



Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

# PRIMING RESILIENCE WITH INTRA-HOUSEHOLD CHANGE

## Addressing gender norms

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# Introduction

Since “resilience” entered the international development community’s lexicon, programs have been challenged to use more adaptive and systems-based approaches. Indeed, with the rising frequency of climate and ecological shocks and stresses—including floods and droughts—there is a clear need to do so. Failure to invest in resilience risks households and communities backsliding into poverty and countries losing hard-earned development gains.

Definitions of resilience often operate at the community or systems level.<sup>1</sup> Attention at this macro-level often overlooks variables at the individual and intra-household level. In particular, there remains the issue of gender. **For example, how might women be differently positioned to contribute knowledge and skills that can strengthen household and community resilience?** Social and cultural norms frequently exclude women from access to resources and decision-making, and consequently they are less able to take absorptive and adaptive measures to respond to shocks and stresses.

Mercy Corps’ two-year BRIGE (Building Resilience through the Integration of Gender and Empowerment) Program was launched in 2015 to strengthen resilience by increasing the organization’s capacity to better respond to gender-specific needs. BRIGE introduced an additional layer of gender programming on to existing resilience-focused “parent programs” in three countries—Nepal, Niger, and Indonesia.

Our research found that BRIGE’s intra-household gender norm intervention catalyzed women’s participation in household and community decision-making in ways that enabled them to better contribute to resilience at both levels. This intervention was in the form of a facilitated household dialogue curriculum, and points to the need for resilience programs to invest more in intra-household gender dynamics alongside pursuing community and systems-wide changes.



*A husband and wife who participated in the household dialogue in Dadeldhura district in Nepal farm tomatoes together.*

Sangita Adhikari/Mercy Corps

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Mercy Corps, Our Resilience Approach to Relief, Recovery, and Development, [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Mercy%20Corps%20Resilience%20Approach\\_April%202015.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Mercy%20Corps%20Resilience%20Approach_April%202015.pdf)

# Why does participation matter for resilience?

Women’s participation—in both household and community decision-making—can contribute to strengthening resilience. At the household level, increased participation can mean more informed or different perspectives on critical issues like household finances, livelihoods and nutrition, among other things. At the community level, programs that apply a resilience lens to their design frequently ask that individuals participate in collective trainings or information sessions where they receive critical skills and knowledge that support absorptive and adaptive strategies. Participation in community groups and activities can in turn provide the opportunity for individuals to build critical assets that can operate as resilience capacities at household and community levels. These include:

1. **Social capital:** Individuals have the opportunity to build **social capital**. By participating in these groups and activities, individuals develop social resources (e.g., networks, social relations, access to other institutions in society) that may help provide support in the case of a shock or stress.<sup>2</sup>
2. **Human capital:** Individuals acquire **knowledge and skills** that they use and share at the household-level, and individuals can **share and access information** through broad community networks. Knowledge and skills are used to understand community risks, as well as develop and implement risk-reduction strategies.<sup>3</sup>
3. **Decision-making:** Individuals contribute to **decision-making** at the household and community levels. Decision-making power is critical to the resilience response process.<sup>4</sup> Assets become resilience capacities when an individual makes the decision to employ them in response to a shock or stress.

## How does the household dialogue address barriers to participation?

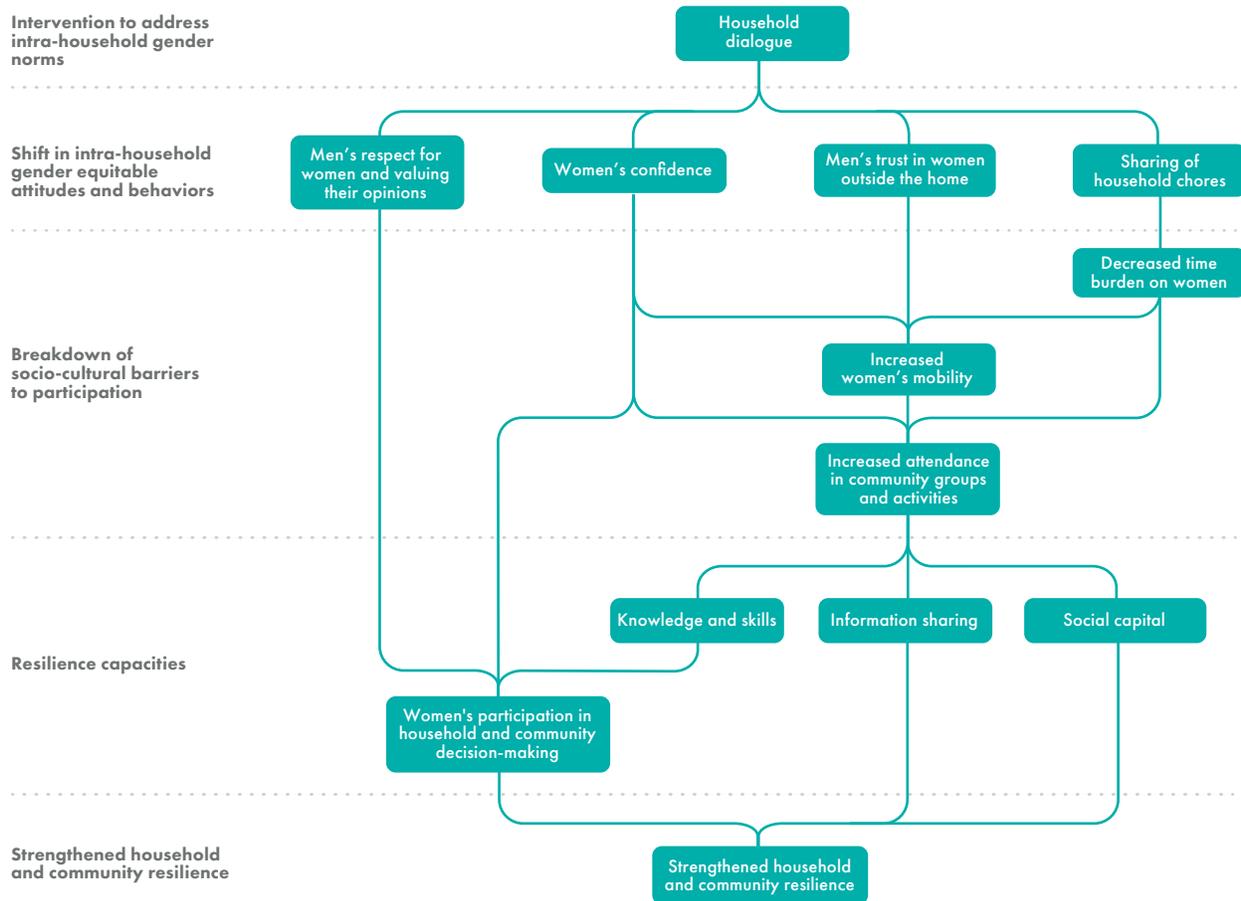
Women’s meaningful participation in community groups and activities that build resilience capacities is often hindered by certain socio-cultural barriers that limit their time, mobility and decision-making power.<sup>5</sup> The research considered the effect of the household dialogue—a household-based intervention piloted in the Far Western and Central Regions of Nepal and the Tillaberi Region of Niger—on addressing these socio-cultural barriers.

The household dialogue curriculum refers to a four-day facilitated training organized with a man and woman from the same household (frequently husband and wife but not necessarily). It presents couples with an opportunity to reflect together on the gendered division of labor within their households. Discussions followed, and participants jointly designed and implemented plans to change decision-making and roles within the household. Following the training, BRIGE staff followed up with participants through regular monitoring visits to track progress on the plans.

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- 2 International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Building Resilience for Food and Nutrition Security: Resilience and Social Capital, May 2014, <http://ebrary.ifpri.org/utils/getfile/collection/p15738coll2/id/128152/filename/128363.pdf>
  - 3 Mayunga, J. S., Understanding and applying the concept of community disaster resilience: A capital-based approach. Draft working paper prepared for the Summer Academy for Social Vulnerability and Resilience Building, 22 – 28 July 2007, Munich, Germany, 2007, [https://www.u-cursos.cl/usuario/3b514b53bcb4025aaf9a6781047e4a66/mi\\_blog/r/11.\\_Joseph\\_S.\\_Mayunga.pdf](https://www.u-cursos.cl/usuario/3b514b53bcb4025aaf9a6781047e4a66/mi_blog/r/11._Joseph_S._Mayunga.pdf)
  - 4 Béné et al. *The Influence of Subjective and Psycho-Social Factors on People’s Resilience*, Technical Report Series No. 2: Strengthening the Evidence Base for Resilience in the Horn of Africa, ILRI, 2016, [http://www.technicalconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Report-5-The-influence-of-subjective-and-psychosocial\\_18Feb2016.pdf](http://www.technicalconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Report-5-The-influence-of-subjective-and-psychosocial_18Feb2016.pdf)
  - 5 Oxfam Canada, Learning Forum on Women’s Rights and Resilience, Ottawa, September 2013, <http://go.oxfam.ca/docs/learning-forum-on-wr-and-resilience-september-2013.pdf>

Providing households with the household dialogue prior to implementing “resilience strategies as usual” ensures greater impact. The household dialogue increases women’s confidence, time, mobility and respect; in doing so, it improves their participation in community groups, where they can both access and contribute knowledge that can help households and communities better manage their exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stresses (See below).

## A RESILIENCE CAUSAL CHAIN HOW ADDRESSING HOUSEHOLD GENDER NORMS CAN LEAD TO STRENGTHENED RESILIENCE



The research finds that it is helpful to approach resilience along a causal chain. That is, as development practitioners, we often assume that offering a training or an information session is sufficient. There is a pervasive “build it and they will come” supply-side mentality. However, if we meet potential participants where they are—embedded in all of the socio-cultural complexity and gender norms within their households—we are likely to improve inclusion and participation in such a way as to ultimately strengthen resilience.

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN BUILDING RESILIENCE CAPACITIES: EXAMPLES FROM NEPAL AND NIGER

In Nepal, disaster management committees meet to discuss ways to absorb, adapt to, or respond to shocks and stresses. Among its activities, the committee discusses early warning systems, rescue and first aid responses, agricultural technologies, and funding opportunities to help farmers plant crops that are more resistant to climate and ecological hazards. In one meeting in a BRIGE community, participants decided that they wanted to plant potatoes and were discussing how much to plant. Men said they should plant 10 kilograms each; the women, on the other hand, said that they wanted to plant 25 kilograms. As it turns out, the women are the ones typically responsible for planting and working the fields, not the men. The men, without knowing, had suggested a much smaller amount because they thought that the women would not be able to manage more. This is an example in which explicitly having women's opinions in community decision-making makes a difference in agricultural production. Improved agricultural production is important for household resilience in that it provides food and income. At the community level, some of the crops promoted, like sugarcane, actually serve to reinforce the flood-prone lands where they are planted.

In Niger, the research found that following the household dialogue training, women's opinions were more included in household food purchase decisions. Previously, men had bought food without consulting the women who were responsible for cooking meals for the family. Often, this resulted in food purchases that were not nutritionally balanced or aligned with household needs. The household dialogue increased the participation of women in household decision-making; in both the short- and long-term, more nutritious food improves the health of individuals so that they are more resilient in the face of future shocks and stresses.

Below, we discuss the four key ways in which the household dialogue intervention shifted households towards more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors, thus overcoming barriers to women's participation in household and community decision-making.

### KEY LEARNING #1

## Household dialogue increased women's confidence, thereby improving participation in household and community decision-making

For historical and cultural reasons tied to structural inequalities, confidence tends to accrue to men and not women in many societies, including in the communities where BRIGE worked. The household dialogue aimed to change this with the idea that if individuals do not have confidence, a resilience-focused program may implement important activities for "hard skills" (e.g., farmer trainings, disaster risk reduction technologies, income-generating activities, etc.), but women's acquisition and use of these hard skills will be diminished due to lack of participation and low quality of participation (e.g., attending, but not expressing opinions or having opinions considered by others).

This confidence (or lack thereof) is manifest at both the household and community levels, and so is its impact on women's contributions to resilience. In some households, **lack of confidence prevents women from speaking-up, making decisions or taking action related to household finances, including investments or spending.** It is challenging for households to proactively adapt to risks and respond to shocks if these women actually have better or more complete information than men or, as in Nepal and Niger where men frequently migrate for seasonal labor, if men are not available to make decisions and take action. Our research found instances in which women knew more about agricultural technologies due to the division of labor in the household and

because of their participation in community training sessions. At the community level, women in the Nepal BRIGE program that participated in the household dialogue training had more confidence and were better able to speak up at home and in the presence of others in organized community groups, often **contributing valuable information that strengthened community decision-making**. As one woman who participated in the household dialogue explained, "...women were so shy to speak in front of strangers, but now we are able to give our own introduction....There is positive transformation seen in the mindset of those people who thought that women were not allowed to go beyond their territory, cross their limit or be involved in any kind of social events."

## KEY LEARNING #2

### **Household dialogue increased men's trust in women outside the home, thereby improving women's mobility**

In many communities, men have limited trust in women's activities outside of the home, often thinking that outside the home, women become "morally corrupt" or lack skills such that they may be cheated. **Men's lack of trust is one important factor driving women's limited mobility**. Mobility, as it helps reduce exposure to shocks and stresses and helps individuals access resources for coping, is important for resilience.

The BRIGE research found that the household dialogue increased men's trust in women such that they were able to leave their homes to participate in community groups and activities that provided valuable resilience-building information and skills related to disaster risk reduction, early warning systems, financial services and livelihoods training that they could, in turn, relay back to their households. Again, participation also strengthened communities' capacities to be resilient in the face of a shock or stress because women shared their knowledge for better, more informed community decision-making. Increased trust, and therefore increased mobility, also meant that women were more able to work away from the home or participate in market activities.

## KEY LEARNING #3

### **Household dialogue increased sharing of household chores, thereby reducing the time burden on women so that they can participate in activities that build their ability to better absorb, adapt to or respond to a future shock or stress**

The household dialogue training led to increased sharing of household chores between men and women. After an initial introduction to develop a conceptual understanding of gender, the couples participated in a session on the division of roles and responsibilities in the household. Inevitably, this discussion encouraged deep reflection on chores and realization, on the part of men, that women do a lot more than they initially thought. Men increasingly helped with household chores, thus **freeing time for women to engage in different resilience-building activities**, such as participating in community trainings in Nepal or preparing more nutritious food in Niger.

In addition to knowledge acquisition and information-sharing, increased participation in community groups contributed to a less tangible part of resilience-building: social capital. Prior research has shown that social capital is important for building resilience at both the household and community levels. Our research found that participating more in the community furthered 1) women's "bonding social capital," defined as relationships among demographically similar members of a community that may be called upon during the course of a climate or ecological shock or stress; and 2) women's "bridging social capital," defined as relationships with other useful actors in society (e.g., private agricultural market actors, government service providers, etc.).

#### KEY LEARNING #4

### Household dialogue increased men's respect for women and the value of their opinions, thereby improving women's participation in household decision-making

If women have informed opinions that can contribute to building resilience (i.e., about improved agricultural production, vulnerable community members, physical assets, or opportunities for financial savings and insurance), what is preventing them from sharing it with their households and communities? Aside from confidence, a key factor is related to how men respect them and value their input. The household dialogue helped men better appreciate women and value their opinions in decision-making.

Through the household dialogue curriculum, men often first came to understand the value of women in their traditional gender roles at home, understanding the extent and importance of their labor and the knowledge that accompanies it. But as women increasingly acquire information and skills outside of the home that are not necessarily aligned with these gender roles (often by participating in community groups and activities), **men come to have more respect for them and their opinions, opening the door for their increased participation in important household decisions.** In this way, several of the results begin to collide: men's trust in women outside the home increases their participation in community activities; in turn, this increases men's respect for women and their opinions. All the while, women's confidence increases the quality of participation in both community groups and at home.

## Rethinking resilience: Starting with individual and intra-household change

Many approaches to strengthening resilience rely upon community-level interventions, assuming that meaningful participation will naturally occur. This research demonstrates that participation should not be taken for granted: by including a household dialogue primer, BRIGE has shifted the focus to first address gender norms at the individual and intra-household level, thus spurring improved participation of women in households and community activities with the potential to strengthen resilience.

**As resilience discourse continues to influence how development policies and practices are framed, it is important to consider that the desired community and systems-level change often first requires change at the individual and intra-household level.** Gender norms are deeply embedded at the intra-household level and often determine who is participating in the decisions and activities for building household and community-level resilience. Better inclusion of women and other marginalized groups can mean bringing more informed opinions or different perspectives to the discussion. It can also mean building the knowledge and skills of people who are strongly positioned to help their households and communities better absorb, adapt to and respond to climatic or ecological shocks or stresses. This inclusion will not happen by itself, and for that reason, resilience approaches should incorporate intra-household-level interventions that will make their other strategic activities more effective in the long run.

For more information about this research, a full detailed report is available, along with implementation and measurement tools related to the household dialogue intervention.

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### About Mercy Corps

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