali 2006: 21. Translation by Glenzer*).

How proud should we be about such a result of our VSL programs in Mali? From a pure microfinance perspective, the above result would probably not earn the gold star for "best practice." Yet if we widen the view of Mali's work, one of the most striking findings in the SII research was the discovery of a set of completely unintended impacts of the VSL portfolio. None of these took the form of an indicator in project logframes, nor were they part of the SII team's definition of empowerment at the start of research. The unintended impacts of the VSL work included:

- a) *increased harmony and cohesion in the home,*
- b) *perceptions of women's increased competency by others,*
- c) *greater feeling among women of being able to manage their own lives,*
- d) *increased openness between husband and wife,*
- e) *greater mobility, and*
- f) *reduction in out-migration (both men and women).<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Mali program staff saw the narrow screen in action when the data from the SII were fully analyzed and conclusions drawn. In assessing empowerment against other dimensions, the Mali

However, for Mali's portfolio to rise to the kinds of empowerment impacts seen in Niger's work, or extend to economic impacts seen in Tanzania, requires a more strategic positioning than currently exists. The lead author of the SII in Mali minced no words:

Impact on [household livelihood security] seems small and we are unable to claim real and durable change in the life conditions of women and their households in the study zone<sup>13</sup>....Currently, [VSL] approaches are not addressing or facilitating structural change that would result in much deeper and wider impacts on empowerment. Indeed...women in MJT do not really recognize the structural forces that surround them and, so, do not really question the gendered forms of power that pattern their lives.

*(CARE Mali 2006: 8. Translation by Glenzer)*

As we turn to CARE Tanzania's analysis of a much younger VSL portfolio in Magu, the graphic above suggests lower levels of impact on empowerment than in Niger, but higher impact on economic security. Of the three sites in the multi-country VSL study, Tanzania's produced the most compelling data with regard to income gains for women and household economic security.

VSL households experienced greater food security compared to non-VSL households: 47% of VSL households had to sell assets to buy food during the last lean season compared to 60% of non-VSL households. 11.2% of VSL households experienced a great improvement in quantity and quality of meals compared to 2.2% for non-VSL households....there has been an increase in savings generated by women over the 3+ years of the programme, evidenced by 74% of VSL respondents reporting an increase in number of shares purchased, since they joined VSL groups and 88.6% reporting increase in magnitude of payouts (hence disposable income) over the same period....Both VSL and non-VSL members reported investment in housing improvement over the past 3 years. However VSL members invested an average of TSh 93,000 in housing, compared with TSh 54,000 invested by non-VSL members. 85.5% of VSL respondents reported that funds for housing investment had come from VSL loans and payouts....68% of VSL respondents were engaged in an income generating activity (IGA), compared to 13% for non-VSL members. 64% – 80% of women engaged in IGAs reported that funds invested in their IGAs during the last year were from VSL. The greater access to income by VSL members was reflected in VSL members owning slightly more household/productive assets than non-VSL members. For respective assets, between 70% - 90% of VSL members reported that respective assets were purchased with VSL loans, payouts or income from their IGAs. *(CARE Tanzania 2006: 4).*

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SII team itself had undervalued these findings a-f, essentially burying them in a single mention on page 23 of the report.

<sup>13</sup> How small, in numbers, is the economic impact of VSLs in Mali's portfolio? The following passage from the SII report from Mali is telling both in this regard but also with regard to internationally accepted measures of a poverty level of \$1/day. "The individual interviews with the [VSL] women sheds (sic) some light on their quantitative definition of sole financial self-sufficiency; for them it oscillates between 900,000 FCFA (\$1800) to 500,000 FCFA (\$1000) per year. Comparing these numbers with the level of profit earned on average using the quantitative study (20705 FCFA [\$41]), one can conclude that the individual profits do not generally allow women to attain financial self-sufficiency." We would suggest that these kinds of figures about economic poverty generated by the poor themselves should receive greater attention from international actors, whose stingier threshold of \$1 per day puts 74 percent of Malians in poverty.



Can we explore these different impacts as a function of the narrowness or width of strategy that VSL is positioned to advance in each context? In Niger, the CO has long taken a programmatic approach to its work: household livelihood security with a commitment to gender equity. For over 10 years, it has invested steadily in staff skills, knowledge, and capabilities around gender and power analysis, livelihood analysis, and understanding the political economy of gender and power in different economic, social, and cultural contexts in Niger. More so than any other African CO that we know, Niger has succeeded in understanding gender and power in long-term, historical, and political-economic context and situated individual projects within that knowledge.

The CARE Niger team itself is explicit in articulating this shift in how it understands the value and strategic function of MMD in its larger commitment to transforming the socio-economic and political conditions shaping the country.

*It is therefore clear that the objectives of the MMD program have also evolved as a function of MMD's success, and as the MMD women define new priorities that influence MMD. It is in this process that the MMD system has evolved towards a global concept, to become a « female leadership development approach » with microfinance as simply one branch of its work. MMD is now linked to CARE's interventions in Niger as the principal community engagement strategy for projects/programs focused on other domains, such as health, natural resource management, nutrition, animal husbandry, etc.. (Sayo, personal communication, December 22 2006: 7).*

There are a number of contextual and programmatic differences between Niger and Mali, not least of which being that the Niger VSL portfolio is more than a decade old, while the portfolio investigated in Mali was mostly created in the past few years. Time, clearly, plays an important role in VSL groups' abilities to promote deeper structural change around gender relations. However, Mali's explicit strategy has been to "bolt on" VSL groups in every project that it does. This has meant that the kinds of deep, nuanced understanding of gender and power that Niger possesses is missing in Mali. Very little is done with the groups in Mali around consciousness-raising about women's issues, about inequality, or about women's rights. Instead, the groups are largely positioned as a technical mechanism to allow women access to credit and savings with the assumption that this alone will, eventually, generate greater economic and empowerment gains. This is evident in the responses generated in the Mali study's qualitative component:

*The heavy weight of patriarchy was very clear in our research sites...Moreover, the inequality between genders was constantly brought up in interviews and group discussions. "It's the man who makes all the decisions; that is part of the responsibility of being a man," the husband of one participant...said, a comment that was frequently echoed." (CARE Mali 2006: 16. Translation by Glenzer)*

In Mali, the portfolio in which the VSL component was embedded had not benefited from the long, sustained investment that Niger enjoys. Knowledge of gender and power dynamics and issues was weaker than in Niger, and staff had received much less training and support either to understand the political economy of gender relations or to program to alter them. While in Niger, the CO had long recognized that atomized VSL groups could not acquire enough strength to shift gender relations and so had worked hard to link groups into larger solidarity networks, this was not done at all in the Mali



sample. And while the rural economy in Niger actually offered interesting small-scale entrepreneurial opportunities for women – and the CO had studied these opportunities in some depth – opportunities in the zones researched in Mali were not impressive and there had been little in the way of rigorous analysis prior to establishing women’s VSLs.

What, therefore, is different about CARE Tanzania’s approaches and operating contexts? Differences in rural economic markets, vibrancy, and strength are clearly important: rural women in Magu District in Tanzania live in a world with more opportunity than Malian women in Ségou Region. Further, the relatively young VSL portfolio in Tanzania – roughly the same age as the portfolio investigated in Mali – was built upon nearly a decade of integrated livelihood security programming in Magu, a concerted CARE Tanzania effort to commit to a particular zone. In contrast, many of CARE Mali’s VSL sites lack this depth of experience and contact with rural women and men. Both of these facts shape yet a third subtle but critical difference: women’s own assumptions, and their own aspirations, about the possibilities in their lives. Such attitudes, ideas, and beliefs are shaped deeply by patriarchy and societal norms regarding the “proper” roles for men and women. The table below contrasts Tanzanian women’s ideas about what a strong woman is with those of Malian women:

Mali	Tanzania
<p>A woman is empowered when she, above all else, is engaged in income generating activities (IGA) or a job that provides her the means to meet household needs.</p> <p>Secondly, an empowered woman has a husband and children (or at least the capacity to have children) – who are productive and able to take responsibility for the woman herself.”</p> <p><i>(CARE Mali 2006: 4. Translation by Glenzer)</i></p>	<p>She is a woman with a purpose in life. She is engaged in an income generating activity, such as running a tea café, selling fish or local brew or in some paid employment, in which she is knowledgeable and which brings her a good income. This is in addition to farming from which she has a good harvest. She has access to labour for her income generating activities.</p> <p>She is educated and has a healthy family with well spaced children. From her income she is able to take care of her family, bringing her children up in the way she deems fit and able to send them to school. Her children recognize and appreciate what she has done for them as a mother and in her old age they take care of her.</p> <p>She has a house made of cement/bricks with iron sheet roofing which provides better security than the mud and thatch roof housing. If the house has many rooms some can be rented out. She has access to her basic needs and owns productive assets such as land, trees, chicken, goat and cattle. Owning a lot of cattle would be great, as this is a symbol of wealth in her community. Increase in her wealth status does not affect the relations between her and her husband ‘because they love each other.’ Her family may consume the produce from her assets or she can sell them for income. For instance trees can be sold as charcoal, milk from cattle can be sold for money. She has a say on how this income should be used.</p> <p>She demonstrates good conduct and respect for others and has good relations within her family. There is ‘no worry within her family’. She is happy. <i>(CARE Tanzania 2006: 3)</i></p>

The baseline assumptions of a “strong” or “empowered” woman are very different. One would expect that a population of women who believe the Tanzania narrative of empowerment would achieve greater economic and empowerment gains in the context

of a VSL program: the women start with a much larger vision about what they can be, do, and accomplish. CARE Niger recognized this long ago and it is why the CO has invested a great deal of time, effort, and resources in increasing women's field of vision and in its own staff as gender change agents. CARE Niger has also done a great deal of work, as in the Awash program, to work with male religious and community leaders to produce win-win roles and outcomes for women's VSLs. In Tanzania, a number of their VSLs are gender mixed, with men and women saving and loaning jointly. While this raises important questions about reproduction of gender inequality and inequity within the groups themselves, it clearly is a promising strategy if CARE wishes to use the VSL entry point to leverage wider and deeper changes in gender norms, ideologies, and relations of power.

The range of impacts across Niger, Mali and Tanzania reveals how important it is that we position program interventions in ways that recognize the interplay of economic and social change. By forcing us to consider what changes matter for women in their particular social, economic, and political contexts, the wide-screen perspective can help us to know when small, incremental gains in women's individual capabilities are seedlings of greater impacts on gender inequity (and when they are simply small).

Taking in all of the cases described in this section, we see how even very good projects are thwarted by a narrow-screen framework. They can produce important benefits, but cannot, in the absence of a wider-screen understanding and commitment, work towards enduring impacts on such deeply embedded causes of poverty as gender inequity. In the sites explored above, the failure to recognize emergent changes, and to nourish them in a longer-term strategy for social change, has handicapped both short term and longer term empowerment gains. A wide-screen approach can work – and its payoffs are irrefutable. But this is much more evident in the Asia work in Phase 2. We turn to this next.

## **V. Core Findings, Take 2: Seedlings of Change in Asia**

The examples above show us very good projects whose benefits are smaller than they could have been, and create harms that are larger than they needed have been. As we move through the SII's portfolio of five studies from Bangladesh and India, we will see how a gradually widening screen can produce, and reveal, more significant results.

We begin with one of CARE's most legendary projects – the ***Rural Maintenance Project***, which closed in June 2006 after operating for 23 years across nearly every district in the country. RMP focused on providing cash for work opportunities for very poor single women (usually divorced or widowed) on rural road maintenance. At its start up in the early 1980s, RMP was groundbreaking in its attempts to gain cultural acceptance for even extremely poor women to work outside the home. Unfortunately, despite its longevity RMP operated with a largely inflexible, narrow screen focus throughout its operational life. Little analysis was undertaken of women's situations and limited reflection on how the project could further impact on the empowerment of the participating women. Overall, some 166,000 women were involved in RMP's road maintenance associations. In its limited sampling of three districts, the impact study suggests that the economic benefits to many of these women have changed their economic status by one or two wealth categories, and at the same time, their social acceptability in their communities had also grown. Nevertheless, in the

reflections of the SII research team, the members, including RMP field staff, unequivocally agreed that this impact could have been much larger and far reaching if from the mid-1990s, once it was more accepted for women to work outside the home, a solidarity group approach has been introduced, whereby women were grouped together from the same or adjacent villages, and encouraged to decide on priorities and support each other in the groups.<sup>14</sup> Thus, by not adopting a wide screen approach, RMP undoubtedly passed up the opportunity to have a far greater potential impact than in fact was the case.

The story begins to shift as we contrast the enormous RMP with Asia's smallest examined intervention, a pilot ***Violence Against Women*** initiative in Bangladesh that actually takes the widest screen approach of all the Asian projects studied. The VAW initiative built from several systematic analyses of gender and violence in the design phase.<sup>15</sup> In this analysis it was determined that the underlying cause of violence is rooted in the cultural ideology that promotes male dominance and superiority, and women's subordination and subservience. This is exemplified in many social institutions such as early marriage, polygamy, forced marriage, the lack of value given to girl's education, and dowry practices.

What is unique about the VAW initiative is that it actually tried to respond to this insight, addressing the structural, relational, and attitudinal factors that perpetuate the mythology of women's essential subordination to men. And all on a budget of only \$50,000 a year, with two full-time field staff and two part-time managers responsible for the ongoing strategizing required by the initiative.

The elected *union parishad* members, school teachers, medical staff, religious leaders, youth drama groups, and finally village level groups, were all enlisted. They were presented with the analysis and then engaged in a discussion as to whether their culture really supported gender violence and, if not, how these factors could be addressed. As a consequence, in the activities that followed, there was a specific focus on changing the way men and women thought about these issues, and hence the nature of power relations between them. The goal was to help men understand that changing these social practices would benefit the whole family, including themselves.

Arguably, the team's ambitions exceed their resources, and in the absence of a capacity for continuous analysis of the local political economy, the VAW pilot ran risks. The SII's contextual analysis suggested that the project did not recognize how the structures it supported were excluding minorities, and it is clear that in trying to resolve actual cases of gender violence, the pilot risked doing further harm to the women concerned. Despite its size, however, the initiative has had a surprising impact on some of the institutional, attitudinal and relational issues affecting gender violence. In one of the project's two implementation areas, both community members of the village forum against violence (VF) and the *shalish*

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<sup>14</sup> Instead the members of the RMAs came from villages scattered across each union parishad.

<sup>15</sup> In 2000, a study of 66 cases of VAW, located in four sub-districts including Birampur of Dinajpur district (north-western part of Bangladesh), found that 50% of women reported that their husbands were violent during pregnancy (Blanchet 2001). In Birampur health complex, a review of hospital records showed that 30-40% of women were admitted as a result of violence-related causes.

(traditional arbitration body):

...were generous in attributing the project with contributing to positive changes in VAW and related issues of polygamy and early marriage, which are also noted by community members. Legal services are also perceived to have improved. There is a long way to go in increasing women's voice. Women *shalishkars* were also clear that there is a long way to go in improving *shalish* process, giving women a voice in decision-making, and were aware that it remains difficult for poor women to obtain justice. However, space for women has been created in these previously completely male-dominated arenas. The Kanpur VF is making real efforts to decrease the practice of dowry. (*Kanji (1): 32*).

If size is no guarantee of significant impact, however, it is also not intrinsically a barrier. In this vein, the comparison between RMP and another large scale project, this time the **CASHE** project in India, is enlightening. CASHE was started in 2000 as a microfinance initiative, working across three states in India with local implementing partners. There were three tiers to the implementing strategy. At the local level, CASHE provided its partners with an extremely efficient savings-based model for them to use in organizing women's micro finance groups. Such was the effectiveness of the model that most partners were able to scale up the number of groups they worked with by four or five times. The groups themselves grew in confidence, as members' gains in capital and incomes translated into gains in other areas of their lives, starting with their relationship with their husbands. In this sense, the technical excellence of the microfinance model recalls the levels of impact visible in Tanzania (higher than Niger in terms of poverty impacts, but lower in broader empowerment impacts).

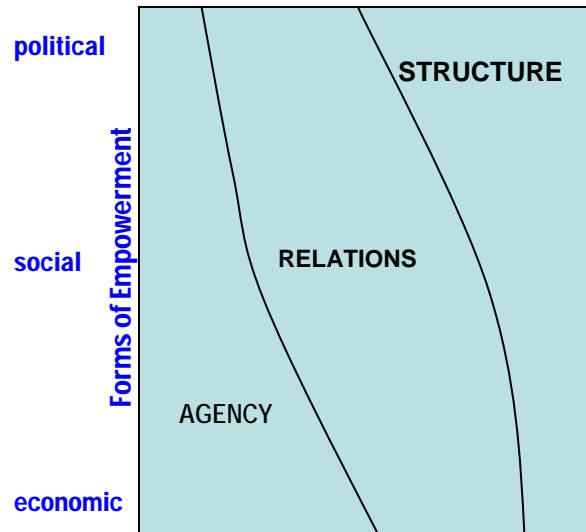
So why, in that earlier graphic of the African VSL projects, do we find CASHE in the upper-right quadrant of high impacts on both dimensions? A likely explanation emerges as we consider the second and third tiers of CASHE. At the second tier district level, the village level self-help groups (SHGs) federated and the project worked to improve their access to capital and related support from various kinds of financial institutions. Finally, at the state level, the project addressed policy and legal issues related to the existence and resource access of the federations and their constituent SHGs. As a result of this methodology CASHE has worked with over 300,000 women in the six years of its existence, a substantially larger number than RMP did in 23 years. Moreover, although the impact is mixed across the different states and partners with whom CASHE has worked, some partners have achieved extremely impressive results.

The reason why the impacts with some partners was different from others, is that although CARE itself had a primarily narrow-screen micro finance focus in its implementation of CASHE, several of the partner organizations, who had long histories of operating in their areas and embraced broad social development aims, took a wide-screen approach. The combination proved effective. CASHE lent these partners an extremely efficient model for them to form and operationalize SHGs. Once this was achieved, the partners were then able to provide the groups broader information and support to address wider concerns in their lives. In the SII synthesis workshop held in India, this approach was described as a theory of change that led from economic through social to political empowerment, understanding that these three elements are not wholly sequential. Collectively, these three levels of empowerment have served

broadly to reduce levels of poverty and improve the quality of life in those areas where the SHG federations had been most active and successful.

The areas of impact that women in SHGs and federations themselves identified as most important fall out into corresponding categories in the synthesis analysis:

- **Achievement of women’s economic empowerment:** financial numeracy, savings accumulation and access to credit, investment in new and diverse economic enterprise, improved food security, reduced out-migration in search of employment
- **Increased personal empowerment:** self-confidence and self-worth, awareness and understanding of rights and entitlements, mobility, challenging gender violence, demand for education for themselves
- **Structural and relational change:** greater equity in treatment of girl and boy child (diet, education, aspirations), changing dowry and early marriage practices, engagement in household decision-making, men shifting roles (child-care)
- **Political empowerment:** realizing and using the power of solidarity, collective action (for immunization, literacy, pensions, water supply, road improvement), challenging abuse of women (alcohol abuse, mobility restrictions, VAW), growing political representation and influence with institutions promoting women’s agendas, bringing men onside, dealing with police/officials, confidence in dealing with threats (rebel forces, political leaders)



One of the chairwomen of a federation in Andhra Pradesh perhaps best summed up the changes taking place in her statement: “We are out of the kitchen now, and soon more members will join us.” CASHE staff from the SII exercise understood that the kinds of changes listed above represent the potential of what can be achieved through the partner-based model that CASHE has promoted. Until this point, CASHE had been promoted as a project focused on improving the microfinance services available to women, and hence on their economic empowerment. It had been perceived in a narrow-screen way, with partners adding the wide-screen perspective. Understanding this, finally, the CASHE staff have themselves changed their perceptions, and are seeking to embed this wider-screen view in the independent agency, ACCESS, being formed to continue the work of CASHE. To do this, the SII report noted that CASHE needs to:

1. Broaden the definition, and operationalisation of empowerment and understand how long-term social change actually happens;
2. Take qualitative indicators more seriously, and concentrate on processes and not just on outputs;
3. Ensure reflection and critical inquiry is institutionalized;
4. Invest in alliances/networking with different agencies, government as well as non-government, to overcome constraints to solidarity and sustained support;
5. Undertake gender and power analysis for greater clarity on practices, norms and

power relations, develop empowerment strategies around relations and structures, and enable women to engage and shift relations with power-brokers in their lives (Sarkar and Drinkwater 2006).

These are some of the requirements for a technically excellent project like CASHE to take a widescreen approach more systematically. They also exemplify some of the attributes of another of the smaller interventions studied in the South Asian SII work, the ***Nijeder Janyia Nijera*** ('we for ourselves') project from Bangladesh. This is another pilot initiative building a local community development approach that starts from analyses of power and local class relationships, and is heavily dialogical in nature. Nijera has a self-professed wide-screen approach that utilizes its community led approach "to promote the self-realization of poor rural women and men, to help them articulate their own vision of development, and to strengthen their capacity to act in pursuit of their self-defined goals." The project explicitly uses a technical intervention (Community-Led Total Sanitation) as an entry point for these critical reflections and new dialogues on power and exclusion – an example of using short-term benefits as "hooks" for processes of longer-term social change.

Nijera pursues a dialogical approach to empowerment and social change, and is heavily geared toward learning how one draws more powerful social actors – men, local elders and religious leaders, government officials, Union Parishad chairmen and members, other civil society actors – into conversations about transparently delivering the entitlements of the poor. It is the growing knowledge, confidence and organizing capacity of the "natural leaders" that Nijera hones in on that drives this process. A conclusion in the impact study for Nijera was that:

Nijera has achieved an enormous amount in a short space of time in terms of building women's agency, supporting them to change relationships in their locality and to pursue their own goals. While there have been fewer changes in the structures which disempower women, women's ability to engage with more powerful actors has increased. The way in which such practices and strategies begin to influence and shape rules and norms are also evident (*Kanji(2) 2006: 38*).

One of the distinctions between Nijera and the CASHE project in India is that Nijera starts from a philosophy that the poor need to engage with elites, officials and politicians to change the adverse nature of the power relationships that oppress them. In CASHE, this is not a central component of the SHG strategy; rather, as women grow in confidence, and the SHGs federate, the members are "moving out the kitchen" to engage men more widely, first as husbands, then as members of their community, and so on as they seek to impress their priorities on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and government agendas. However, a second CARE India project included in the SII has, like Nijera, sought to develop the engagement between women and men as a conscious strategy from the base. This project is the ***Sustainable Tribal Empowerment Project (STEP)***. In STEP, CARE, working with partners, has initiated village planning processes in all the 6200 settlements in the project area. An action learning cycle is used whereby communities decide priorities, initiate actions to advance these, and then monitor and review their progress before commencing the next action cycle. Various kinds of fora are used. Like CASHE, some women are organized in SHGs separately from men, but then are also represented with men in the core committee of community action groups, the village apex structures that undertake the village planning. Women in the latter groups, the SII exercise reported, have learned to become more vociferous than when they only engage in SHGs because of the greater experience they have in negotiating with men.

The short impact study of STEP undertaken for the SII suggests a project well-positioned for impact on women's empowerment. Its broad empowerment approach is guided by an explicit conceptualization of gender inequity that is seen in the nature of the project processes. The project is achieving structural change, for example, in education, that has altered the way services are provided. Like CASHE, Nijera and the VAW initiative, STEP shows encouraging potential for more deep-seated change once wider-screen approaches start to be adopted.

Findings like these do more than adorn this section of the SII report. CARE's Asia regional leadership team is taking true leadership in using them to build the political will and the organizational change strategy that will allow it to pursue a more coherent and locally accountable commitment to fighting the subordination of women and girls in the Asia region. By harvesting lessons across these five SII studies, layering them against the regional gender mapping and dialogues held late in 2005, and developing concrete models and contingency plans that country staff can use to guide their shift from narrow to wide-screen program approaches, we can see today how they will launch a new generation of programs that offer a coherent platform that a range of donors, technical advisors, political allies and activists can support with confidence.

## **VI. From the Particular to the General: Global Secondary Data**

The SII journey reveals literally dozens of concrete, valuable, and deeply life-affirming contributions that CARE's work is making to women's lives. Looking across all forms of data and all regions, we are confident in stating that for 20 million women and girls, CARE's portfolio worldwide is having important impacts. These include widespread increases in self-esteem, group membership and assertiveness; we have also opened up spaces for women's voice that were previously restricted in the public sphere. We see a resulting opening up of important discussions, previously taboo, on social and cultural norms, and in specific instances, changes in notions of citizenry where these discussions are resulting in changes in laws, norms and practices. Particularly when powered by solidarity group methodologies that take on these deeper change agendas, we see that group formation can lead to other positive impacts, socially and politically; women are joining together not just for practical gains but also for social support, and to negotiate with and influence power-holders in the public arena.

All of the projects in the SII's sample of **country studies** fall somewhere along this continuum of good-to-great gender work – a few projects showing more significant breakthroughs or blind spots, and the vast majority making sincere attempts to bring together the analytics and strategies that would enable them to more effectively address gender and power relations. Our analysis of a host of **secondary forms of evidence** largely confirm this general distribution; and while the dry numbers may feel harder to swallow than the more nuanced case studies, they offer important insights into why programs struggle at least as much as they succeed.

CARE's global secondary data set includes existing evaluation studies, proposal designs, and annual project reporting information, along with a widely varied body of project reports and program strategies. If this slice of CARE's portfolio were mapped on a women's empowerment bell curve, it would be one that's pretty tall just below the middle and fairly short in the tails.



In 2005, 362 projects (40 percent of CARE’s worldwide portfolio of 895 projects) provided data on their gender- and empowerment–related work. While this sample presents a picture too incomplete to be considered representative in its own right, and describes project approaches, rather than impacts, it does offer us a useful backdrop against which to situate the 23 projects that participated in the SII’s impact research efforts. Of these projects 45 percent claim a gender and diversity focus, and 57 percent claim a focus on empowerment of their target communities. Whatever we might make of these “glass half-full” data points, they remain noteworthy signs of discourse change in a global portfolio that is nominally NOT about gender equity, but rather rural livelihoods, economic development, education, emergency response, health, HIV/AIDS, water and sanitation.

CARE’s portfolio remains heavily skewed toward promoting women’s agency (with a bias to investment in information and skills, group membership, education, employment, health, and legal rights awareness, and away from a focus on strengthening self-esteem, mobility, and decision influence in households). The study finds no significant change over last year’s analysis, with a decided shying away from structural and relational issues (where we focus on representation and strength in civil society, information and access to services, political representation and negotiation and accommodation habits).

That said, however, when we come to analyze the actual program practices through which projects would operationalize their stated commitments to advancing gender equity, the results give significant cause for concern. Only 2 percent of the projects did gender analysis as part of project design, and only 12 percent reported having an explicit gender strategy. Beyond their fundamental gender blindness, only 37 of all projects in CARE’s global database claim to combine the range of approaches<sup>16</sup> that would give us confidence in our portfolio’s positioning for enduring impacts on women’s empowerment. And in terms of strategy? The most common approaches to gender and empowerment include increasing excluded actors’ participation and representation, training, and awareness-raising. Only 1 percent did gender training for partner organizations; 1 percent raised awareness about violence against women; 9 percent raised awareness on women’s rights. In the words of the C-PIN evaluator, such work represents a continuing performance gap, and:

...allow me to see that most CARE projects are not currently positioned to have a lasting impact on women’s empowerment, despite their best efforts in the present. This is sobering and important news for a portfolio so focused on women and their position. (*Petrova 2006: 27*)

Further digging suggests that much of our global portfolio is handicapped – much like the El Salvador early-warning project team was handicapped – by project designs that offered little analysis, few concrete strategies, and even smaller resource commitments that would enable them to contribute effectively to women’s empowerment. In some cases, the data suggests a downright negligence in our approaches to gender, power, and change.

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<sup>16</sup> Petrova seeks evidence of six key approaches in the C-PIN data, to assess what it tells us about the portfolio’s positioning for impact on the underlying causes of poverty. These are: (1) rights-based approaches; (2) policy advocacy; (3) governance via citizens’ participation in decisionmaking; (4) a focus on marginalization; (5) empowerment; and (6) gender equity and diversity. (*Petrova 2006: 25*).

- A review of 32 randomly selected CARE International project proposals of significant size designed since the introduction of CARE's rights-based programming principles revealed that at least 44 percent of our major "rights-based" projects are "struggling mightily with gender and power analysis, with the identification of strong approaches and strategies for affecting sustainable improvements in women's empowerment or gender inequity more widely, and with paying little more than lip service to this as a result." (*Picard 2005: iv*)
- A review of a convenience sample of 31 evaluations of projects with a declared gender focus shows that only four of these projects had conducted any form of gender analysis, while none had attempted any form of power analysis. (*Glenzer 2005: 9-10*)

In order to understand why we have so few projects that are able to live up to the programming principles and strategic directions that CARE has set for itself, we must look to systemic failures, and not individual ones. CARE's gender policy has called, since 2000, for systematic investment in gender analysis, gender training, gender-sensitive program strategies and partnerships. And yet the results above show that despite repeated efforts and appeals to increase accountability for these core practices, there remains a deep resistance to change in our core organizational processes. In the following section, we will turn to some of the internal forces that, when favorably aligned, can propel individual projects or entire programs down a pathway of significant impact, but which all too frequently align against the kinds of personal and institutional investments that make such a breakthrough possible.

## **VII. Turning the lens on CARE: the internal face of empowerment**

In this section, we explore what the data tells us about the second key question of the SII on women's empowerment. How do CARE's internal practices shape our impacts on women's empowerment? Having addressed many of the programmatic aspects in the preceding sections, we will focus our attention on data about our organizational identity and culture which underlie these program practices. The importance of deeply embedded organizational beliefs, biases, and blind spots is such that, in the aforementioned evaluation review:

...more than 20 percent of the evaluations presented empirical evidence that our internal weaknesses in this regard are limiting our ability to have an impact on gender inequity; in at least two cases, outright harm to women can be documented (*Glenzer 2005: 2*).

At the broadest level, the data from Phase 2 of the SII suggest two large arenas of action where CARE can do better:

- working harder and in collaboration with others to change industry norms, conventions, assumptions, and rules about funding and definitions of "success" that impinge upon CARE and which are very difficult for a single actor to change; and
- preparing staff to be more effective gender change agents through more determined investment in management, rewards, and organizational learning.

After briefly summarizing the organizational forces that seem to undercut effective work on empowerment, we will draw on the Women's Empowerment Framework itself to help us understand why these features recur so persistently in our work.

## 1. An overview of the internal landscape

Phase 2 research supported and extended the findings on internal organizational strengths and weaknesses uncovered in Phase 1.

Phase 1 Findings: Internal Drivers/Barriers of Impact	
<p><b>Organizational Drivers: Propelling Change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ staff motivation</li> <li>☑ supportive management; flexible and open to critical feedback</li> <li>☑ policy commitment to promoting and learning about gender equity</li> </ul>	<p><b>Organizational Barriers: Resisting Forces to Change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ high turnover of project staff</li> <li>✗ competitive, versus collaborative spirit between projects and sectors</li> <li>✗ gender still an “add on” issue (although initiatives were encouraged these were still disconnected from routine project processes)</li> <li>✗ no accountability</li> <li>✗ no mechanism for wider learning or applying lessons from gender activities</li> <li>✗ structures which reinforce gendered power inequalities within CARE staff</li> <li>✗ need for more women field staff and much stronger explicit emphasis on gender mainstreaming and training.</li> </ul>
<p>CARE needs to actively involve all its staff in opening up the question of gender roles and women’s empowerment and to provide a safe environment in which to do so. It needs more staff with a passionate commitment to the issue and more gender sensitive and balanced project management teams. And perhaps most basically CARE needs to remind itself of its own gender policy and make its implementation a point of evaluation for all staff. (<i>Mosedale 2005: 24</i>)</p>	

This list is familiar to anyone involved in CARE’s gender equity and diversity or rights-based change initiatives – the very repetitiveness of these findings and admonitions are, we think, a crucial kind of data. In Phase 2, we’ve come to understand better that their persistence is an expression of the resilience of structures of power and privilege within CARE. Certain organizational attributes, too – an aversion to learning, to innovation, to risk-taking and to a passionate dedication to long-term social change – are not merely a “problem” of what CARE staff do or do not do; they are a result of institutional relations, norms, and conventions in the development enterprise. A recent edited volume<sup>17</sup> includes several careful explorations of how power relationships embedded in the international aid system “limit the potential for aid relationships to support progressive social change” (Eyben 2006:1).

The effects of powerful donor rules and procedures extend beyond the highly visible aspects of controlling expenditure on the specific projects of programmes that donors fund. They are pervasive and influence organizational structures, incentives and relationships, making it difficult for recipients to engage in transformative learning processes since staff are inclined to see their roles and responsibilities within the terms of specific donor projects, rather than within broader organizational strategic frameworks.” (*Shutt 2006: 167*).

In the same volume, reflections on ActionAid’s struggle to resist a key donor’s calls to “conform to ‘normal practice’” are relevant, as the learning and

<sup>17</sup> Eyben 2006.

accountability system ActionAid developed against the grain of the industry's prevailing culture has served as a model for CARE's SII:

ActionAid's DFID colleagues could understand the difficulties of 'measurements' and sympathize with our reluctance to produce quantitative indicators that would create incentive systems at odds with ActionAid's principles. However, they frequently returned to the same point. They had to fulfill organizational requirements. Boxes had to be ticked. There had to be measurable, fixed indicators to satisfy senior managers. The challenges were not simple. They were...about a credible way of assessing progress and accountability, and, most importantly, about *who* defined and controlled the process." (David, Mancini and Guijt 2006: 143).

While it is easy to blame donors, we find this too convenient. We can choose to act differently inside CARE in the face of institutional barriers; we need not unconsciously perpetuate unequal power relations in our work. We know of individuals throughout the organization who are heroically doing this already. Our task is to shift from change based on lucky coincidence to system transformation that becomes, through its sheer weight and scope, impossible to be co-opted by larger institutional forces.

## **2. Phase 2 debate: how empowered are we to help make change happen?**

As we explored internal factors, we began to see a reflection of our broader thinking about empowerment. In other words, our ability, as CARE, to impact upon women's empowerment is facilitated by and undermined by issues of agency, relations and structure (*CARE ECARMU 2006: 11*).

The women's empowerment framework can be applied to CARE's internal dynamics, revealing important contestation over power, deep structural impediments to change, and the strengths and limitations of the largely agency-based approaches that the organization has relied upon to advance our commitment to gender equity.

### **THE EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK @ WORK**

**Agency** is simply the identification and pursuit of our interests. It is at work for empowerment when staff and supporters use insights, experiences and resources to challenge inequities in how we work: taking a risk to innovate, taking a stand against exclusion or exploitation, taking the time to question assumptions and help others to do so. It is an essential ingredient in making change happen – but can be constantly eroded and undermined if we fail to consolidate the changes achieved in the basic structures and relationships of our organizational model.

**Structures** are the accepted rules, norms and institutions that shape our daily choices. In CARE, we draw these from the local contexts in which we work, and from the global culture of the development business. They are at work when we accept the inevitability of female under-representation in strategic parts of our organization, or when we conform our program strategies to donor directives. We contest and challenge structures – when, for example, we seek to enact a rights-based approach against the grain of tradition, even if it means changing "untouchable" assumptions of our work. Or when we uphold policy commitments to organizational practices that promote equality, learning, or accountability.

**Relations** are the vehicle through which we negotiate our agendas. Organizational hierarchies typically conspire against relations of trust, learning and interdependent teamwork, and favor relations of individualism, competition, and control. Efforts to promote broad-based leadership, to reward efforts to share knowledge, and to recognize and reward collaborative efforts to advance a shared goal can transform the ways we relate. And efforts to bridge staff, donor, or community relations of mistrust or authority through dialogue and engagement build a broader and stronger coalition for equity.

As in our programming, CARE has tended to focus on individual agency in order to alter our internal processes, procedures, attitudes, and behaviors around gender equity and diversity. We institutionalize that bias when, for example, we promote decentralization without strong systems of learning and accountability. We all have, in our heads, a picture of some heroic individual who, against the grain, leads important change that results in more equitable gender and diversity climates in a particular part of the organization. It might be a male country director who insisted on hiring more female senior managers; it might be the gender advisor who must rely on stamina, wits, and popularity to prod an unresponsive organization into action. Time after time, the stories we tell ourselves about success focus on that heroic individual, their capabilities, their attitudes, their energies. We implicitly tell ourselves that all would be wonderful if only we had more people like that. And when change doesn't progress, we look for the individual to blame.

The literature on gender and organizational change has always emphasized the deep connection between organizational practice and ideologies of society, work, and organizational life. In 1999, Rao, Stuart and Kelleher wrote of “the ‘deep structure’ of organizations – that collection of values, history, culture and practices that form the unquestioned ‘normal’ way of working in organizations” – which is driven by four deeply gendered assumptions of organizational life. These four aspects of deep structure are: the *myth of heroic individualism* that perpetuates victory over learning, and stereotypically favors male leadership; the *split between work and family* which limits women's participation and interests in public organizations; *exclusionary power* which blocks organizational learning and devalues participation, and the *monoculture of instrumentality* which substitutes the accomplishment of narrow objectives for the achievement of social change (Rao, Stuart and Kelleher 1999: 2-12).

These four assumptions shed important light on CARE's reliance on the agency and sacrifice of “heroic individuals,” and our difficulty in challenging the internal and wider industry structures and power relations that define our work. Likewise, the framework of agency, structure, and relations helps us see that, perhaps, we have relied for too long on the ingenuity of agents inside of CARE when what we need – and what is deeply threatening to gender norms that permeate this organization – is a broader commitment to change structures and forge new kinds of relationships inside of CARE. In the subsections that follow, we will explore evidence of this unreasonable reliance on under-supported agency, and the ways in which a culture of upward accountability limits our willingness to take risks to innovate in pursuit of greater social impacts, as well as our incentives for gathering, sharing, and retaining lessons learned from experience.

#### **a. Equipping our change agents to challenge deep structure**

How can we explain that in Bangladesh a tiny violence against women intervention, hamstrung by a chronic lack of resources, reveals such innovative approaches to addressing women's fundamental lack of the right to security, while in the same country, the multimillion dollar, 20-year Rural Maintenance Program never realized its potential leverage for helping women move from economic survival to broader forms of solidarity for change? One key difference is that the VAW project was born from the outrage of a maternal mortality project director shocked by the rates of violence his project uncovered, and their correlation with maternal morbidity in the project area. Witness: the heroic individual.

Clearly, people can make the difference, even in the most constrained environments. But as we learned from our review of programmatic approaches to empowerment, the aspirations and ingenuity of CARE's change agents gain greatest traction with conscious support and nurturing. If left to struggle on their own, they risk defeat by deep structure, but if their efforts are channeled and leveraged in ways that explicitly surface and challenge structural norms, a radical transformation is possible.

There is a constant interplay between the agency that fuels staff innovation for women's rights and the dominant mental models and organizational structures that shape what staff can even imagine to be possible. If staff are not aware of these dominant (if unstated) norms and assumptions, then they face a difficult struggle to know how best to advance gender equity. In the Phase 1 synthesis report, we saw that an unanticipated consequence of the success that feminist activists have had in putting gender inequality and women's rights squarely on the development map is that "now many people (men and women) with no history of consciousness raising around gender, nor necessarily any strong feelings on the subject, are expected to 'deliver' positive change. This is unreasonable – unfair to staff and unlikely to work" (Mosedale 2005: 21).

On the other hand, we have seen the payoff of investments that help staff to explore, and then address, the personal and structural impediments to their efforts to advance gender equity:

I don't know when it started, but every night when I go to sleep, I reflect on all things that happened during the day. Since I've started working for ISOFI, I started to think about people. (Vietnam)... I think ISOFI has created a big army of passion-driven people who dream and sleep [gender and sexuality]. (India)"

*(Kambou et al 2006: 31)*

In India and Vietnam, the past three years have seen a quiet transformation of the health sector's ways of talking and thinking about gender, sexuality, power and sexual/reproductive health outcomes. In the ISOFI project we see the coming together of courageous leadership at multiple levels of CARE – from headquarters to field extensionist – to shift staff mindsets as a precursor to changing the impact of our practice. The reflective process was the heart and soul of the ISOFI approach, structured through a very clear series of phases with well-documented methodologies and lessons-learned. "ISOFI doesn't tell you what to do. It just lets you grow and helps you to learn with your mistakes. It has helped us to actually take ownership. I think that this is what it has done for the entire ISOFI team." *(Kambou, p. 32)*. For thousands of staff who struggle every day to overcome their own inhibitions and fears about confronting deeply embedded norms and power structures around rights, discrimination, power and exclusion, ISOFI offers practical and inspirational models to help get started. In the context of the Sexual and Reproductive Health sector's commitment to learn from and institutionalize the practices that result from these innovations, the power of individual change agency is harnessed to challenge deeply institutionalized assumptions about how the sector should work.

CARE's change agents are ill-served when we allow them to become too busy chasing project deadlines to organize and reflect, when they feel ill-equipped to tackle gender and power inequities, and when they are frustrated by indifference all around them. Expecting these foot-soldiers to do the work of transforming CARE by the force of their own wits and wiles is akin to asking women to transform unequal gender relations without support – eventually, as happens time and again in gender mainstreaming

efforts in and out of CARE, the change agents burn out or learn not to take risks that the organization refuses to share with them.

**b. Structure in relations of accountability: talking the talk and walking...away?**

The SII reveals recurring patterns of failure to support those who are trying to face the risks, and help the organization live up to its discourse on gender equity and women's empowerment. These patterns make it impossible to ignore the structural forces at work. CARE Peru's evaluation of its large REDESA nutritional security program finds important gaps in applying any gender and diversity standards to the (largely male) project team:

*In the beginning, when the team was complete, we were 12 staff, and I thought I was invisible and mute, since nobody could see me or hear me except Javier, who was always respectful. But as I have a strong character, not many months went by before I made myself heard and seen. But if I hadn't been this way, what would have become of me? (CARE Peru 2006: 130)*

We see, again and again, men's discomfort in supporting the empowerment of women, and women's struggle to keep promising careers on track in the face of demands that ignore the broader roles they play in families and communities:

In my culture, it is not accepted that a man follow his wife. The married women are reluctant to aspire to high positions. For unmarried women, becoming an international staff member means being above many men; therefore, they lose hope to have a partner. (*Madhuri 2006*)

I think a lot of women national staff coming up the ranks are inspired when they see women country directors. I wish I had done more to really support them. We improved human resource policies to make them more family- and women-friendly, but we need to do more. There's much more attitudinal change – change that would really impact the women we work with on the ground – that is needed. (*Vigoda, in Clark 2006*)

In December 2005, CARE in Asia organized a Gender Equity Exchange and Synthesis process, with the purpose of taking stock of the state of gender equity work across the region and setting new commitments. An external ally who participated in the GEES meeting had a number of reflections on the disconnect between CARE's workshop talk and its daily practice, including:

It is common knowledge that hierarchies (often synonymous with male power) inhibit achievement of equity. CARE is no exception, and it is clear that there is a perceived and real hierarchy of power that seems to be concentrated at the SMT/CD level within country programs, and concentrated in Atlanta internationally. The indifference of CARE senior management toward the workshop (very few of those invited attended) was rightly pointed out as an indication of the relative prioritization of gender equity among the senior management. (*Tom Thomas, Reflections on the Gender Equity Exchange and Synthesis*)

What begins with a failure to follow through on commitments to diversity and equity in our management leads quickly to failures to invest in activating the tools and capacity-building strategies needed to advance equity in our programs. In El Salvador, the Early Warning project implementation team struggled with no support to operationalize general commitments to "include a gender focus," without knowing "what to do, what tools to use." In Asia, the consultant's report of a mapping exercise of internal organizational



change efforts that had been made in the region notes the broad institutionalization of the same apathy and lack of accountability:

In all the country offices that provided documents for analysis, there appears to very little clarity on the content of gender and sexual harassment policies. The knowledge of these documents and their contents are limited largely to the GED team, or particular persons responsible for advancing GED. (Roy 2006: 6)

### **c. The gilded cage of success – personal and organizational risk**

One of the key indicators of empowerment (and points of pride) for the women of Cuenca, Ecuador who participated in the Phase I SII research was the recognition of the sacrifices they have made in order to win greater security, to face discrimination with dignity, to demand their rights as citizens. The price of empowerment is something that we don't often discuss in CARE, where we shudder at the idea that poor and marginalized women should have to make new sacrifices.

It is no less taboo to suggest that CARE might choose to “lose” some of the attributes of our success in order to gain the ability to focus more effectively on the underlying causes of women's disempowerment. The pressures can be seen in CARE Guatemala's decision to accept unwise donor conditions in order to win the contract for the FODEMH project. They are also present in nervous suggestions that the SII revert to more “normal” social science research methods – with the power relations they entrench – to ensure that CARE's research is taken seriously by powerful peers in the academic and funding communities.

Research teams have reflected along these lines in multiple sites, probing quite honestly into the unstated values (expertise, competition, visibility, “professionalism,” results-orientation, and risk-aversion) that act as powerful markers of success and protect hierarchies of power and domains of privilege in CARE, and in our work with communities. CARE Bangladesh researchers recognize that in failing to make adequate investments in the VAW initiative, the country office has exposed the most vulnerable community members in the project area to the risk of exclusion and backlash. ECARMU staff reflected in their synthesis that CARE clings to its dominant position as “the one that knows,” and uses the power of our reputation to defend against questioning the assumptions that underpin that status. CARE Burundi staff used appreciative inquiry methods to turn the tables on their strategic planning and SII processes – taking the time to simply listen and be challenged by how “neighbors” in their own country described and attributed the changes they had undergone. The journey has been a carefully led and deliberately challenging process of honing in on critical strategic insights about gender, power, social relations and change. In the words of the country team: *“It is important to note that this initiative will not end with the strategic planning process. We wish to adopt and institutionalize it as the basis of our future intervention approaches”* (CARE Burundi: 4).

To be sure, there is an element of personal insecurity when we are challenged on the limitations of areas of hard-won expertise in addressing the multi-faceted obstacles to women's empowerment; and there is just as much of an organizational attachment to known and accepted ways of working. *“We are comfortable,”* says the Latin America regional synthesis *“with the solutions and strategies we know, and hesitant to experiment with new approaches.”* With significant exception of those “change agents” who bring personal awareness and struggle with gendered power relations to their work,

the vast majority of our staff, and therefore of our organizational behaviors, reflect a risk-intolerant approach to pursuing women's empowerment goals. CARE's internal culture of rewarding risk-less success exacerbates the cost of going out on a limb. CARE USA's Program Division Leadership Team came to the same conclusion during FY06, identifying CARE's risk-averse culture – and the institutional and structural underlying causes of this – as the most fundamental obstacle to implementing a robust rights-based approach to addressing underlying causes of poverty and social injustice.

SII field research was itself subject to this risk-averse culture. Repeated messages to teams that SII research was purely voluntary, that the goal was not judgment from above but, rather, learning from within were not, to some staff, credible. They feared the rhetoric was false, that the voluntary aspect of the SII was but organizational theater. Staff simply doubt the organization's commitment to learning for the sake of learning, to truly being accountable to the power and not just donors, and are nervous about being judged.

On the other hand, courage has its rewards. The aforementioned ISOFI pilot project tackles head-on the question of taboos and biases in one of CARE's most deservedly recognized areas of expertise (sexual and reproductive health). Through ISOFI, staff and partners engaged in CARE India and CARE Vietnam's sexual and reproductive health programs called on partners with expertise we lacked in gender, sexuality, and rights. They connected in trusting ways to explore and challenge systematically the (often unmentioned) fears and biases that led them to skirt engagement in their programs on the very questions of gender, sexuality and power that were essential to lasting impact. The final report is replete with the voices of staff who faced, many for the first time, the fears that inhibited them in their work and in their personal lives. One example of the merits of daring to explore our blind spots is worth sharing:

As with all development work that seeks to change social norms, critical and potentially harmful reactions can and do occur. Such was the case of a potentially violent incident in Lucknow, India, involving a young married woman previously beaten by her father-in-law for participating in an ISOFI-sponsored activity. In her determination to attend the activities a second time, she slipped out of the hands of her father-in-law in his attempt to beat her for leaving home against his orders. In response to this and other such incidents, CARE staff reflected carefully on whether and how to get involved in domestic violence within the community. Rather than advise the young women whether or not she should continue to attend ISOFI activities, the CARE staff accompanied community women who were angered by the violence committed against many women in their community. The women convened to develop and implement a strategy to address male-perpetrated violence against village women. Two years later, CARE staff report a dramatic decrease in male-perpetrated violence against women within this community. (*Kambou et al.*: 36).

#### **d. What do we lose, in order to win? Reflection, innovation, and participation**

In trying to understand why CARE seems inconsistent in supporting its change agents across the organization, the women's empowerment framework again offers a useful reminder of the power of institutionalized and normalized ways of being – of the structural and relational forces we must address:

What we value in those who work with us also raises tensions; we work in “projects” which are planned as activities and monitored in terms of outputs. We are rewarded for progress on activities and outputs, rather than deep and lasting change in the structures, relations, and individuals we work with. Again, the broader context pushes us to this – our funding is finite, the development industry requires accountability and this often translates as detailed, time-bound work plans that are blind to broader change and are overambitious for the contexts in which we work. (CARE ECARMU: 10)

One side-effect of this focus on outputs at the expense of longer-term changes in power relations is that in our programmatic processes, we struggle to enact the principles of participation and solidarity that we have claimed for over 10 years in CARE. The SII itself has struggled to match resources, time, and skills to the task of managing mixed research teams safely and effectively. And the Latin America SII team’s deliberate efforts to integrate SII lessons in new project designs shines a spotlight on the challenges we face as we deepen our commitment to women’s empowerment. Where reflective and consultative program practices are well-established, new projects clearly advance a broader programmatic vision of gender equality in development. In other cases, weak context analysis and limited strategic visions persist – reflecting project submission timeframes too tight to afford critical consultation with community women, and a poor institutionalization of the attitudes and skills that would produce gender-sensitive programming in its absence. Weaknesses in program design often crystallize in CARE only at the stage of project evaluation, and Guatemala’s evaluator put it most succinctly:

*It is important not to be too directed by the donor’s conditions. The challenge is not to lose our solidarity with the social movement as we form organizations, develop projects, and create jobs. (CARE Guatemala: 33)*

We cannot write off these dynamics wholly to insensitive donors. With a few notable exceptions (including the participation of community change leaders in the analysis of CARE Bangladesh’s SII findings) we reproduce them internally at every level of our organizational action:

The majority of debates and dialogues were inward looking – both in terms of analysis and solutions. Given the class/caste profile of staff, that results in an upper caste/middle class-centric perspective. The need for community leadership in these debates cannot be overemphasized. Communities, especially poor women, need to be considered leaders and allies in pushing forth the agenda of gender equity.

*(Thomas, Reflections on the GEES)*

On the positive side, consider these notes from the Ethiopia team that struggled with such a challenging research process in Afar:

...the teams were happy and eager and readily agreed to start the debriefing at 8:00 on Thursday in order to be prepared to go back into the rural areas if necessary. Everyone came back with observations and stories which have added to the quality of the findings...Because the group had been active in forming the research questions and checking previous information, the results this time were of great interest to all. (CARE Ethiopia: 150)

### ***3. Internal frontiers: working against the grain of structure and relations***

The above examples help explain some of the challenges we have, as one organization working towards gender equity in the face of industry and social forces aligned against easy success. If we want to stop reciting the same litany of obstacles, and to see the drivers of transformational impact on women's empowerment more often aligned in our work, we must be prepared to act with greater solidarity, a clearer theory and purpose, and more direct strategies against those deeper norms and practices when they reassert themselves in our change efforts.

#### **a. The incredible vanishing act: where are power and patriarchy in our women's empowerment work?**

As we have shared the Women's Empowerment SII framework and Phase 1 findings with external audiences, the most common observation is one that we ourselves never considered. How conscious are we, in our research and in the programming it assesses, of the competing ideologies and theories of change that shape our work? These challenges came from feminist activists and academics, who have consistently highlighted how aid turns gender into a technical fix and, so, sugar coats issues of power, resistance, and conflict. And they also come from within, as members of the research team reflect that "you could use this framework without ever seeing the thread of power that runs through it, and makes these dimensions of change important" (Martínez 2006(2): 3).

As participants in the SII's global Phase 2 synthesis conference tried to make sense of the findings from all the Phase 2 research, this vanishing act became very clear:

Many Oslo participants remarked that the research framework and findings from this SII seemed to skirt the most critical and contested aspects of women's empowerment: power, gender, patriarchy and even women! Digging into this puzzle produced some of the meeting's clearest messages – on our need to be more conscious about how we allow ideas on power and change to shape our pursuit and assessment of impact on something as inherently political as women's empowerment. Noting the eclectic sources (from the World Bank to the feminist movement) that informed our women's empowerment framework, Rosalind Eyben urged us to think about "how power is shaping the very way we think about empowerment." (Martínez 2006(2): 3)

The evidence from the SII indicates that the wider' organization's inability to take a stand, and to adopt a directly political stance on the questions of power and justice in our work to end poverty, has profound impacts on the ideas, skills, and comfort areas that individual staff bring to the core functions of our work. Taking such a stand would trigger deep structural change – in how we dialogue with communities, how we identify priority program foci, the strategies we deploy, the alliances we form, and how actively we try to shift donor behaviors, policies, and ideas of success.

#### **b. The paradoxical relationship with donors**

Priorities and perspectives of donor governments and multilaterals are central to the development goals and strategies that NGOs like CARE pursue. And while all actors wish to learn from experience, to do "evidence based" work, the very structure of donor-contractor relationships make it difficult for the lessons of field practice to challenge the imperatives of donor politics. Such blocks to learning are most apparent in USAID RFA and RFP cycles rooted in "results-based management," in which the main focus is

delivering on predetermined outputs and not, for example, learning that those outputs and strategies to achieve them might be inappropriate or even harmful. Donor underinvestment in promoting a fuller approach to women's empowerment is also ideological and political. The still-dominant neoliberal paradigm conflates economic activity with development, and the "aid effectiveness" agenda is marked more by a desire to demonstrate concrete, countable results than to seriously question the ideologies and practices that hamper impact. Batliwala writes:

"Women's organizations and non-governmental development agencies have not been able to withstand these shifts in focus and strategy, since they are dependent on government or donor agencies for funding...A handful have tried to persist with more basic forms of awareness-building and social change..., but find it increasingly difficult to raise resources for this kind of work, and to fill donor demands for quantified impact assessments." (Batliwala 2006: 8).

CARE's own leadership has begun to recognize the urgency of fighting back against the structures that reproduce narrow-screen thinking. This has required us to move beyond internal calls for gender-sensitive practice to recognize ways in which our very size, resource base, identity and relationships as a development NGO inhibit our flexibility and effectiveness. CARE is learning to name and challenge political and ideological agendas where we are confident that they undermine progress against our vision. In this vein, we note CARE's expansion of policy analysis and advocacy capabilities, the use of empirical evidence to guide our transformational shift out of food aid, its and our public challenge to dominant political and ideological discourses around HIV/AIDS. Witness the editorial writings of CARE's President, Helene Gayle, in a recent op-ed:

All donors must commit to fight HIV and AIDS in the long term. Empowering women to have more control of their lives and relationships cannot happen overnight. It cannot be packaged into a one-year project. Rather, it involves a lengthy process of working with communities, especially men and traditional leaders. To succeed, it requires mutual trust and respect. Unfortunately, many donors have one-year funding cycles, require quick impact, and do not invest the time and effort in broader social change. Without social change, particularly with respect to the position of women, HIV and AIDS interventions have no anchor and hard-fought victories may be frittered away (Gayle 2006).

### **c. An organization that pulls together**

The persistent message across all sites from Phase 1 and Phase 2 is the importance of a sustained and concerted policy commitment across the different leadership levels of CARE International, from the project managers, to program and country directors, to regional and member management teams. This commitment must go beyond the rhetorical alignment behind a shared discourse, to actually building the kinds of interdependent and trusting relationships that allow us to act in greater solidarity, with more complementarity, and toward a more concrete shared goal.

In this respect, it is significant to note the concrete staff and financial contributions made to the SII by four CI members (Austria, Norway, UK and US), and the receptiveness and support of CI Program Working Group leadership. In Phase 2, the SII's 23 original field research sites represented projects developed through CARE's Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Norway, UK, and USA. The strengths and weaknesses have much to do with the political will of these members to negotiate for appropriate designs, timeframes and funding levels from their respective donors, and to support country office

staff with the technical, political, and material resources that position the project to achieve both short-term successes and meaningful contributions to longer-term programmatic goals for social change. In working together (as has happened this year with collaboration between CARE Austria, Norway, and USA in crafting strategy for women's empowerment in East/Central Africa), we reinforce and encourage one another's commitments, expand our knowledge bases, build coherence, and thicken our networks and alliances for change.

## **VIII. Driving home: the implications of what we have seen**

In the following and final pages of this report, we will outline a set of core programmatic and organizational practices that this research identifies as essential, and eminently applicable, for our efforts to improve impact on women's empowerment, gender inequity, and the underlying causes of poverty and social injustice at large. We will also summarize what we believe to be the stakes in our decisions about whether and how to take up the challenges these practices represent for our existing ways of working – the likely difficulties they will represent for us, and their inevitability if CARE hopes to remain relevant in the struggle that our vision calls us to join.

### ***1. Reflections on the many-forking path of CARE's past and future work***

Nearly all Phase 1 and Phase 2 studies ask us to place capital and asset accumulation by women and their communities within wider social change. Such changes rarely appear explicitly in project logframes. They include critical consciousness of the nature of women's subordination and of the social institutions that sustain it; an unwillingness to submit silently to second-class citizenship; a collective identity among women as political subjects; organizational and mobilizing skills; a history of practical and concrete achievements to bolster confidence; attitude changes in male and female elites (including our own staff) that shift conceptions of poor women as victims or beasts of burden; new experiences and mechanisms to foster interdependence and mutual gain between women and men as rights- and duty-bearers. These are deep, lasting, verifiable yet hard to quantify changes that must occur if gender equality is to be achieved.

In truth, we cannot know today what the final impact of changes provoked by CARE's work will be. We cannot predict the end-result of something as small as a woman's declaration that "now I feel like a person with rights; now I'm not afraid; now I dare to speak in public... now I want to do projects with my group." We cannot guarantee what will become of something as apparently large as the participation of 400,000 African women in financially sustainable community-based microfinance groups. Either one may be the seedling of a radical shift in power relations, and an important step towards more equal gender relations. Both contain important aspects of change in women's own agency, in their expectations and forms of social relation, and in the ideas, norms and conventions that structure power in their societies. But either one could wither on the vine, as just another false start, a glimmer of hope that is eventually engulfed by the wider forces that have reinforced inequality for centuries and underpin political economies across the globe, in both developed and developing countries..

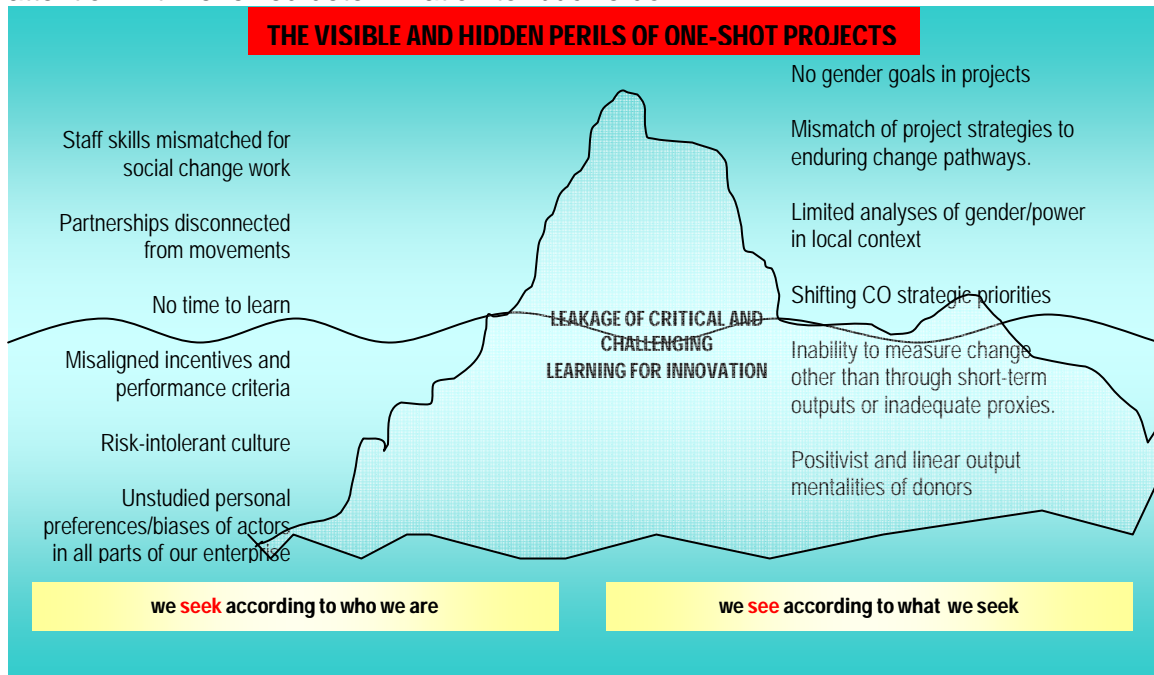
What we do know is that CARE can make more or less intentional and focused efforts to ensure that seedlings such as these are nourished, and flourish to their fullest potential. We can, as CARE’s President, Helene Gayle does in her Congressional testimony below, push back at the structures and patterns that handicap our effectiveness:

“Gender inequity still is not a sufficient focus of PEPFAR nor an area that PEPFAR is especially effective at addressing,” explained Dr. Gayle. “Wherever women cannot control the sexual encounters they engage in, either for reasons of rape or abuse, gender disempowerment, economic dependency, or cultural practices, ABC in its current formulation...is problematic.” Dr. Gayle concluded her testimony by stating that PEPFAR could be considerably stronger in addressing vulnerability if it took a broader health and development approach to combating HIV and AIDS...The underlying causes of the spread of HIV and AIDS reflect a combination of many non-health factors such as poverty, gender inequality, stigma and social and cultural norms.” (Kinner 2006).

In the next section, we will explore how such stands can become a hallmark of CARE’s program brand – a distinguishing feature of “the new basics” of CARE program quality.

## 2. Improving the odds for women’s empowerment: a new basics?

Recent years have seen a rising call in CARE for a return to “the basics” – to the fundamentals of project management and financial accounting so key to CARE’s ability to win and implement projects, and maintain our reputation. The SII research suggests that, indeed, there are important gaps in our programmatic thinking and management incentives. But it also makes clear that these gaps are in fact symptoms of deeper tensions in our work. As we begin to think about the range of strategic responses we can deploy to improve our impacts, it may be useful to envision them attacking an iceberg of threats. Some of these threats are clearly visible failures to meet the program quality standards we have set for ourselves to date, and as such may well draw the bulk of our attention with renewed determination to “buckle down.”





SII evidence suggests, however, that such an approach will miss the deeper forces that shape our identity and goals. Rather, we believe CARE needs to invest in “new basics” that address both the obvious and the hidden threats – and leverage the opportunities at all levels. The solutions proposed are simple, but perhaps not easy. At their heart, these approaches require a commitment to systematizing the best of the practices sprinkled throughout this report. The best of our program innovators around the world are already leading the way, but their efforts are fragmented by systemic barriers of knowledge, resources, and culture. We can do more to help them bring these practices together in a pragmatic and coherent approach to increasing our impact on the underlying causes of poverty. Key programmatic and organizational features of the “new basics” can be summarized as follows:<sup>18</sup>

### Programmatic

- **Local, Long-Term, Impact Goals:** Each country office commits – and is assisted by CI members – to achieving three to five *local program impacts* that advance the organizational goal, building and evolving strategy over time through cumulative learning from their own work and that of others addressing similar issues. These long-term programs become the organizing principle for our work.
- **Perspectives on Power and a Theory of Change:** All program action is built on a working (and constantly tested) theory of power and change.
- **Reinventing the Project:** Projects are valued equally as platforms for *reflection* on long-term impacts, for *critical engagement* with participants and stakeholders, and for *delivering* high-quality benefits in the short-term. The logframe is used more wisely to map how we believe a project might contribute to a cumulative shift in human conditions, social positions and the enabling environment.
- **Building Women’s Solidarity:** Programs move to solidarity models where women organize to build social and political influence around shared agendas.
- **Extending Solidarity to Engage the Powerful:** Programs encourage women and men – in the home, community and external institutions – to surface, debate and challenge the norms and practices that sustain women’s subordination.
- **Aligning Accountability:** Accountability is *for impact*, and to the constituencies served by the project in the countries in which we work. The poor play a more prominent role in defining strategy and judging success. We shift our relationship with project donors as a result, marketing and encouraging their investment in long-term programs or project-sized components of these.

### Organizational

- **Unyielding Leadership:** Leaders at all levels take responsibility for finding and sharing creative ways to enact our stated policy commitments and advance a clear organizational goal regarding gender equity. They would manage down, up and sideways to support one another in this difficult journey.
- **Collective Recognition:** Achievement is seen as the product of teamwork across hierarchies and divides in CARE and also in the communities we serve.

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to drawing on the examples of innovations sprinkled throughout the SII sites of study, this section draws heavily on a handful of fieldwork informed writing about transforming our approach to programming: Tony Klouda’s work on Critical Social Challenge, Mary Picard’s writing on the “Knowledge for Impact” paradigm, and Michael Drinkwater’s writing on Organic Programming Processes. Summaries of these works are available from IMLT.

- **Responsible Risk:** Programs become sites of struggle, risk-taking and learning, proactively responding to harms as they arise.
- **Stopping the Leak of Knowledge:** We have financial and organizational models that retain our best staff, partners and ideas across project cycles, leveraging knowledge and relationships for change. We use technology in sensible and revolutionary ways to ensure that our knowledge is constantly at the cutting edge of our field practice.
- **Knowledge and Learning Are our Hallmark.** We foster open-ended learning processes that acknowledge that complex changes – poverty reduction or empowerment, for example – can be difficult and hard to measure. We develop metrics that meaningfully capture social change underway. Staff are rewarded for making reflection and critical thinking with all stakeholders a core aspect of CARE’s work. We disseminate our work at all levels to be transparent about our ideas, contribute to development knowledge and learn from others.

What is the business model that allows us to pursue these recommendations, positioning our work for impact on wide-screen social change while drawing on the resources of more narrowly defined development processes? The project remains a key element of a coherent learning program that is linked to a more ambitious commitment of intended impact. It becomes an important part of a larger convoy that includes non-project investments in networking, research, constituency-building and advocacy, and sustains and supports these fellow travelers along the road.

But these “new basics” also will require us to:

1. Rethink our assumptions about what constitutes “country presence,” and how this links to local accountability and governance structures. This dovetails with the organizational evolution thinking that is currently underway in CARE International
2. Rethink what we consider to be an effective investment of unrestricted resources in our field operations. Bluntly, to be successful, the “new basics” require significant increases in the sheer quantity of unrestricted resources gathered through more creative private and foundation fundraising in support of longer-term approaches in the field. Here, our recommendations dovetail with work already initiated by CARE USA Program Leadership Team’s on country office measures of program quality and impact, and the Strategic Support division’s work on a new generation of financial performance measures.
3. Play a much more visible, aggressive, and leading role in advocacy to change international development policy and practice.

Underpinning all of the tools, strategies, management systems and fundraising we must deploy in this concept of “the new basics” lies a fundamental shift in mindset: a willingness to put thinking and learning (and unlearning) with communities at the heart of a more organic, critical, and reflexive process. This requires persuading ourselves, our donors, our constituents and (not unimportantly) participants – who have all been conditioned by a rigidly charitable mentality – to recognize that while we do some things very well, we have not yet found the way to work together to end poverty and social injustice. Such an approach is difficult for an organization and an industry predicated on extending “known” needs and rights to populations of victimized women. But it is the key to ensure that as we remove the blinders than have marginalized women’s realities within development discourse for 50 years, we don’t enter a new period of blindness to the strategies and aspirations that they bring to the quest for empowerment.

### 3. Cause for optimism: Why do we know it can be done?

If the practices listed above form the backbone of a world-class approach to promoting women's empowerment and enacting our programming principles more broadly, then the SII gives us cause for great optimism. None is beyond our reach; none is rocket science; all of these practices exist in CARE today, and some are beginning to come together through deliberate acts of vision in country, regional, and sectoral programs around the world. Shining examples abound in the SII sites, and many are well-documented in methodological guides that others can easily pick up and use or adapt to suit their own local needs. We quickly highlight just a few of these tools and promising new developments:

- ✂ Concrete guidance on conducting a careful local power analysis from CARE Bangladesh's Social Development Unit;
- ✂ Detailed process notes on facilitating critical and honest dialogue about power, change, and local realities from the sexual/reproductive health team in Mwanza, Tanzania – and background documents on this approach from CARE's Sr. Advisor for S/RH, Tony Klouda;
- ✂ Extensive notes and guidance from CARE Burundi on how to forge more honest dialogues between staff and the poor and, so, begin to break down the forms of power that development workers exercise;
- 👉 The use of an accountability framework and a learning process (which includes the SII) to underpin Latin America's regional strategic focus on improved program quality;
- 👉 The crafting of a long-term program commitment to gender equity in Niger, using VSL as a powerful draw to bring women into solidarity groups with the potential for larger social action;
- 👉 The positioning of women – through CARE Peru's Civil Society Strengthening proposal and through CARE Ethiopia's FGC eradication project – to engage in more open dialogues and more equal negotiations with male power-brokers;
- 👉 The commitment of leadership teams in India, Vietnam, and the Sexual/Reproductive Health sector of CARE USA to build a safe space for risk-taking and learning around sexuality and gender in the ISOFI initiative.

We call out for special attention the real opportunity that the Basic and Girls' Education sector's Patsy Collins Trust Fund Initiative (PCTFI) affords CARE to illustrate a learning program approach. The Patsy Collins legacy gift makes possible a 20-year time horizon, allowing CARE staff to structure and leverage a sustained learning agenda that breaks new ground in extending the right to education to the most excluded and marginalized girls. Already, guided by an explicit vision and theory of change laid out in the Trust Fund strategy, the first cohort of grantees is working differently than education sector projects in the past – positing explicit hypotheses that their projects will seek to test over a 10-year period, establishing accountable and relevant measurement systems that track, among other things, changes in empowerment of girls, and investing in reflective processes where the lessons of project implementation are deliberately examined, shared, tested and documented for application in future rounds of increasingly well-informed grantmaking. (*PCTFI Overview 2005*). The PCTFI illustrates once again that shifting the framework of aid industry relations from a focus on target-based accountability to one of co-responsibility for risk-taking learning to enhance impact can make all the difference to a group of motivated agents.

These are just a few examples to illustrate that in theory there are countless sites of innovation where we can turn for practical ideas and inspirations. They exist, but are scattered, often untested in their ability to convey the processes clearly to others, and inaccessible to the wider organization. But the most encouraging sign of hope is that there are various processes in play today in CARE to help us to harvest and share such innovations more systematically, in ways that encourage their spread and application across a far wider reach of CARE's work and beyond. Here, we cite as examples the creation of a CI partnership to seed coordinated programs and learning around violence against women in East and Central Africa; the creation of the PROSHARE network of CARE staff to define and harvest knowledge that their teams need in order to effectively advance women's empowerment; the commitment of the CARE International Emergency Working Group to explore and address the gendered power dynamics that attend our work in disaster risk-reduction and emergency response.

Some of these efforts to strengthen our fundamental capacities and commitment to advance women's empowerment are the result of the long germination of CARE's gender equity and diversity work, and of the shift it has called for in our internal operations and in our programming. Others, however, are a direct response to tentative recommendations presented at the end of Phase 1 – recommendations to revive and revitalize CARE's gender policy, to invest in senior staff competencies to lead on gender work, and to build coherent knowledge management systems and learning processes so that lessons learned are, truly, learned by the organization. In feedback across CARE USA and CARE International, it is clear that there is strong interest among top managers to hear the findings of Phase 2 in order to move forward more aggressively with the kinds of programming, marketing, and human resource strategies that will position us for world-class performance.

#### ***4. What are the stakes?***

Across the board, the SII evidence reveals that CARE's work has made real and valuable contributions to women's struggles to overcome the material and social drivers of their poverty. CARE is making concrete investments in expanding women's assets, skills and attitudes, and in fostering new modes of social and political relations between women and men in households, communities, and social organizations of the state and civil society. It also reveals, however, that these contributions are accompanied by harms and missed opportunities for deeper change that should be troubling to an organization dedicated to ending poverty and social injustice.

And finally, it demonstrates important cases where our programs are closing these gaps. Cases where concrete and short-term benefits that projects produce for women serve as important entry points of a coherent and sustained strategy that moves stakeholders to address the larger social forces that shape gender inequity. These cases represent seedlings of an exciting new approach to gender-equitable development. They reveal CARE's future, we believe: a flexible organization that secures impressive short-term poverty and social justice gains through projects that are grounded in long-term strategies and testable hypotheses about how to alter the power relations and structures that produce poverty.

And so, when the group of community change facilitators – impoverished women and men from conservative rural Bangladesh – berates CARE's senior programmers in a

conference room in Dhaka for not squarely tackling the issue of dowry that they see at the heart of Bangladeshi patriarchy, we must register and nourish a seedling of transformational change that CARE has planted. When a young nomadic girl approaches an aid worker with hopes of finding support in her efforts to resist early marriage, and so continue the schooling she desires, we must see it for the possible breakthrough it is. And when we know, through careful deliberation and debate, that the pathways of deeper impact lead us into conflict with the orthodoxies and power hierarchies that mark our industry, we should engage these with cunning and with determination – sticking to our long-term goal through ups and downs, and never justifying substandard work with claims that “somehow, sometime” they may lead to impact for women.

It is not in CARE’s nature, not in our history, and some critics would say it is even against our organizational DNA to be preoccupied with social change. We are – so the critics say – fundamentally a poverty-fighting organization, and we should stick to making concrete, material, and practical improvements in poor women’s very precarious condition. We argue that in light of the heretofore unseen positive impacts and latent potential for structural impacts revealed in this study, even the most cynical of unbelievers can find cause to believe that CARE can align our work with our vision.

On our SII journey, we have yet to discover the “holy grail” – that single CARE project that has heroically conquered gender inequality and poverty; however, we can not rule it out, and after two years of learning with hundreds of staff and allies around the world, we have seen important degrees of approximation – in a single project like CASHE, and in program-building processes like those underway in Bangladesh and Burundi. And we have seen the concrete, practical and replicable steps being taken in isolated cases across CARE that, if pulled together in a true process of organizational learning, development and accountability, would render our global work toward women’s empowerment truly groundbreaking.

Knowing now what we do about the chance we have to lift our impacts for women’s empowerment to a fundamentally new level, we have every reason to rise to the challenge as a concerted global force and aligning with others seeking the same goals, seize the opportunity.

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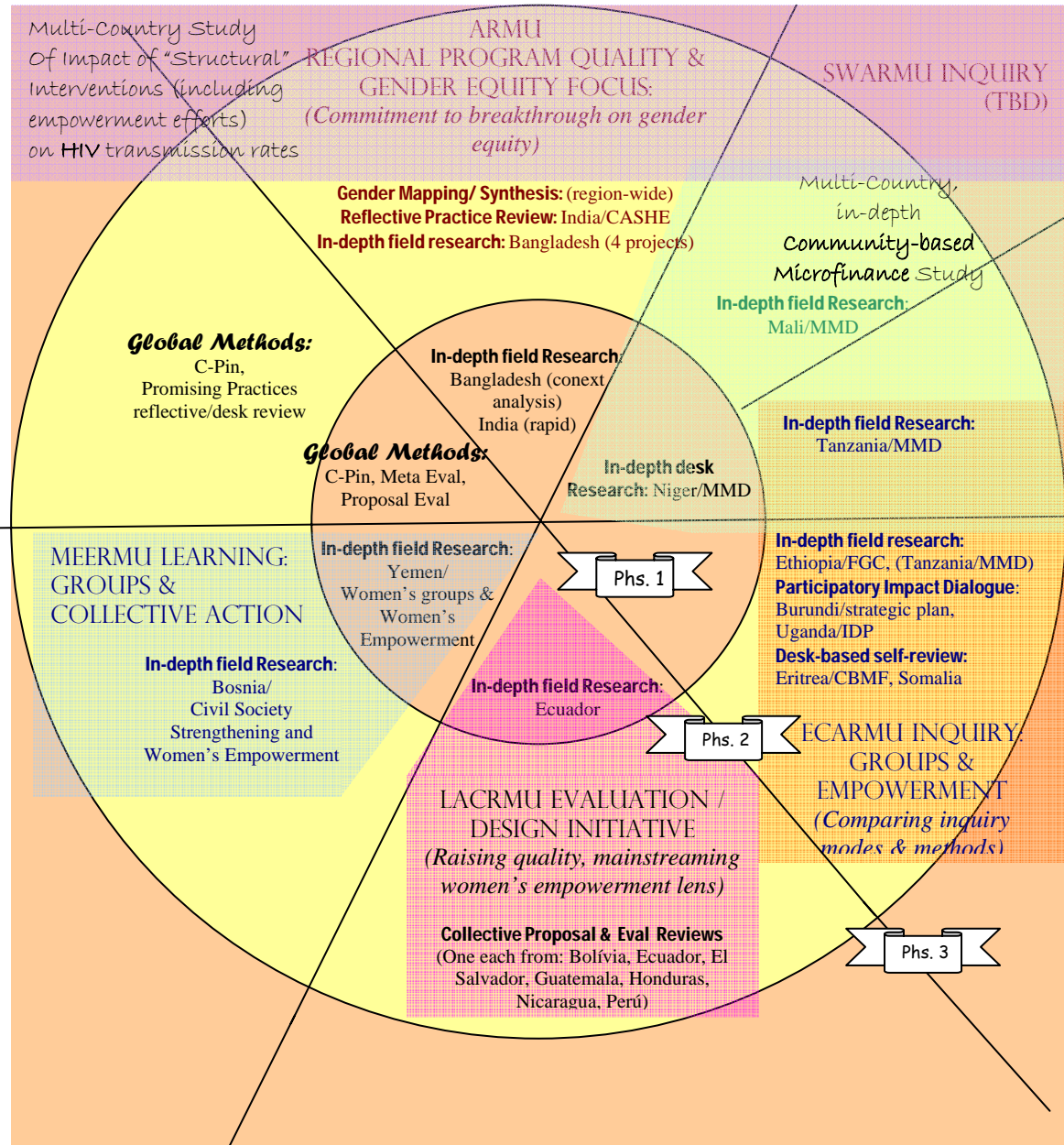
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## Annex 2: The Matrix and Mosaic of CARE's Women's Empowerment SII

The table below lists all of the sites of phase 2 research, categorized by inquiry type.

	ASIA	EAST / CENTRAL AFRICA	LATIN AMERICA	MIDDLE EAST	SOUTHERN/WEST AFRICA
In-depth field research	<b>Bangladesh:</b> Violence Against Women (DFID) and Nijera (DFID)	<b>Ethiopia:</b> FGC Eradication (Austria) <b>Tanzania:</b> Village Savings and Loan (NORAD) <b>Somalia:</b> Northern Somalia Partnership Project (USAID)		<b>Bosnia-Herzegovina:</b> Post-war Civil Society Strengthening (research ongoing) (DONOR?)	<b>Mali:</b> Village Savings and Loan (NORAD?)
Participatory assessments	<b>India:</b> CASHE Village Savings & Loan (UK-DFID) and STEP Tribal Empowerment (EU) <b>Bangladesh:</b> Rural Maintenance Program (CIDA, USAID)				
Desk reviews	<b>Regional Gender Mapping Exercise</b>	<b>Eritrea:</b> Gender-based Violence/ Women's health (DONOR?)			<b>Niger:</b> Vill. Savings & Loan (NORAD)
Preliminary inquiries to understand local context and indicators		<b>Burundi:</b> Appreciative Inquiry dialogues <b>Uganda:</b> IDP program, Buffer-zone management project, +1 (donors?)			
Empowerment analysis in already-planned evaluations			<b>Bolivia:</b> Ciudades Fronterizas governance (?) and PETIM child labor eradication (?) <b>Ecuador:</b> DYGO democracy/governance (EU), EDUCAVIDA education (EU), and Microwatershed management (DONOR?) <b>El Salvador:</b> JIBEWS Early warning (ECHO/France) <b>Guatemala:</b> ADIMH Mayan women's forum (Austria) <b>Nicaragua:</b> PROSAE sexual/reproductive health (DONOR?) <b>Perú:</b> REDESA Title II (USAID)		
Empowerment integration in new project proposals			<b>Ecuador:</b> Imbachuka solid waste management, INTIEduca education and child labor, Yaku Manta Yachay integrated <b>El Salvador:</b> Combating Domestic Violence and Sexual Exploitation of children <b>Guatemala:</b> Title II <b>Nicaragua:</b> PROFINCA economic development <b>Perú:</b> Civil Society Strengthening		
	<b>Patsy Collins Trust Fund (Education and Empowerment of Marginalized Girls) Cohort 1: Cambodia, Tanzania, Mali, Honduras</b>				
	<b>CARE Austria Frame Agreement Project: Burundi, Nepal, Uganda</b>				
Analysis of project data	Global CARE Program Information Network FY06 data analysis				

Layering these studies into an image that shows the evolution of the SII across the first two phases, and projects forward to the upcoming third and final phase of research, we see:



### ***Annex 3. Revisiting our Understanding of Women’s Empowerment***

From the first phase of our research, we had already begun to notice important ways in which the realities discovered through the research dialogues challenged standard discourses around empowerment found in the development literature:

- empowerment is not a simple or linear accumulation of personal and material resources, but a highly reversible process of learning, loss, and growth. Its measurement, therefore, is susceptible to vagaries of timing, optics, and sensitivity of the research process.
- women value relational aspects of community, solidarity, interdependence and love to a far greater extent than suggested in standard individualistic notions of empowerment
- the agency of a given woman or group of women – their capacities to make and pursue choices in pursuit of their strategic interests – is deeply conditioned by forces that have little to do with them – by changes, in fact, in the behavior and attitudes of men and the institutions they control.

Phase 2 research expanded the debate on the nature and dynamic of empowerment to hundreds of community members, staff and partners, and external activists and theorists. The resulting contradictions were some of the richest arenas of learning and change for staff who participated in the research, and made it clear that our Women’s Empowerment research framework needs to evolve. We will elaborate more on the methodological insights in a separate document of lessons learned on the conduct of women’s empowerment research, but will flag here three major insights that are central to this report of findings and recommendations:

- women’s empowerment research must centralize power, patriarchy and resistance
- the relational domain is critical in women’s priorities for social change
- agency, structural, and relational aspects interact in advancing any important dimension of change in women’s empowerment.

**First**, the “simple” task of translating “empowerment” into local languages was a great awakening to many members of staff – who realized that the development language and ideas they manage in daily work were often deeply disconnected from the values and priorities that women expressed when describing the attributes of strength, courage, and respect they desired for themselves. But such difficulty also points to the fact that we in development use words and notions that we know are ill-defined and under-specified.

We have seen how the SII team in Ethiopia struggled to engage the conceptual chasms that existed between the women’s empowerment definition that formally guides our research, and the deeply patriarchal notions of empowerment as social acceptability put forward by the women of Afar. Little wonder that their findings overlooked yet a third end that women were interested in pursuing –evidence of which is abundant in the subversive views and acts that the data revealed. The struggle to know “what to measure” in Afar, replicated in most of the Phase 1 and 2 research sites, reveals a central insight and learning around our Women’s Empowerment research framework: ***if we want to understand empowerment, we must understand how power shapes the very stories that people can tell, and the stories we are able to hear.*** Our research framework has inadvertently replicated all of the dominant discourses that shape our worldviews and work priorities (the discourse of local culture, and the discourse of

development). And in doing so, it mirrors their silence on the questions of patriarchy, power, and resistance that should be central to women's empowerment work. ***It is essential in all our continuing programming and research on this theme (and on other underlying causes of poverty, we suggest) that we resist this disappearing act, and centralize these political dimensions of change.***

**Second**, the voices of women across the globe have raised important challenges to existing and dominant notions of women's empowerment, and the strategies that those concerned with human rights and development should therefore deploy to support them. The most common of these is diverse women's preoccupation with building and maintaining strong relations of interdependence. In Bangladesh, women talked of:

'the rights and dignity of men as well as women require ... [each to] respect each other equally ...and this will lead to the household being better off, not just economically, but also as a family. There will also be happiness and love.'

(Drinkwater, Asia summary p. 15).

In El Salvador, the key arenas of self-esteem, mobility, security and autonomy were linked to a fifth domain, leadership, defined in a most unconventional set of parameters:

*the capacity and willingness to help others; sharing what (they) know; (they) relate to other people; (they) lead groups and meetings; they fight to change their situations and those of others; they relate to organizations; they value other women.*

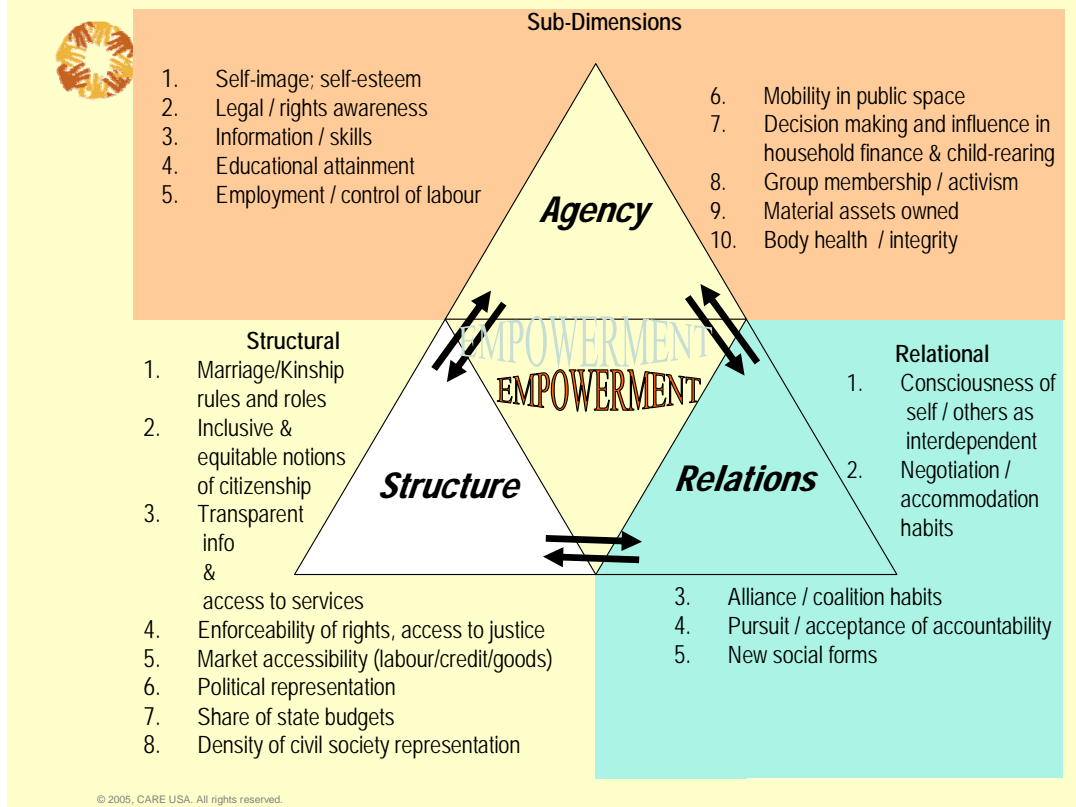
(El Salvador JIBEWS evaluation, p. 6).

The insistence of women on this point sharply underscores the merit of CARE's departure from the standard World Bank empowerment framework by including a focus on the relational dimension of empowerment. ***Women signal an inextricable interplay between their individual and collective agency, positive change in the relations through which they mediate their needs and rights, and the wider structure of norms and institutions that result and recreate power relations in society.***

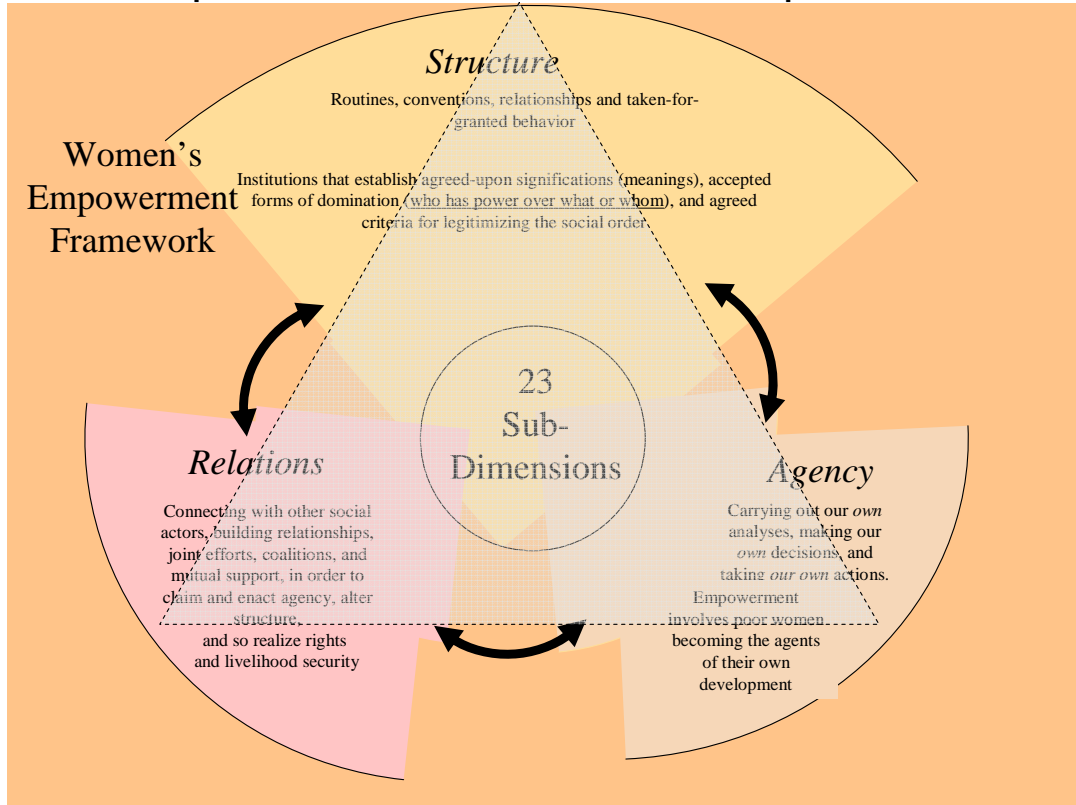
**Third**, we have recognized an urgent need to revisit our basic visual model for the women's empowerment SII – which organizes critical dimensions of change in three interacting domains of social change (agency, structure, and relations). The model and its underpinning theory has proven itself to be an invaluable way of ensuring in research preparations that our studies explore “the dusty corners” that lie beyond CARE's standard categories of gender analysis (household asset and decisionmaking distributions, etc). The findings, moreover, bear out the relevance of a framework that seeks to assess empowerment as a function of interdependent and mutually reinforcing change across the personal, relational, and institutional domains.

However, research teams across the board found that the division of specific sub-dimensions of change into “either” agency, structural, or relational domains was misleading. Their research makes clear that progress in any given sub-dimension – whether it be changes in judicial systems or changes in women's self-esteem – represent the convergence of agency, structural and relational change. *As a result, the SII team recommends that research teams in the future develop indicators in each sub-dimension that explore change across the different domains*

## Guiding Graphic of Women's Empowerment Research Framework, Phases 1 and 2



## Alternate Graphic to illustrate revisions to Women's Empowerment Framework.





## **Proposed improvements to our women's empowerment research framework and process for assessing impact on women's empowerment**

(from the CARE International Strategic Impact Inquiry Phase 2 Global Synthesis Workshop. Oslo, October 10-12 2006)

### **The 12-Step Program for Theory Scavengers Anonymous**

1. Ongoing critical review of our assumed and unspoken ideas (theories of change) and their manifestations in how we advance our work. Challenge ourselves to talk about how power operates to exclude/oppress and keep women in subordinate positions – and how we think that power can be reshaped. And talk about how our ideas (often unarticulated) have shaped our Vision, Programming Principles, and broad “organizational theory of change”
  2. *Key questions and discussions to articulate the perspectives we bring on women's empowerment, and how these shape our view/theory of what makes change happen.*
  3. *Strategic stretch: create “uncomfortable dialogues” – foster a culture of testing different perspectives, and seeing the world through other eyes, to challenge ourselves and one another.*
4. Make these discussions on power, patriarchy and change more explicit in our Women's Empowerment framework. Offer a simpler language and a more transparent framework/model for people to work with:
  5. *Dynamize and inter-relate key domains of change that lead to empowerment*
  6. *Rebalance the model, as per our “take” on the relative weight of different domains (expand Structure)*
  7. *De-link the sub-dimensions from the broad domains – examine across all.*
  8. *Reflect on (and operationalize/indicatorize) how A-S-R interact in each sub-dimension to “nurture seedlings” of transformational change*
9. Recognize different perspectives on empowerment that underpin the various sub-dimensions/indicators – and be purposeful in how we weave those perspectives in our analysis and the story we tell about change.
10. Integrate new sub-dimensions of change that may emerge from the local context for any given study (and subject them to the same critical review of the perspectives they represent)
11. Design and execute the research, keeping clarity on how it reflects and tests a theory of transformational change. Ensure a connection and critical reflection on this theory of change in the way we select: questions, methods (including the type of team needed, the capacity-building offered, the instruments used), identification of data (indicators, and how we interpret them), analysis, synthesis, and communication
12. Learn and grow! And then change the world and our own ideas! Spin out the implications for: SII findings, SII method, Program and organizational practice, Organizational vision and strategies, and ultimately, a change management approach for the organization that radically improves our ability to impact on the gender inequality that is one of the key underlying causes of poverty and social injustice.

## ***Annex 4: Perspectives on Power & Change in CARE's Empowerment Work***

(Adapted from Drinkwater, M. "The Politics of Empowerment" Powerpoint presentation at CARE International Strategic Impact Inquiry Global Synthesis Workshop. October 11, 2006.)

### **Theories of Change and Their Different Perspectives...**

- Different definitions of empowerment have different theoretical assumptions behind them, and behind these assumptions lie political perspectives
- The difference in these perspectives lies most clearly in their posited end states

### **Two conceptual areas, envisioned differently in each perspective:**

1. Power – in relation to its relative ability to be enlarged (like wealth) or more or less equitable. And in relation to the forms it takes.
2. Choice – in relation to levels of individual and collective self-awareness and consciousness

### **Perspective 1: Empowerment as Instrumental Means to Development Outcomes**

- Neo-liberal perspective
- Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland - Empowerment 'as a group's or individual's capacity to make effective choices, ie, to make choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes' (women become good citizens/ consumers)
- The WB views the 3rd MDG (to promote gender equality and empower women) as a central component to its overall mission to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth
- Power neutral/ underplayed (power to do)
- (existence of choice, use of choice, achievement of choice)

### **Perspective 2: Empowerment as the Overcoming of Male Oppression**

- Feminism's Marxist roots, particularly in Latin America – empowerment as a (Freirean) process of conscientisation and collective action to overcome male oppression, to achieve women's emancipation.
- Power tends to be seen as a zero-sum game (power over and power with forms)

### **Perspective 3: Empowerment as achieving social justice and rights for women**

- Influenced by the human rights discourse since the late 1990s – outcomes seen in terms of the advancement of gender equity and achievement of greater social justice for women. Addition of the relational dimension, thus
- Importance of involving men and women emphasized and hence power seen as a capacity capable of expansion (power with and to do forms, also involves men changing attitudes and thus shifts in way power is manifested)

### **Perspective 4: Empowerment as a journey of personal / collective transformation**

- Empowerment as process – determined effort to stay away from outcomes: 'the expansion in women's ability to make strategic life choices' (Kabeer)
- 'Participatory' legacy – process of 'bottom-up', dialogical action; women and men, in processes of self-discovery, evolving consciousness, transcending (cultural) boundaries, and changing aspirations
- Power enlarges (power within leads to other kinds of changes)