

Traditional leaders advocate for female decision makers

Women are being installed as fully titled chiefs and members of cabinet.

What was the situation before V4C intervention?

Traditional leaders (TLs), who are largely men and role models for their followers, can play a crucial part in promoting gender equality within the community. In Nigeria, where leadership roles have historically been allocated to males, traditional leaders are demonstrating that it is possible to break the mould by promoting women to top-level positions within their communities. This case study looks at the people at the centre of the change as well as the observers of the change in order to understand how these outcomes have come about, as well as the impact of women's participation in community decision-making more widely.

What did V4C do?

In an attempt to increase support from men and boys within communities, and to promote positive attitudes towards women and girls, V4C has sought to expand the pool of traditional leaders advocating for positive change within their communities. In 2015, V4C facilitated a two-day seminar on gender and masculinity for 26 male TLs from 17 Local Government Areas in Enugu State. It also organised a series of meetings in 2016 for 'key women influencers' as well as events that promoted dialogue between young people and traditional leaders from their communities. These interventions built on those of others working within the community including current programmes addressing GEWE and previous ones such as SAVI.¹

What happened as a result of V4C's involvement?

Since these activities, a palpable shift has taken place within some of the traditional and modern decision-making bodies of the communities in the programme's target States. Where in the past, women may have held low-key advisory positions; they are now taking top leadership roles, and in some instances have been installed as fully titled chiefs – for the first time.

Different pathways towards this change emerged, with a variety of factors prompting the TLs to rethink their view, or to make the decision to take action. For some leaders, the most valued contribution of V4C has been as a catalyst – helping them to see *how* they could go about implementing change – how they can approach the change, and what kinds of things they can begin to work on, with whom. In all cases, the TLs themselves have proved to be the facilitators

¹ The State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) was a DFID-funded empowerment and accountability programme which operated in ten states in Nigeria and ended in 2016.

of these changes with V4C providing minimal support beyond the initial awareness raising activities.

Women have been invited into royal cabinets, broadly on the same terms as men.

“We discuss issues openly as men in the cabinet. We do our work in mutual respect to each other and guided always by the need to do what is best for our community”
(Female TL)

Male TLs said they were persuaded of the value of women’s participation and saw how their communities are missing out on the potential contributions of women if they are excluded from leadership roles. They recognised how these can be harnessed to enhance community development, and how the increased status of women in cabinet can help with cabinet affairs.

In all four communities in the sample, a number of women have now been given senior and permanent roles. Something that many community members never imagined possible. Both male and female traditional leaders report that these newly installed women chiefs have equal voice and equal authority, both within the cabinet and within the community, and are contributing to cabinet discussion and decision-making in the same way as men.

Many of the TLs that attended the seminar spoke of the need to “sensitise” the members of their cabinets on their return, and to secure the support of the wider community. One TL has planned a gradual process for increasing women’s involvement in leadership so as not to make the process too confrontational. Another promised change within a one-year time frame to give him time to consult and check on the implications of the change for the safeguarding of traditional culture.

For male traditional leaders, the seminar clarified the difference between the inclusion of women, and the previously threat of women taking over leadership from men.

“We heard many examples of women who have achieved great things in our country... I believed what I heard, because in our community there are many projects which were abandoned which the women took up and completed....” (Male TL)

The seminars offered a vision for women’s participation and the benefits of women’s leadership for all, not just women or women versus men. They showed the the difference between appointing women as full chiefs as opposed to merely advisors, and generally provided a culturally acceptable definition of girls and women’s empowerment. The sessions also gave them the chance to see themselves as part of a wider national and global community intent on realising gender justice.

Women traditional leaders have initiated or influenced changes in local laws and policies.

“Before we were made chiefs, widows were forced to mourn their husbands for a year and two months without going out of the house or bathing, but now we have put an end to that. You can mourn your husband but you can also go out, bath and look good.”
(Female TL)

Despite the short period of time they have been in post, many of the women chiefs have quickly and successfully advocated for changes in local laws, including those on widowhood, land inheritance and women’s movement at night, ensuring that women’s rights are respected.

Women have been included in other decision-making bodies in the community.

“Today women are working as partners with the men in community development and this has been transmitted into most of the community way of life. Everywhere in the community women are making real differences from the family level to community and commerce.”

Male TLs from all the four communities in the study reasoned that if women were to become members of the core cabinet, it followed that they should also be at the forefront of other bodies in the community. Many community members spoke of the ripple effect that they had observed, where women are taking up leadership roles in other groups within the community.

Changes in relationships in households and the community more generally.

“In our community, things have never been better. We live in greater harmony; the women are happier and there is reduction in the number of cases of conflict between husbands and wives”. (Male TL)

Each of the four communities has witnessed a wider change in the quality of relationships between males and females, with greater respect for women and girls. The reasons given for this general sense of acceptance varied however. While most members referred to the fundamental equality inherent in the decision, women TLs and female community members generally expressed their happiness about the changes in terms of having new kinds of influence, and of more female voices, decision-making powers and priorities, now working alongside the male ones. The support for the change among the male traditional leaders interviewed however, was more based on the realisation that excluding women as leaders denies the community of their contribution.

What are the reasons for these changes?

The changes that have been made can be attributed to a combination of the sensitisation interventions of V4C, the fertile ground created by previous interventions and the perceived wider climate of change in favour of GEWE in Nigeria and globally. But the biggest contribution has been made by the TLs themselves. By acting on their new knowledge of the benefits of women's leadership for all, TLs have mobilised their communities in support of girls and women's empowerment and in doing so, have become catalysts for change themselves.

What helped to facilitate the changes?

The observations of the V4C facilitators about the change process to date also raises some interesting learning points.

1. It was important to begin with First Class traditional leaders to validate, influence and make way for less senior leaders.
2. Engaging with the intersection between State and Traditional government was helpful. V4C were able to solicit the approval of the top layer of authority, and the TLs could ask questions, express any misgivings they had about the content and purpose of the training.
3. The TLs were concerned about the imposition and importation of Western ideologies. As custodians of Nigerian/Igbo culture, it was important for them to be reassured that this was not the aim, and that a home-grown perspective focused on optimising the development of their communities lay at the root of the initiative.
4. What resonated most with traditional leaders in the seminar was a connection with the history of their culture and tradition, which they have responsibility for preserving.
5. Facilitating a space for discussion, and sometimes debate, where the ideas, views and perspectives came from the TLs rather than the facilitators was appreciated by TLs who were cautious of the reverse approach.
6. The participatory methodologies used by V4C, have been helpful for drawing out the experience, knowledge and wisdom of the TLs and building on this to draw attention to positive examples of successful and widely respected female leaders from their own context, as well as from around the world.
7. V4C received feedback from some of the male TLs that it is not always just the men that perpetuate harmful traditional practices or create obstacles to change, and it was thus important to also offer events for influential women who could then influence other women.