The complexity of community engagement: Developing staff-community relationships in a participatory intervention to reduce domestic violence a Kolkata slum.

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Introduction

- Dissatisfaction with inflexible top-down development interventions has led to a demand for community-led approaches and the proliferation of terms such as participation, empowerment and community ownership (Cornwall, 2008). However, the practical implications of these terms remain unclear (Chambers, Pettit, & Scott-Villiers, 2001).
- In light of countless examples of technically sophisticated interventions which have failed to take hold in communities, there has been a recent call for insights from the behavioural and social sciences into the acceptance and success of interventions in practice (Bradley et al., 2011; Check Hayden, 2011).
- This study examined how sociocultural factors influenced relationship-building between NGO staff and community members, and how this mediated community support and participation in an intervention to reduce domestic violence in Kolkata slums.

Method & Context

- Shikha* is an NGO which runs non-governmental schools, women's rights groups, health clinics and vocational training programmes in 14 villages in South East Kolkata. This poster focuses on the establishment of a women's rights group in Rajana.
- Rajana is a village of approximately 80 families based on a city dump. It is not served by government systems for water, sanitation, healthcare, education or transport.
- Shikha faced significant community resistance when they first attempted to establish a school and women's rights group in the area. Within 2 years, however, they had supported a group of women to reduce domestic violence and to successfully lobby the government to provide safe water and to close illicit liquor shops in the area. They continue to campaign to obtain electricity

Table 1. Method and Participants

Method	Participants
Semi Structured Interviews	• 6 Administrative staff • 5 Teachers • 4 Teaching volunteers • 5 School pupils
Focus group	• 8 Women's group members • 1 Women's group facilitator

A Thematic Network Analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) identified 59 basic codes which were clustered into 11 organising themes and five encompassing global themes. These are presented in Table 2

Cultural Context

Staff emphasised that communities were not only excluded from services such as water, electricity, education and sanitation, but also isolated from exposure to other ways of life and positive role models. Within the communities, domestic violence was considered legitimate or even necessary, and was a matter of shame for the woman.

They even said things like "It's all fine with us. We are weak." Whenever we asked about their problems, they would say, "We don't have any problem at all. Only that our husbands drink a little. That's all"… Domestic violence had become an integral way of their lives. They thought, "These beatings are necessary if they have to keep control on us"… They always kept saying that – "Our husbands are otherwise good. They only beat us when we sometimes make the mistake of answering them back." (Lily, women's group facilitator)

Women had **little opportunity to establish friendships** or discuss their problems as they were often restricted inside their homes by their husbands or mothers-in-law. Furthermore, their poverty often fostered competition rather than solidarity.

All this time they have remained neglected and isolated even in their own families where the other members think "she is just a stupid woman"… the situations are so adverse, the people have to fight so much for their survival that none of them has good relations with his neighbour. (Lily, women's group facilitator)

Staff found it much easier to engage less isolated communities with greater access to the city and with greater experience of the "outside world" through radio and television.

Staff-Community Divide

Despite coming from the same city and speaking the same language, **differences in values, social status and lifestyles** marked clear divisions between staff and community members.

Just the sight of you people from the cities would have us scared and anxious. Like, when we speak we know that we use a lot of slang words but that's how we've grown up and we can't change that. So we always felt insecure, that was our main inhibition. (Sarita, women's group member)

Locals found it difficult to relate to the values and terminology that were being espoused by Shikha staff.

When we started discussing these issues like women's rights and entitlements with them, we realised that they are not at all familiar with this kind of language, these terminologies and coinages. They didn't even know what the word "rights" meant in the first place, let alone having them … We were trying to speak their language, but the very concepts we were trying to advocate were sort of alien to them. (Lily, women's group facilitator)

Some staff were uncomfortable with community lifestyles . They commented on a lack of personal hygiene, inappropriate clothing and that parents didn't care about their children, "at least not as much as we do" (Gopa, teacher).

Findings

Power Dynamics

Power struggles between staff and community members were manifest in **conflict and resistance** ranging from suspicious stares to insults, taunts and even death threats.

Initially, I must say, they rejected me badly…when we tried to speak against [domestic violence] they rejected us like anything. The first thing that they rejected me for was that, in spite of being married, I don't wear the Sankha and the Pola [Bangles traditionally worn by married Bengali women]. (Lily, women's group facilitator)

Community members had little or no experience of others taking an interest in their wellbeing and the social change agenda and participatory group-formation provoked a lot of scepticism.

[The men] keep a strict vigil on us all the time. They just stand silently at the back during the meetings and watch what we do. If by any chance they get some negative message from what we are doing or saying they convey it straight to the political leaders. (Priya, co-founder)

Building Relationships

Gaining the trust of communities was a slow and unpredictable process. It was often fuelled by unanticipated events such as teachers spontaneously responding to community emergencies, going beyond their official roles to help people who were injured or ill. They arranged transport, paid for medical treatment and donated blood. "This made our position stronger in the hearts of these people" (Mita, teacher). Some felt that **building personal relationships** was key to gaining acceptance, for example, by playing with community children and avoiding an air of superiority.

They found something in me that told them that I might be friendly enough. This might be because right from the beginning I have tried to mix with them just like someone from their own community. I would ask them how the members of their family are, what they have cooked at home and things that would help me get closer to them. (Gopa, teacher)

They emphasised the importance of **consistency** both in individual and group-level interactions.

Consecutive meetings, consecutive field visits and one-to-one talking is very important … Until and unless you develop a relationship you cannot go on, even if you have a bagful of goodies in store for them. (Nondita, admin.)

A more controversial approach to building relationships was the use of **well-intentioned deception and manipulation**. When Lily first tried to get women to talk about domestic violence and women's rights she was rejected outright. Shikha revised their approach and set up a literacy class for the women, through which they gradually introduced stories and newspaper clippings about women who campaigned to close liquor shops, earned independent incomes and challenged domestic violence.

My strategy was that I would make [the literacy teacher] narrate some of the stories to them, not myself … Finally when they started asking repeatedly about me, he said, "No, she's been really hurt by your behaviour. You could also bring about the developments that are going on elsewhere in your own communities. But it seems you are not at all interested." But gradually their points of view were changing … they would tell him, "No please tell her to come, we did not mean to misbehave". They had realised that whatever I was discussing with them was for their own good. (Lily, women's group facilitator)

Using one's position of authority to manipulate individuals "for their own good" is a controversial approach. Though highly paternalistic, it was utilised to ultimately bring about positive change where more traditional information-provision and negotiation were ineffective.

Unstable Progress

Through story-telling and by bringing the women to visit other successful women's self-help groups Shikha stimulated community women to make social comparisons with others and to think critically about their own situations.

What we thought was, if others can cope with this situation why not us? Then we, the women thought that if the men can't then we will have to take care of the whole thing. (Sarita, women's group member)

However, when the women began to act on this new sense of purpose things did not go smoothly. As one staff member put it, they became "too dynamic" (Lily, women's group facilitator), vandalising liquor shops and physically threatening violent men themselves. This caused a backlash of criticism and violence within the community.

What these women here tend to do is immediately go and apply everything they have learnt regarding the gender issues… [but] if one fine morning she suddenly goes home and tells her husband, "No, you can't beat me anymore," the situation will actually worsen…They started calling me for help. I said let them do whatever they are doing now, because at this stage they have gone out of my hands…[Eventually] we said "Before demolishing the liquor shops, did you ever give a thought to who the people are that you would be harming in the process and how socially powerful they are? You could have been murdered …You have actually invited more problems by acting in this stupid manner." (Lily, women's group facilitator)

Lily's reaction demonstrates the **emotional nature of field work** which adds another layer of unpredictability to the development process. Staff do not simply implement technical plans. They constantly use their personal discretion and moral judgement to respond to community activities.

Some staff felt very demoralised by what they perceived as ingratitude or opportunism among community members.

They only come when it's their own need. Like one of them was having some trouble regarding banking so he came to us for help but once we did it for him he never came back. (Ashoka, teacher)

Successfully coping with these emotional situations depends on positive relationship management. As expressed by one volunteer, "I think it always boils down to the one-on-one thing and in a way that's scary because you're dealing with the flaws of human nature and personalities. It's not just about having the most technical or elaborate plan." (Elaine, volunteer)

Table 2. Codes, Organising Themes and Global Themes

BASIC THEMES / CODES	ORGANISING THEMES	GLOBAL THEMES
Social exclusion	Structural inequalities	Sociocultural Context
Lack of healthcare		
Domestic violence	Social issues	
Sexual exploitation		
Alcoholism		
Child labour		
Crime		
Child marriage		
False consciousness	Stable oppression	
Fatalism		
Isolation		
Propriety & behaviour	Communication barriers	Staff-Community Divide
Concerns about eloquence		
New concepts & jargon		
First impressions of community	Sociocultural differences	
Dress		
Hygiene		
Staff treated as guests		
Economic differences		
Insults, taunts & violence	Resisting intervention	Power Dynamics
Men staring/surveillance		
Suspicion & mistrust		
Rejection		
Opportunism		
Protest & complaint		
Violent punishment	Power-struggles within communities	
Husbands resisting wives		
Restrictive gender roles		
Struggle to engage men		
Female focus		
Women resisting women		
Enthusiasm and energy	Establishing trust	Building Relationships
Proving intentions		
Holistic approach		
Gradual process		
Relationship-focus		
Love		
Acknowledgement and respect		
Consistency	Engagement strategies	
Convince community gatekeepers		
Negotiation		
Deception/manipulation		
Input and ownership	Unpredictable participation	Unstable Progress
Bottom-up requests		
Learning from communities		
Critical questioning & analysis		
Critical consciousness		
Awareness of rights		
Solidarity		
Community		
Role models		
Social comparisons		
Setbacks		
Over-empowered/ "too dynamic"		
Agenda filtering down to all staff	Continuing challenges	
Slow structural change		
Decontextualised donor demands		
Conflicting priorities		
Avoiding dependency		

Conclusion

- The positive rhetoric surrounding participatory approaches often fails to convey complexities and dilemmas that arise in practice. This study found that differences in values, lifestyle and status between Shikha staff and community members severely hindered communication and participation. It took considerable time and effort to build trusting personal relationships which transcended these group-level tensions.
- The more community-led participatory interventions are, the less predictable they become. Shikha's intervention had unanticipated consequences, dividing opinion within communities and leading to violent civil unrest.
- Though staff explicitly endeavoured to prompt participants to define their own solutions, they reprimanded them for implementing solutions they saw as overly-radical. In practice, the intervention was managed using a mixture of top-down and bottom-up techniques, a balance of facilitation, guidance, instruction, and occasionally manipulation.
- Nonetheless, as Shikha's experience demonstrates, the inevitable power imbalances inherent in participatory intervention do not necessarily preclude significant positive social change.
- Recognising the concrete impact of the cultural context and the interpersonal dimensions of development can provide useful insights into why interventions succeed or fail.

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*All names have been changed to preserve anonymity

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