Gender equality is a challenging development goal that involves not only giving women a voice, but also cultivating a social movement that challenges the cultural practices limiting them. A training with gender champions from a pastoral project in Kenya helped ACDI/VOCA see that despite our commitment to women’s empowerment, we must always be open to learning.

1. Even in female-only focus group discussions, all voices need a chance to be heard.

Women with lower levels of literacy, especially those with lower levels of self-esteem, often remain unheard in focus group discussions and are left out when setting development priorities. Power and privilege dynamics play out even in the female-only groups and maintain a system where the women without power or privilege are silenced.

2. The best advocates for change might be those you are least likely to suspect.

The notion that those community members who have had more outside exposure will bring about the desired change in the community was seriously challenged during our gender training. For example, the older, more experienced, but illiterate and semi-illiterate, men were against the practice of early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). Some of the well-educated young men were the most vocal advocates for the practice.

3. The threat of retribution keeps people from changing their behavior.

Going against particular cultural practices, such as allowing women to milk a camel, could result in a household being ostracized by the community. Interventions should therefore focus on “Do No Harm” approaches and strategically select the harmful cultural practices they would like to address that will have the least negative impact on participants.
4. Preventing the continuation of harmful cultural practices involves a complex web of actors.

When seeking to change behavior around harmful practices, it’s often assumed that the perpetrators of the harmful act should be targeted, without looking at the broader context. For example, we found that when conducting anti-FGM initiatives, it was not enough to work only with mothers and traditional birth attendants who typically perform the cutting. We had to also focus on changing the perceptions of young men and girls who have grown up in a culture that accepts FGM as normal.

5. Gender balance is not gender equality.

In an attempt to achieve gender balance in development initiatives, there is a tendency to add more men into women-only groups for the sake of “equality.” While creation of gender-balanced groups is a necessary step toward development, projects should ensure that the introduction of men into the women-only groups does not exacerbate the existing gender-related harmful practices.

6. Time and mobility are important for women’s participation.

Given the demands on women’s time, projects must be strategic when designing interventions targeted to them. Trainings that are staggered over several months with one-hour meetings per week will result in greater female participation than a three-day intensive training. Projects must also assess women’s ability to move outside the home or take up activities outside their traditional roles. These will factor greatly into women’s participation in economic activities.

7. There is no such thing as a gender-free intervention.

Whether a project is improving market access for farmers or changing policies at the national level, every intervention has a gender element that must be considered. We are working within environments driven by social and cultural norms that dictate roles for men and women, which cannot be ignored. Applying a gender lens to every project is crucial to developing gender equality across all levels of society.