

Gender and Collective Action: A Conceptual Framework



This paper presents a framework for investigating the intersection of collective action and gender to illustrate how gender-oriented analysis can foster more effective collective action in the context of agriculture and natural resource management, and how collective action can be used as a vehicle for gender equity.

SOURCE:

Pandolfelli, L., R. Meinzen-Dick and S. Dohrn. 2007. *Gender and Collective Action: A Conceptual Framework for Analysis*. CAPRI Working Paper No. 64. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

The Analytical Framework

The Context or Initial Conditions

Particular attention is given to the cultural context where gender roles are constructed by society and influence the extent to which women and men can use their assets and institutional infrastructure at their disposition. For example, physical assets such as roads will enhance access to markets, yet a gender norm which confines women to their homes, e.g. *purdah* in India, can hinder women from meeting their livelihood objectives.

The context includes the assets, vulnerabilities, and legal governance (norms, legal structures, power relations) systems that influence a range of outcomes.

1. **Assets.** These refer to a pool of resources or assets available to an actor. These can be categorized as physical (e.g. roads, markets), natural (e.g. water, soils), financial (e.g. bank account), social (e.g. group membership), political (e.g. government representation), and human capital assets (e.g. education), as well as property rights vis-à-vis these assets. Property rights can only be effective if they are recognized as legitimate, as when they are sanctioned by governance structures to enforce such rights.

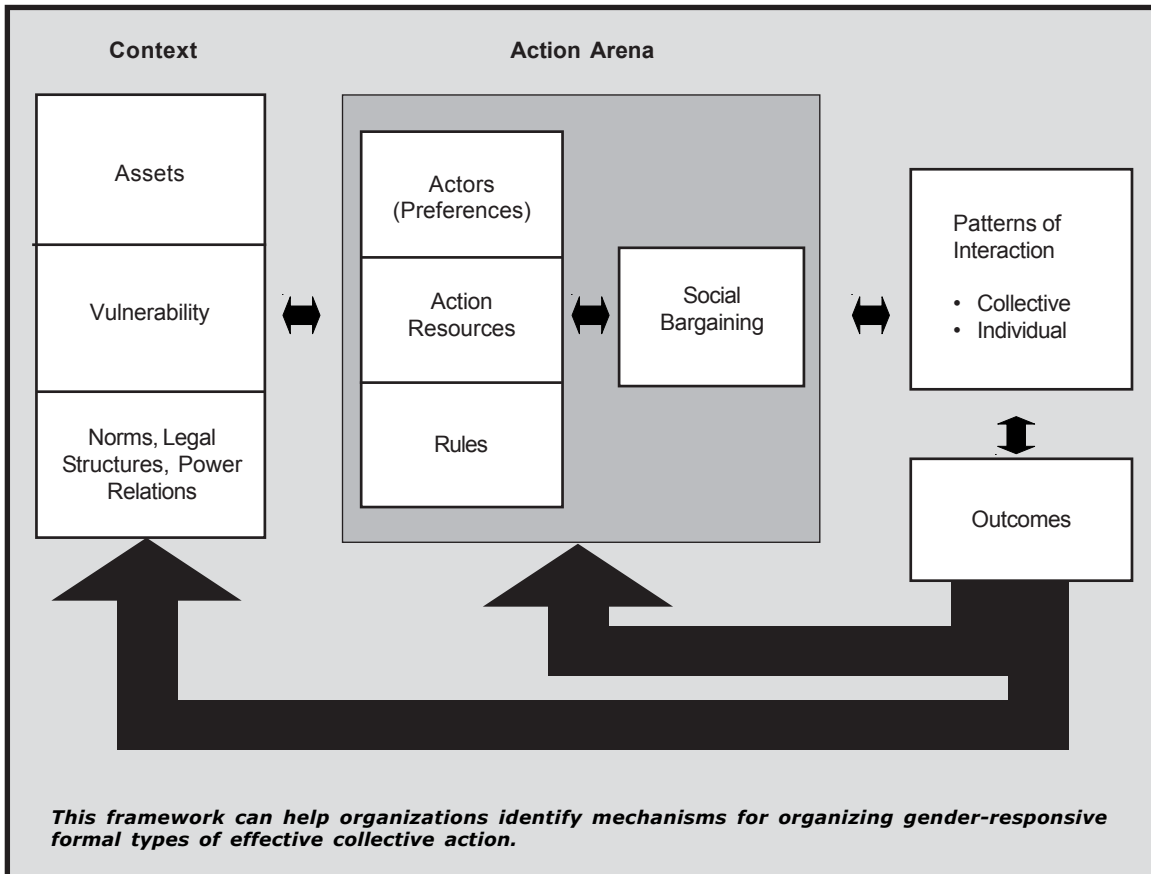


Figure 1. Analytical Framework to Analyze Gender and Collective Action.

For example, a woman may have access to a piece of land for firewood collection but have no rights to plant trees on that land, as this activity is often reserved for those who own the land. There is evidence that shows that property rights raise women’s status in the household as well as in the community, which translates into greater bargaining power.

2. **Vulnerabilities.** Aside from lack of available assets, women are vulnerable to lack of government services, crises in agricultural production such as drought, declines in landholding, seasonal unemployment, and gender-based harassment and violence. Women are more strongly affected by these factors because they have less access than men to credit and employment in alternative labor markets.

Women are often limited by accepted cultural gender roles, which in turn may affect their ability or willingness to engage in collective action. Such vulnerabilities include dependence on, or subordination by, male household members and in-laws, which may result in a husband’s refusal to allow his wife to engage in, or control the benefits accrued from, collective action.

3. **Legal Governance.** Gender biases towards women as reflected in the norms embedded in cultural, political, and economic institutions do not change overnight, and in fact, attempts to directly challenge gendered norms and upset power imbalances may result in backlash and further disempowerment of women.

To stimulate gender equality, changes in statutory law (e.g. in laws pertaining to inheritance, divorce, and property rights) will provide a basis for women's appeals for more substantial rights, i.e. changes in gendered norms. Decentralization can also help to change existing power structures by enhancing women's participation in the public arena.

Action Arena

This is the heart of the framework and is shaped by a host of initial conditions. Here, *actors* and their preferences, *action resources* (such as information and the ability to process it, social status, time), and *rules* determine which actions are carried out, and how they are implemented.

- **Actors and their preferences.** To understand the motivation of the actors, it is important to understand their preferences. Usually men and women differ in their preferences: for example, women prefer crop varieties that have good taste and cooking properties, while men first consider the market price.
- **Action resources.** These are the assets and internal capabilities that are relevant to the specific situation and increase the bargaining power of the actors. For example, having the confidence to stand up and speak in front of the community can be an important action resource. However, if women are forbidden from speaking in public, this particular asset cannot be translated into an action resource.
- **Rules.** Rules clarify expectations about the costs and benefits of participation. They shape the bargaining process and/or may be shaped in the process of bargaining. They can be written or unwritten. For example, a woman may remain silent in the presence of her husband during a public meeting, even though she is more informed about the subject matter. Both groups and assets strengthen women's bargaining power.



Gender roles (women taking care of children) may affect women's willingness to engage in collective action.



Women often prefer crop varieties that have good taste and cooking properties.

In northern Nigeria, women must observe seclusion under *Shari'ah* law; thus, they cannot organize. However, they can capitalize on the resurgence of Islam to form women-only associations that teach Islamic education. Through this informal rule that permits these schools,

women are able to develop additional support networks to help with childcare and ceremonial expenses.

- **Bargaining power.** This is the ability of an actor to engage in social bargaining, based on their action resources and the rules. Both groups and assets strengthen women's bargaining power.



Outcomes: Impact on Gender Relations

Whereas effectiveness of collective action refers to the ability of groups to meet their immediate purposes (e.g., the management of a natural resource), the impact of collective action refers to changes (in this case, changes in gender relations) that go beyond that. For example, a microcredit scheme designed to raise the income of its members would measure its effectiveness in terms of income earned while measurements of impact on gender relations would include the ability of women to control that income within the household.

The framework described here undertakes a “gendered poverty lens” to consider collective action outcomes in terms of all the critical aspects of poverty, as well as how these aspects are experienced differently by women and men. Impacts on gender equity can thus be evaluated by several indicators, including: the level and distribution of income, as well as the recognition that women may make trade-offs, or tactical choices, between different material, psychological, and symbolic aspects of poverty; the ability to secure basic needs; the degree of social and political inclusion; security against violence (including violence against women); vulnerability to shocks; and, more broadly, the opportunity set for livelihood improvement.

Four levels of impact on gender relations can be distinguished: relations within the household, relations within the collective action group itself, relations of the group vis-à-vis the community, and relations of the community vis-à-vis the outside. Analysis of the impact of collective action on gender equity cannot be divorced from analysis of the household because activities undertaken as a collective feedback into women's and men's social bargaining within the household. For example, income-generating collective action schemes may increase a woman's fallback or exit options within the household if she is able to strengthen her asset endowments (e.g., financial capital) and draw upon them as action resources to increase her bargaining power within the household.

At the community level, collective action groups, particularly mixed-sex groups, may alter perceptions of women's socioeconomic contributions, thereby increasing their status within the community. Collective action groups may also mobilize enough social and political capital to contest the state. For example, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya grew into a significant political force. Collective lobbying efforts have also been influential in strengthening women's legal rights and share of state expenditure at the national level in countries such as Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa. Even at the international level, the global women's movement may be seen as a form of collective action that has had an impact on development discourse and policy, such as through the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* and the Beijing Platform for Action. Changes in gender relations may feed back into the action arena, the initial conditions, or both.

Conclusions

For researchers, this framework can help identify key aspects of the environment that influence collective action outcomes and how these may differ for men and women.

It can also help to look at the various resources that different actors have to draw upon, and how the rules affect the bargaining power of different actors, especially men and women. This information can be used to redress power imbalances by building up the critical resources needed for both men and women to participate effectively.

This framework can also help government and development organizations to learn from and strengthen informal forms of collective action that women may engage in, and identify mechanisms for organizing gender-responsive formal types of effective collective action.

Suggested Reading

Pandolfelli, L., Meinzen-Dick, R., and S. Dohrn, eds. 2008. *Gender and Collective Action: Motivations, Effectiveness and Impact*. Special Issue of *Journal of International Development* 20 (1): 1-116.