



## Executive Summary – Curiosity Collective II

### Are VSLA feminist platforms for gender transformation?

#### Background, Introduction and Methodology

This paper focuses on the gender transformative aspects of VSLAs that emerged from the Curiosity Collective (part 2) which took place in West Africa in early 2020. The paper provides findings and recommendations about how VSLAs can be a platform to challenge patriarchal structures that discriminate against and normalize violence against women and girls. It builds on [previous work](#) carried out by the Curiosity Collective.

The objective of the Curiosity Collective (part 2) was to identify and demonstrate the value add that VSLAs play in promoting gender transformation.

The guiding framework for the Curiosity Collective (part 2) was [CARE's Gender Equality Framework](#) which highlights that in order to have gender transformative impacts we must work across three domains: Agency, Relations and Structure.

Over a period of six days in Niger and Cote d'Ivoire, teams visited five women-only VSLAs and eight mixed VSLAs in urban and rural contexts as well as a women's rights NGO and an NGO that provides support to victim/survivors of GBV. In both countries, colleagues from government, women's rights NGOs and LGBT organizations (in Ivory Coast) joined the final day's group discussions to share their inputs into our deliberations.

Core to the methodology were:

- Inclusive reflective learning approaches
- Feminist principles
- CARE's Gender Equality Framework of Agency, Relations and Structure

#### *Feminist Research Principles*

- *Participant as experts*
- *Open dialogues of curiosity*
- *Premises challenging patriarchal approaches*
- *Raising the voice of marginalized*
- *Seeking solutions towards equality*
- *Empathetic dialogues*
- *Promoting female courage*

Given the limitations of the methodology, the findings and recommendations should inform further inquiry and learning on how VSLAs function and what their potential to achieve gender transformative change is.



## Findings and Recommendations

### VSLAs are a platform for gender transformation, so we recommend that:

- ✓ Measurement tools include rights-based indicators that capture changes in gender equality in Agency, Relations and Structure. CARE needs to test and integrate these indicators in a) the MEL guide for VSLAs and b) the guide on designing gender-transformative VSLA programming, in order to collect data systematically over time.
- ✓ Existing qualitative measures be developed, strengthened and systematised to capture gender transformative changes in VSLAs over time.
- ✓ Involve women members of VSLAs as part of the process of the development, testing and implementing the indicators and measures.

### Women value women only spaces, so we recommend:

- ✓ CARE actively invest in and support women-only VSLA groups.
- ✓ If mixed-sex groups are required, CARE ensure that separate women-only spaces are built in.

### VSLA's may trigger violence, so we recommend:

- ✓ Be open and discuss with women eventual changes in household and community power dynamics and be aware that masculinities might be challenged.
- ✓ Include robust GBV risk mitigation guidance in VSLA programme guidance, particularly at the set up stage of VSLA groups, this should be linked to [CARE's Guidance on GBV Risk Mitigation](#).
- ✓ Ensure that risk mitigation plans are developed, implemented, monitored and inform learning for improved practice and guidance.
- ✓ Link VSLA groups to local referral and support services and link survivors of violence to VSLA groups.
- ✓ Engage men and boys to challenge GBV in their community and among their peers.
- ✓ Learn from successful projects carried out by [CARE Rwanda \(Indashyikirwa\)](#), [CARE Sri Lanka \(EMERGE\)](#) and [CARE Burundi \(Abatangamuco\)](#) on how men and boys have contributed to a reduction in violence against women.

VSLA methodology promotes self-selection. It is critical that CARE, partners and Village Agents understand the society we operate in and that *patriarchal social and cultural norms prevail*. When they promote group creation these norms can strongly influence group members "self" selection.

### To achieve gender justice, men and boys must change, so we recommend:

- ✓ That programs working with women only VSLA structures engage men and boys for gender justice outside of VSLA meetings and deliberate efforts need to be made so that men and boys are proactively challenging patriarchal norms among peers in their communities and beyond. CARE can learn from couple approaches in our SRHR and GBV programming to more deliberately engage men and boys for gender equality.
- ✓ Engage men and boys through existing groups: CARE should identify existing groups of men and boys and engage them in order to advance our work on dismantling patriarchy.
- ✓ Avoid investing in men-only VSLAs: CARE's impact population is women and girls and VSLAs should focus on the empowerment of women and girls and as a basic principle, CARE should not invest in men-only VSLAs.
- ✓ In mixed groups, CARE:
  - *Must not be Gender Blind*: if CARE is creating mixed groups, consider the risks of this and build in ways to mitigate them; e.g. risk of sexual exploitation and abuse
  - *Must Identify Gendered Power Dynamics*: multiple types of gendered power dynamics can operate in a mixed group. It is important to be aware of and identify these to ensure that we are not inadvertently reinforcing power inequalities. It is important to be aware of who



inhabits formal and non-formal leadership roles in the groups, and with that, what training is offered to which groups.

- *Must use a gender lens to encourage how group funds are used:* so that the use of funds is prioritized in a way that does not reinforce gender stereotypes.

### **Women's Political Participation is a structural change, so we recommend:**

- ✓ In the VSLA scale-up strategy, articulate a clear process of support for strengthening and measuring the effect of VSLA women's political participation.
- ✓ Link VSLA women to local women's rights NGOs and groups working on the issue of women's political participation, so they receive wider, appropriate and sustained support.
- ✓ Support and link with local women's rights NGOs and groups working on the issue of women's political participation in order to support women with political ambition in VSLA programs and support broader work to increase women's representation in politics.

### **Scale up and multiplying impact is possible through challenging patriarchy, through partnership and through replication, so we recommend:**

- ✓ Clarify that the primary goal for CARE in its VSLA work is gender equality.
- ✓ Articulate scale-up as being not only about increasing the numbers of new VSLAs but also about increasing gains in Agency, Relations and Structure because gender transformative work will also impact positively on food and nutrition security; sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence.
- ✓ Recognize and reward the women who promote VSLA replication and network creation, integrate women VSLA members who have years of experience as experts and compensate them as 'consultants' or 'staff'.
- ✓ Train CARE staff working in VSLAs to understand, analyze and measure the VSLAs from a gender transformative perspective, so that the full impact of the VSLAs can be tracked, learned from and improved, not only from a financial perspective but also from socio-political and cultural perspectives.

### **VSLAs can exclude some people, so we recommend:**

- ✓ That CARE explores how to adapt the basic VSLA methodology to include very vulnerable groups
- ✓ That CARE identifies vulnerable and marginalized people in the community with existing VSLA groups and how to extend the VSLAs to be deliberately inclusive of them.
- ✓ Play a 'convener' role: CARE country offices and members can connect more deliberately with feminist women's rights organizations, bringing them in to their VSLA work.
- ✓ Partner with organizations who work with marginalized and vulnerable groups – including those working with people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGI/E) and survivors of violence - to learn from them and explore how the VSLA approach may be adapted to include them.

## **Conclusion**

Three decades ago, CARE was instrumental in sowing the seed for the very first VSLA in Niger – which came to be known as 'Mata Masu Dubara' (MMD) or in English as 'Women on the Move'. It goes without saying that these groups were women-only savings groups. What began as a saving group 30 years ago, has today become one of the strongest examples of collective action of women in West Africa. The women of these MMD groups have reinforced their self-esteem and confidence and are empowered to raise their voice and work collectively to challenge patriarchal norms and practices that discriminate against and violate the rights of women and girls in their communities. This is an example of how powerful and meaningful women-only spaces can support collective action by women and bring holistic change in a woman's life – financial, social and political. CARE must build on the expertise and learning of these women globally.