

Listening beyond words

An experience shared by Patricia Ardón, JASS

Many years ago, when I was very young, I worked in an organisation that was introducing household taps (faucets) for drinking water for rural and Indigenous communities. To raise awareness and encourage community participation, the organisation used popular education processes. With the community members, the organisation chose a specific community in which to introduce this scheme for potable water. Male and female promoters from this community participated in the process.

We held a series of meetings with leaders and with community members via assemblies. As in the past — and as still happens in many communities — men dominated the conversation. Women rarely spoke, except when specific women's spaces were created, which was infrequent at the time. Both women and men, albeit fewer women than men, also conducted community surveys. Finally, after months of work, it was decided that conditions were ripe for introducing household faucets. The premise was that putting faucets in the houses would benefit the women, as this would lessen their workload, since they had to walk to the public water collection tank — or sometimes even to the river — to collect water. At that time, the concept of gender-differentiated impacts was practically unknown to most people, but we had already gone through some basic training and sensitization on the subject.

When the faucets were installed, our great surprise was that most of the women were unhappy with this modality. Upon further investigation, we realized that the women felt they had lost the only space where they could socialize with each other, talk about what was happening in their lives, what they were going through with their partners, their joys and sorrows, their children, and their families. The public water collection tank — and sometimes the river — were their only places of coexistence and exchange. And it was also the only space — or one of the very few spaces — where they had the possibility of mingling beyond the control of their male partners. And of course, most of the men were happy that they did not leave their homes because (among other reasons) when they did go out, they found out about things like the men's "infidelities."

This experience impressed me profoundly and has stayed with me. It led me to reflect more deeply not only on how we sometimes get carried away by appearances or by what may be beneficial (or not) for other groups of people, but also on the importance of investigating what is behind what we are seeing and hearing — beyond the words themselves — especially in the lives of women. Furthermore, it has helped me to reflect on the different ways we learn — some of us learn more through concrete experience or observation; others learn more through study, or in many other ways.