Women's Meaningful Participation

Expanded guidance: practical tips, tools, and contingency strategies for each checklist item

1. Before — Planning and invitation

□ Set an explicit participation target (at least 30% women)

- State the target in writing in your event plan and share it with co-organisers so it is a shared commitment, not an aspiration.
- If registration is used, track sign-ups by sex in real time and follow up proactively if women's numbers fall short before the event.
- Contingency: if you reach the day with low female registration, consider postponing or splitting the session rather than proceeding with a skewed room (a session that is 90% men sends its own message).

□ Consult women on timing, location, and format before finalising

- Identify two or three trusted women community members or local partners and ask them directly (informally, by phone or in person) before sending invitations.
- Use a simple three-question check: Is this time workable for you? Is this location safe and reachable? Is there anything that would stop you or other women from coming?
- Contingency: if consultation is not possible in advance, build a 10-minute feedback moment into the start of the event to surface issues and adjust on the day,

□ Check timing against women's daily responsibilities

- In most rural contexts, early mornings (before 8am) and late afternoons (after 4pm) conflict with cooking and childcare. Midmorning tends to work best (do the research on this for your location)

- Check against agricultural calendars: planting and harvest seasons may pull women away entirely. Local partners or gender focal points can advise.
- Contingency: if timing cannot change, offer to arrange short-term childcare at or near the venue (or provide a short recorded summary women can access afterwards - though this is really not ideal)

□ Confirm the location is safe, accessible, and culturally appropriate

- Ask a local woman partner to visit or assess the venue, not just a male colleague. What feels neutral to men may feel unsafe or off-limits to women.
- Check: Is it reachable by the transport women actually use? Is there a separate toilet facility? Is it a space women already frequent, or one associated with male authority?
- Contingency: if the venue is problematic and cannot change, acknowledge it openly at the start and ask participants if they feel comfortable, this alone can shift the dynamic.

□ Send invitations directly to women

- Do not rely solely on community leaders, local government, or male heads of household to pass on information, invitations frequently do not reach women through these channels.
- Use women's groups, savings cooperatives, water user associations, or women's networks as direct communication channels where they exist.
- Contingency: if you have no direct contact with women participants, ask your local partner to personally accompany the invitation with a verbal explanation of why women's presence specifically is needed.

□ Identify and address practical barriers

- The three most common barriers are transport cost, need for permission (from husband, family, or community leader), and lack of childcare. Address all three explicitly in planning.
- For transport: budget a small travel allowance or arrange shared transport from a central point. For permission: engage community or religious leaders ahead of time to signal that women's attendance is valued and appropriate.
- Contingency: prepare a brief letter or note from the organising institution that women can show to family members explaining the purpose of their attendance, this has been used effectively in several BRIDGE grantee contexts.

2. During — Facilitation and dynamics

□ Ensure women are seated visibly, not at the back or periphery

- Arrange seating in advance. Circles or U-shapes work better than rows. If chairs are in rows, reserve the front or central seats for women.
- Brief any co-facilitators or local hosts before the session starts: women should be welcomed to prominent seating, not directed to the sides.
- Contingency: if seating is already set and skewed, call a short break early in the session and reorganise. You should frame it as a practical adjustment, not a political statement.

□ Actively create space for women to speak

- Do not rely on open invitations ("anyone who wants to speak") as these consistently favour those already confident in formal settings, usually men.
- Use structured turn-taking: go around the room or explicitly invite specific participants. Name women by name when calling on them, it signals that their contribution is expected, not optional.

- Contingency: if women are consistently silent in plenary, shift immediately to small group work (see next point) rather than continuing to push in a format that is not working.

□ Use small group or paired discussions before full group sharing

- Small groups of three to four people lower the stakes for speaking. Women who do not speak in plenary often contribute substantially in smaller groups.
- Where possible, create single-sex small groups first, then bring insights back to the full group. This is particularly effective in contexts where mixed-sex discussion is culturally unfamiliar.
- Contingency: if small group work is not possible (space, time, or format), use written input, ask participants to write one idea on a card before sharing, to surface contributions from those who do not speak aloud (but be mindful of literacy related challenges).

□ Acknowledge and build on women's contributions

- Facilitators should name the contributor when building on a point: "As [name] said…" This makes the contribution visible and prevents it being absorbed into the general discussion without attribution.
- Watch for the pattern where a woman speaks, is not acknowledged, and then a man makes the same point to more response. If this happens, name it gently: "I want to go back to what [name] said earlier…"
- Contingency: debrief with a trusted local colleague during a break, ask whether women's contributions are landing. An outside perspective catches dynamics the facilitator may miss from the front of the room.

□ Keep language and content accessible

- Avoid acronyms, legal language, and policy jargon without explanation. Define technical terms the first time you use them, every session, even if you have used them before with other groups.
- Use local examples and analogies drawn from participants' own contexts, water management, farming, household resource decisions. Abstract frameworks land better when they connect to lived experience.
- Contingency: if a language barrier emerges mid-session (participants are more comfortable in a local language than in the working language), pause and reorganise, use a bilingual participant as a bridge rather than pushing through (also consider providing interpretation - this may need additional budget).

□ Involve women in presenting, facilitating, or leading

- Assign roles before the session: a woman co-facilitates, a woman presents a case example, a woman leads the group exercise debrief. These roles should be planned, not improvised.
- Brief women taking roles in advance, even a 15-minute conversation beforehand builds confidence and ensures they feel supported rather than put on the spot.
- Contingency: if no woman is available to take a formal role, identify one woman participant early in the session and invite her explicitly to summarise the group's output at the end. It is a small but meaningful step.

3. After — Outcomes and follow-through

□ Record sex-disaggregated attendance

- Use a simple sign-in sheet with a column for sex (or design registration to capture this). Do this every time, not only when a donor requires it.
- Record not just numbers but roles: how many women were in speaking, facilitating, or decision-making roles versus attending only.
- Contingency: if no sign-in sheet was used, do a quick count from photos or a facilitator headcount before participants leave. An approximate figure recorded honestly is better than no figure.

□ Note whether women held decision-making, facilitation, or leadership roles

- Prepare a simple tally: number of women who spoke in plenary, number who led a group, number whose input was reflected in final outputs. Keep it brief, three numbers take 30 seconds to record.

- Share this information internally with your team after the event, not only externally in reports. It creates accountability within the project, not just towards donors.
- Contingency: if women held no formal roles in this session, note it explicitly as a gap and name what you will do differently next time. A gap acknowledged is more useful than a gap ignored.

□ Confirm women's inputs are reflected in outputs and decisions

- Before closing the session, read back the key outputs or decisions and explicitly ask: does this reflect what women in the room contributed? Give participants a moment to correct or add.

- If outputs are written up after the event, assign someone to check that contributions from women participants are visible, not merged into generic "participant feedback."
- Contingency: if women's inputs were not captured in outputs, follow up directly with two or three women participants afterwards (by phone or message) to gather their perspectives before the report is finalised.

□ Gather feedback from women on whether they felt heard

- Use a simple two-question exit card: Did you feel comfortable speaking today? Was there anything that prevented you from contributing? Anonymous is better than attributed for honest answers.

- For contexts where written feedback is not practical, ask a trusted local woman colleague to have brief informal conversations with two or three women participants as they leave.
- Contingency: if no feedback was collected on the day, follow up within 48 hours by phone or through a local partner. Fresh impressions are more useful than recollections a week later.

□ Identify one concrete change for next time

- End every post-event debrief with the team by asking: what is the one thing we will do differently next time to improve women's participation? Write it down and put it at the top of the planning notes for the next event.
- Share this reflection with the broader project team, not just the event organiser. Gender-responsive practice improves through collective learning, not individual effort.
- Contingency: if there is no formal debrief, send yourself a voice note or a two-line email immediately after the event while observations are fresh. Even an informal record is better than none.

Remember

Counting women is not enough. The goal is for women to speak, influence decisions, and lead. If women attended but did not speak or were not reflected in outputs, participation was not yet meaningful.

Aligned with IUCN Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy (2018)