

Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend? Experiences with the Gender Action Learning System

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There is now overwhelming evidence that gender inequality is a key cause of poverty, and women's empowerment a key strategy for reducing it. Despite statements to this effect in policy documents of most donor agencies and many governments, gender issues are still widely marginalised in most poverty reduction initiatives apart from a few measures targeted to women entrepreneurs or female-headed households. Addressing gender inequalities within households and communities is widely seen as both less important, and more difficult to address, than household-level material poverty and well-being. Such assertions are often based on assumptions about the views of women and men at community-level and inevitability of conflict and the need for cultural sensitivity.

This chapter challenges these views based on experience of a methodology called the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) in Uganda, Sudan, India, Pakistan and Peru. The analyses of poverty produced by both women and men clearly show the centrality of gender inequalities to household poverty. Men as well as women, provided they are given sufficient support and space, have identified their own behaviour as key causes of poverty and identified and implemented effective strategies for change which they themselves have undertaken as individuals. These provide a basis for community-led collective action and advocacy for change.

GENDER ACTION LEARNING SYSTEM (GALS): METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

GALS is the adaptation of a generic methodology Participatory Action Learning System (PALS) specifically to analyse and address gender issues.¹ GALS adapts very simple diagramming tools: Diamonds, Road Journeys, Trees and Circles to specific gender issues, contexts and organisational needs. The methodology is based on and continually reinforces underlying principles of equity, inclusion and gender justice and women's human rights as stated in international agreements like Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The tools can be used independently by people who cannot read and write as well as organisational staff and academic researchers to analyse issues and strategise change. Ideally GALS is a long-term community-led change process alternating individual reflection and planning with group peer learning and planning, progressively building organisational structures for collective action and community-led gender advocacy. The tools can also be used by organisations and researchers to rapidly obtain reliable quantitative information and very rich qualitative information in a more empowering and interesting manner for participants. Using the same tools at different levels of an organisation, where people who cannot read and write are often better at drawing and analysis, serves to increase communication, understanding and respect and challenge power relations between different stakeholders.

The chapter focuses particularly on one tool – 'Diamonds' -- which can be used to:

1. Explore, identify and compare women and men's criteria for gender justice and/or empowerment and/or gendered perceptions of wealth and happiness;

2. Rank and prioritise these as issues for individual, collective and organisational action;
3. Quantify where participants currently are in relation to each criterion or level;
4. Quantify where they started as a rapid impact assessment;
5. Plot and quantify where they want to get to after a specified period of time as the basis for planning and monitoring;
6. Provoke rich qualitative discussion on all the above, including sensitive issues like power relations, sexuality and violence.

The main steps are summarised in Box 1.

The Diamond tool can be used in combination with other GALS tools as part of a longer term empowerment process, or on its own as a half day participatory meeting. A common practice has been to give one group or set of groups the question 'What are women/men doing in a happy family and in an unhappy family', another group the question 'what does a powerful/powerless woman/man look like/do/have', yet another group another question 'what does a rich/poor woman/man look like/do/have'. This then enables exploration of differences in perceptions of linkages between women's empowerment, wealth and happiness and/or women's powerlessness, poverty and unhappiness in the household and community. An example of a Happy Families Diamond from Uganda is given in Figure 1.

Diamonds have been used not only to look at general criteria for poverty and inequality, but also more specific dimensions of poverty like food security or health and sensitive issues like gender-based violence, decision-making and property ownership.

<i>Box 1 Steps in using the diamond tool</i>
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Diamonds are best used in mixed-sex workshops where women analyse women's situation and men analyse men's, with further subgroups also where possible for comparison of differing views between women and between men. A variant is for one sex to do what they like or dislike about the other sex on a separate diamond. These group outputs are brought together and compared in a common plenary 'Mother Diamond' focusing on 'common human values'. Each group has ideally 10-15 participants with one facilitator and one co-facilitator/rapporteur, both of whom need to have done the exercise before, but neither of whom need to be literate. It requires large wall space, flipcharts, small coloured cards, sticky tape and markers. General facilitation guidelines are given in Mayoux (2009).

Step 1: Individual brainstorming: 'best' and 'worst' cases

Participants are each given two differently coloured sets of 3 cards and asked to draw or write:

On cards of one colour the 3 'best case' criteria e.g. things you like most about being a woman/man?

On cards of the other colour the 3 'worst case' criteria eg things you like least?

Step 2: Sharing, grouping and voting of criteria

Each person presents what is on their cards, placing them on the wall and grouping together similar criteria. Each person then has 5 votes on best and worst to get ranking.

Step 3: Placing on the diamond: gender analysis

Each group of cards are ranked on the diamond with the groups of 'best' cards with the most votes to the top of the diamond and groups of 'worst' cards with the most votes to the bottom. Whilst this is being done, participants decide the horizontal position - criteria seen as currently most unique to each sex to each side, in the columns marked for each sex. Common things in the middle. And the constant question is whether or not each issue is in fact sex-specific, or a common human issue.

Step 4: Quantification and impact assessment

Each person comes up and puts a mark by the card group which applies to them. This then enables quantification of all the criteria at a glance. Depending on time available, participants can also mark where they were before an intervention started to provide a basis for quantified impact assessment and qualitative discussion of impacts.

Step 5: What do we want to change in future?

At the same time participants put an unhappy face by the 3 things they most want to change from the things at the bottom of the diamond. The issues with the most unhappy faces can then be discussed in more detail if time permits, and taken forward for further analysis through Challenge Action Trees.

It is also possible if time permits for people to put a happy face by the 3 things they like most and would like to retain/increase.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE:

Figure 1: Gender roles in Happy Families Diamond by women entrepreneurs in Uganda

WOMEN AND MEN'S ANALYSES OF POVERTY AND EMPOWERMENT

Rigorous cross-cultural comparisons of the outcomes of GALS remains to be done. The focus so far has been more on establishing the methodology as a community-led empowerment process, particularly with women and men who cannot read and write. It has therefore been important not to overload meetings with lots of outsiders taking notes for monitoring or research. This can be done retrospectively using changes marked on the same initial diagrams which always remain as a record.

Nevertheless experience in Uganda, Sudan, Pakistan, India and Peru with poor and very poor women in different types of organisation have identified many common criteria for both the 'ideal situation' and their actual and worst case situations. Regardless of the specific question asked or cultural context, women generally put their own property ownership, earn their own income and respect/love from the husband to the top of the diamond. Women also generally value motherhood highly and have a positive view of certain 'feminine' traits like caring, multitasking and hard working. In Pakistan women's possession of mobile phones was important as a means of maintaining contact with their children, friends and access to outside knowledge of the world – as well as a symbol of wealth. Interestingly 16 per cent of a heavily veiled group of women in Baluchistan considered they were in the empowered category, able to contribute income to the

household and gain respect, leading to discussion of very complex entrepreneurship strategies by these women which challenged many of the stereotypes held by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) concerned.

The criteria do differ somewhat depending on the organisational context, and the types of activity the organisation is involved in. For example tribal women in Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI) in India, an organisation which focuses specifically on women's empowerment and gender advocacy, focused more on collective and political dimensions for empowerment. The most empowered women were seen as those able to get development funds for the village, who help women overcome violence, are educated and aware of the laws and bring new information for other women. A least empowered woman was one who cannot stand up to the wrong harassment of the forest official (Mayoux and ANANDI, 2005).

On the lower 'worst case' part of all types of diamond and in all contexts women almost invariably cite the issue of violence, having too many children and illiteracy. Quantification here has shown very alarming statistics – in Pakistan 80 per cent women are subject to serious forms of violence with 5 per cent at suicidal breaking point (Sardar et al, 2005). In ANANDI a diamond focusing specifically on violence was used with a group of tribal women who initially denied there was any violence in their community. Within two hours they had produced a detailed ranking of different types of violence: Extreme violence was agreed to be 'Beating till you get wounded (bleeding) and you feel like committing suicide is extreme, unbearable violence'. Ranked less severe were cases of being imprisoned in their houses for disobedience and the many forms of violence 'which they have to deal with every day and hence do not call violence' - verbal abuse,

fights over money, daily consumption of alcohol by men, minor beating by the husband because the 'meal is not tasty'. Their ideal situation was 'When husband - wife stay together peacefully without any kind of mistrust and suspicion, children go to school, no illness, adequate water, and agriculture produce, neither have to migrate out for work and above all prohibition on liquor and ban on torture would bring peace'. The only women considered in this situation were those no man in their household or extended family: no husband, father or brother. Five out of the twenty women admitted to having experienced very serious violence just stopping short of murder, which they had never before discussed with anyone (Mayoux and ANANDI, 2005).

In India, Uganda and Sudan after initial training diamonds have been used by women's groups without external facilitation to identify the poorest and least empowered women in their community and develop strategies for their inclusion in the group.

The Diamond has also been used with men in Pakistan and Uganda. In both contexts use of the Diamond and other tools have led to identification of changes which men can make to both increase their own happiness and have greater gender equality in the household. Mutual respect and participation in decision-making was commonly cited by men as an element in both happiness and women's empowerment, along with women's literacy and having few children. In Pakistan men mentioned lack of political representation for disempowered women. Significantly though, household violence featured much less prominently in any of men's analysis of poverty, empowerment or happiness.

In Uganda, where the PALS methodology originated, most groups are mixed sex and have been using Poverty Diamonds, and also a range of livelihood development tools, without external facilitation to identify poverty levels in their groups and analyse and plan their businesses. A particularly important development in Uganda, continuing on from diamonds, have been Challenge Action Trees where men identify the causes for their own adultery, violence and alcoholism and make commitment to action steps to change – on the understanding that such men are not happy as well as their behaviour damaging their wives and children. Anecdotal information from their wives and others in the community indicate these pledges have often been fulfilled, and that the men are presenting their experience in church to other men and women and to their friends.

In Baluchistan, Pakistan, it was clear that for men the way in which gender issues are presented was important. The group of men asked to discuss 'women's empowerment' walked out of the meeting leaving the facilitator alone. The group asked to discuss women and men's role in 'happy families' on the other had a very engaged and in-depth discussion. Although the focus on men's own happiness was necessary as an entry point, the men still identified a number of issues which mirrored women's priorities as a basis on which both men and women could work. They strongly supported women's literacy and smaller families. Many men felt overburdened by their economic responsibilities and the demands placed upon them by their families, and would like to share this more with their wives. Men wanted to be able to go to the cinema with their wives and move around freely with them. This then led to a discussion of why they felt they could not do this and what they could do to change the situation (Mayoux,2005). Interestingly none of the drawings by

either women or men showed women veiled, even though they wore burqa at the meetings – also challenging external stereotypes.

CONCLUSIONS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

The GALS methodology has developed in different ways in the different contexts, and the tools are used in different combinations – because of different initial purposes for which it is used and different organisational experiences and capacities more than because of differences in economic and social context. The methodology is ideally integrated as a more empowering and effective methodology for existing activities –rather than as separate process. This flexibility is a strength, but also makes any written Manual or initial training blueprint problematic. It also makes ownership/accreditation issues rather sensitive - over time it is the women and men in communities who lead innovation in the methodology, not development organisations.

GALS cannot claim to resolve all the contradictions and power inequalities and potential conflict inherent in any participatory process which aims to challenge gender inequality.² The aim of the Diamond is to provoke discussion and rapidly identify actions which could lead to rapid tangible valued changes in a short period of time through participants' own actions in their households and communities. This as a means for increasing community ownership of a gender justice peer learning and action process which does not require continual external facilitation to maintain its momentum.

GALS is not a substitute for in-depth training, but an entry point which provides motivation and highlights demand as well as increasing people's learning skills to benefit from training they receive. In addition to the almost universal demand for enterprise and technical training of various types, demands/actions which have arisen have included women in Sudan deciding to go as a group to government literacy courses they had previously not thought worthwhile, demands in Uganda, Sudan and Pakistan for in-depth women's legal rights training, and in Sudan and Pakistan training on women's rights under Islam. The facilitation process is important. GALS does not aim to be a consciousness-raising tool with preset gender messages. Facilitation is done 'actively from the back'. The facilitator introduces the activity, but only participants handle the marker or cards. The facilitator's role is to ask questions where these are not raised by participants, particularly on apparent differences/contradictions in opinions, to prevent any one person dominating and make sure everyone's voice is heard. The only 'messages' as such come in the summing-up where the outcomes can be compared with a simplified version of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) or some other very simple statement of rights and principles. Through eliciting spontaneous views of gender difference, GALS provokes discussion of which differences are desirable and which are 'unjust' and generally in and of itself leads to a consensus on common human rights, and the need to ensure that women as well as men enjoy these. Facilitation does not require formal education, but good communication skills and empathy – something which is paradoxically often more difficult for those with conventional training experience than people in communities themselves. In Uganda women

entrepreneurs who cannot read and write are the preferred 'trainers' by the community.

Once established for a couple of years, GALS is potentially a financially and organisationally sustainable change process integrated into other activities (existing livelihood or gender training, savings and credit group meetings, annual general meetings, community fairs and so on) and needing little external facilitation of the methodology itself. The organisation's role becomes one of effectively responding to issues identified as needing external support through integration in their participatory planning process. GALS therefore does not in any way remove the need for development agencies and governments to be actively committed to gender justice, backed by adequate resources. It increases the respect and voice of very poor people in organisational decision-making and enables external resources to be targeted where they are most needed based on articulate and informed demand.

NOTES

1. PALS originated with work by the author with Kabarole Research and Resource Centre and their partner organisations in Uganda in 2002. For an overview of this generic methodology see Mayoux (2006). The GALS adaptations with consultancies in Pakistan, India and Sudan, and are now an integral part of Oxfam Novib's 'Women's Empowerment, Mainstreaming and Networking Process'. The other tools used are described in detail in Mayoux (2008).

2. For an overview of some of these contradictions and challenges, see Mayoux (1995), which is the starting point of the ideas which eventually led to GALs.

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WEBSITES

www.palsnetwork.info

A website dedicated to the Participatory Action Learning System (including GALS)
with multimedia learning materials and core resources.

www.wemanglobal.org

A website for Oxfam Novib's Women's Empowerment Mainstreaming and
Networking for Gender Justice in Economic Development process which contains
further documents and updates on the GALS methodology and regional processes.