



LEARNING FROM PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES: ISSUE NO. 3

EXPLORING INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS LESSONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED BY THE UN TRUST FUND TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

MDRI in Serbia advocates for the rights of women with disabilities, which brought the perspectives of women with disabilities to public attention. MDRI/ Viktor Ljevar

Background

This brief addresses an identified gap in knowledge on applying intersectionality in practice to projects preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) in various contexts. In the past few decades, there has been increased awareness of the fact that many women's and girls' lives are shaped by **multiple vulnerabilities** that can interact to exacerbate each other (e.g. women and girls with disabilities who are also internally displaced), putting some women and girls at greater risk of VAWG than others. The Sustainable Development Goals' focus on "leaving no one behind" emphasizes inclusive approaches to VAWG prevention that centre intersectionality. Yet there is limited guidance, literature and documentation on how practitioners have applied intersectional approaches in their VAWG prevention projects.

About this brief

This brief summarizes a longer synthesis review and draws together lessons learned by a range of practitioners who have applied intersectional approaches to preventing VAWG in their projects. It showcases how VAWG prevention in many contexts can benefit from intersectional approaches. The projects, run by civil society organizations (CSOs) supported

by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, used different intersectional approaches to VAWG prevention in different countries, engaging with a range of actors and deploying different entry points. They highlight the diversity of work worldwide, emphasizing that a "one size fits all" intersectional approach to VAWG prevention does not exist. Through a qualitative, inductive approach, the practice-based insights from 10 case studies were put into conversation with existing literature on how to apply an intersectional lens, to highlight how learning from practice can contribute important lessons to the evidence base on preventing VAWG and fill knowledge gaps. This brief also aims to provide some practical tips and recommendations for practitioners who are planning to apply an intersectional lens to their interventions and for donors who are funding such projects.

Case studies

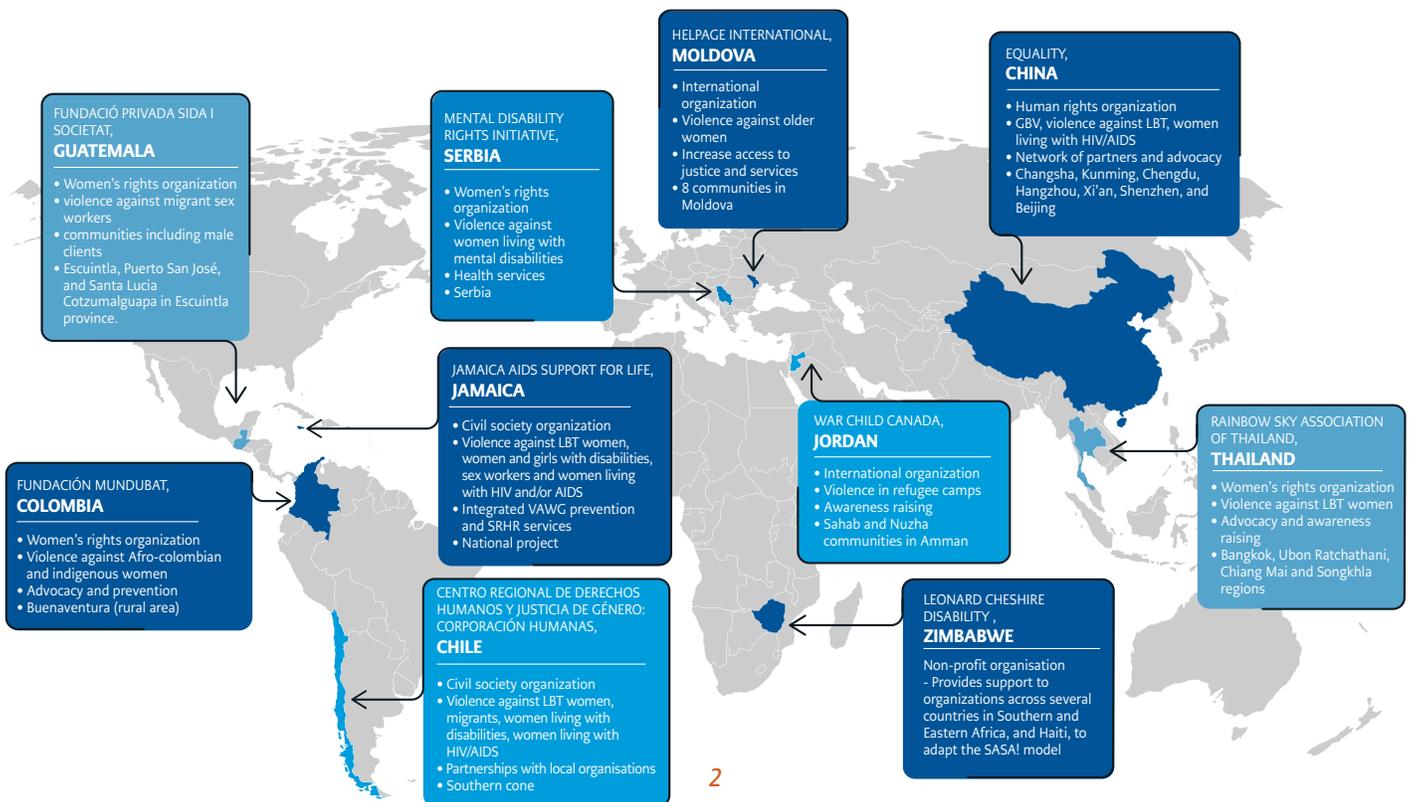
All 10 projects' entry point into intersectional approaches was identifying a specific group (or groups) of women and girls who were particularly vulnerable to violence because of their unique identities and circumstances. The group or groups that were identified and the intervention that was formulated were significantly different depending on the context. For example, the starting point of Rainbow Sky

Association of Thailand (RSAT) was recognizing that women with diverse sexual and gender identities are at greater risk of experiencing violence, especially because of the stigma they face. It focused its project entirely on lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) women. Fundación Mundubat in Colombia focused on how ethnicity, rurality and gender can compound vulnerabilities to violence for indigenous and Afro-Colombian women, who are historically excluded and underserved groups in this context. Fundació Privada Sida i Societat (FSIS) in Guatemala recognized how migrant status and sex work intersect to make certain women particularly vulnerable to violence and focused its programming on migrant self-identified sex workers. HelpAge International Moldova (HelpAge) recognized the risks of violence faced by elderly women and focused its programming on preventing violence against them. Leonard Cheshire Disability Zimbabwe (LCDZ) and Mental Disability Rights Initiative of Serbia (MDRI-S) (both funded twice by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund)) addressed the increased vulnerability to violence of girls and women with disabilities (GWWD), but the two organizations responded to their situations by designing very different interventions: LCDZ focused on violence prevention and access to justice for GWWD living in rural communities, while MDRI-S focused on

preventing violence against women with mental disabilities living in residential institutions.

Some organizations identified multiple groups of women vulnerable to violence because of their intersecting identities by designing partnership-based VAWG prevention projects. For example, Equality's project in China brought together various partners who focused on LBT women, women with HIV and young women, while Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género: Corporación Humanas (Corporación Humanas) in Chile worked with partners focused on migrant women, women with HIV, LBT women, self-identified sex workers and women with disabilities. Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL) addressed violence against women in the broader context of HIV and AIDS, and at the same time focused its programming on responding to particular vulnerabilities around HIV and violence against LBT women, GWWD and self-identified sex workers. War Child Canada (WCC) in Jordan responded to circumstances making Syrian refugee women and girls particularly vulnerable to violence but also highlighted commonalities of risks around age and gender by including women and girls (in and out of school) from Jordanian host communities.

FIGURE 1:
The 10 UN Trust Fund projects included in this brief



Why are intersectional approaches to VAWG prevention important?

In its broadest sense, **intersectionality is a way of understanding that many social categories are interrelated in the lives of women and girls.** Diverse identity categories (e.g. race, gender and class) or wider circumstances (e.g. occupation, migration status and HIV status) can intersect in compounding ways to produce new forms of vulnerability to VAWG. These categories and circumstances shape each other in complex, non-linear and often unpredictable ways. The term “intersectionality” was introduced by black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to emphasize the interconnections between gender and race in relation to VAWG. This feminist-informed approach draws attention to the interlocking systems of oppression in which many women and girls can feel trapped. Intersectional approaches pay **close attention to wider power relations and systems** that create and maintain vulnerabilities to violence in the lives of women and girls. In engaging with these vulnerabilities, however, intersectionality avoids viewing women or girls as innately vulnerable or in need of protection.

How have CSOs applied an intersectional lens to VAWG prevention programmes?

CSOs have applied an intersectional lens to VAWG prevention programmes in four main ways.

1. Identifying specific groups of women and girls with multiple vulnerabilities

Most CSOs started in practice by identifying specific groups of women and girls with multiple vulnerabilities to understand how these intersected in dynamic ways with compounded consequences. Based on this identification, many different entry points were used in VAWG prevention programming, with **human rights often providing a useful connecting concept** for projects across their different approaches. This can be a way to hold intersecting vulnerabilities together with a practical rights-based programmatic focus that requires paying attention (and not merely lip service) to groups that experience compounded vulnerabilities, whose rights are still violated and that have been historically excluded from international development interventions and/or VAWG prevention programming. For example, in Moldova, HelpAge focused on a human rights,

gender-transformative approach to the prevention of violence against older women; in Jordan, a gender-responsive human rights approach to conflict was centred by WCC; in Thailand, the primary focus of RSAT was on the human rights of LBT women; and in Serbia the human rights of women with mental and intellectual disabilities formed a key component of MDRI-S’s advocacy.

The intersectional approaches developed by the 10 projects all recognized that these vulnerabilities are not merely additive and fixed (e.g. “I am vulnerable both because I am a woman and because I have a disability”). Instead, multiple vulnerabilities often combine in unique, context-specific ways to form complex cycles of compounding, dynamic risks of violence. As noted by FSIS in Guatemala:

The project is aimed at women sex workers in Escuintla, Guatemala. They are a group characterized by poverty and lack of work and education opportunities; most of them are illiterate, in a situation of poverty and extreme poverty, associated with alcoholism and drug addiction with high social stigma, single mothers, migrants, the only providers in the family. Generally [they are] of reproductive age, with a higher prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, than the general population and with high rates of violence of all types, especially sexual. They were characterized by little access to psychosocial services, health [services] and justice. Because of all these intersectionalities, it was decided to work with them to address substantive issues that improve their quality of life (written reflection (translated), focus group discussion (FGD) invitee, 1 February 2021).

For some projects, intersectionality only emerged implicitly during implementation and for others it was a core starting principle or was tied to a focus on transforming power structures. For example, Fundación Mundubat in Colombia took an explicitly intersectional approach to its work empowering Afro-Colombian and indigenous women in rural, post-conflict settings of poverty around VAWG prevention and care. It focused from the start on how their gender intersected with three other facets in particular – their ethnic identity, their circumstances of poverty and their lives in a rural setting. However, Fundación Mundubat did not stop after identifying these intersecting vulnerabilities; it went on to adopt an intersectional approach to project analysis and design. The aim of the project was to transform power relations

in a community with interwoven patriarchal, racist and class systems. Recognition of these specific intersections from the start enabled Fundación Mundubat to critically explore how they translated into exclusion, discrimination and violence in practice. This intersectional approach was also incorporated into its training materials, which analysed these intersecting oppressions through a feminist lens (focused on patriarchy, racism and classism). The organization's commitment to an intersectional approach involved remaining aware of additional vulnerabilities that emerged along the way. This enabled practical strategies to be developed to overcome obstacles.

2. Making intersecting vulnerabilities visible for VAWG prevention

A key theme emerging across the projects was how invisible many compounding vulnerabilities in women's lives remain.

Five domains of invisibility were identified: data collection, service provision, self-stigmatization, legal and policy systems, and perpetration. Many intersections as a result of which some women experience vulnerability to violence were still unacknowledged and unseen in some places by a range of actors, including themselves, their families and communities, and even wider legal and policy systems of support such as VAWG prevention services. This multilevel invisibility often increases many women's exposure to violence and can mean specific needs remain ignored or go unmet. This is why making intersecting vulnerabilities more visible to all stakeholders for VAWG prevention was identified by practitioners as a crucial first task. By engaging in several different domains to address these invisibilities in practice, the 10 organizations learned a number of lessons: for instance, a first step for many was the collection and analysis of disaggregated data to make the initial case for engagement with groups with intersecting vulnerabilities and build recognition that women are not a homogenous group.

Invisibilization often takes place in local contexts of VAWG prevention, where CSOs can inadvertently prioritize some groups, issues and types of VAWG at the expense of others. Practitioners from Equality in China pointed out that VAWG prevention experts may still have "blind spots" around specific intersections that make some women more vulnerable than others. At the same time, one initially visible vulnerability may snowball over time into more diverse additional vulnerabilities that become visible only as the programme continues and more trust is built with participants.

In practice, it may be unrealistic to expect projects to identify all vulnerabilities at the start; an ongoing process of adaption needs to be built in to deal with new intersections becoming visible to VAWG prevention practitioners. For example, RSAT in Thailand found that, in the lives of many transgender women, sex work formed an initially hidden aspect. Revealing this aspect then surfaced other, associated vulnerabilities (e.g. drug and alcohol addiction). Over time, transgender women felt safe to talk about their specific health challenges, including access to hormone therapy. As a result, however, tensions emerged between the priorities of many lesbian women and those of transgender women, who wanted to focus on different sets of issues. RSAT's approach centred a highly invisible group (transgender women) but in doing so may have risked drowning out other invisibilized voices (those of lesbian women). However, simply splitting the groups would ignore the reality that some women were both lesbian and transgender. On reflecting in FGDs, RSAT practitioners suggested that more thought is needed around how organizations focusing on those with diverse sexual and gender identities can connect more visibly with wider feminist movements to collaborate more effectively as allies for change.

A third issue that emerged was **the reality of stigma and discrimination as vicious cycles that are present across many levels (e.g. individual, group, community and systems).** Practitioners highlighted that stigma was internalized by many project participants and also had intersecting dimensions. For example, LCDZ in Zimbabwe identified patterns of disability-related stigma, which made women with disabilities feel that they were socially of no use and left them often unable to communicate to share their experiences of violence. This compounded the stigma of experiencing sexual violence. At the same time, **heightened visibility, although a key goal for practitioners that focus on women with intersecting vulnerabilities, can risk increasing the stigma and discrimination that these groups face.**

3. Participation in intersectional approaches to VAWG prevention

All 10 projects highlighted the importance of having the specific group or groups with multiple vulnerabilities focused on in the programming participate meaningfully in its design and implementation. Projects found that participation requires

not only that women with intersecting vulnerabilities to violence assist in the design of projects but also that during project implementation there is a willingness to adapt and evolve programme design based on their needs and priorities.

A number of projects involved groups with multiple vulnerabilities in the design of the project curriculum. In Serbia, for example, MDRI-S organized several sessions with women with mental and intellectual disabilities, where draft materials were workshopped. These women gave important suggestions and corrections, making the material more accessible and easier to read. This participatory development process took more time than originally planned but was seen as worthwhile by all involved. Curriculum design can, however, also be participatory in less formal ways. For example, WCC's women's support group methodology in Jordan required that the women themselves identify the issues they would like to discuss during the group sessions. There was, therefore, no set curriculum that all support groups had to work through. The facilitator would prepare sessions according to the themes and priorities set by the group, and selected project participants would then co-facilitate the sessions.

For a number of projects, women with intersecting vulnerabilities to violence were part of the process of training other service providers. Practitioners found that, because of the direct engagement and discussions carefully facilitated during the workshops, other service providers (including the police) grew more empathetic towards the

targeted populations and their needs. For example, by having a woman with disabilities or a woman who is HIV-positive present and listening to her share her stories and experiences, these vulnerabilities become less abstract and service providers' understanding and willingness to engage with these groups grow. At the same time, **dominant power dynamics are subverted, with "beneficiaries" becoming "expert activists", and those seen as vulnerable moving to the centre of learning and teaching.** Of course, these women must not be included in ways that instrumentalize them. Should they agree to do this, they will need mentoring and ongoing support to avoid retraumatization. Including women in this way was a key strategy for JASL:

The first thing we did ... we built up a cadre of women from the different groups. They were very instrumental in delivering training, especially to the policymakers; they gave their stories. They were the ones who kind of delivered and shared their experiences with policy officers and health-care workers, sharing what it was like and what they would have wanted. So they were a key part of the implementation (FGD, 29 January 2021).

Participation by project participants in advocacy activities emerged as a particularly effective approach and strategy for VAWG prevention for many projects, as long as the organizations



Participants take part in a meeting about accessing justice for women and girls with disabilities in Zimbabwe. Nobuhle Moyo/ Leonard Cheshire Disability Zimbabwe Trust

first paid attention to the immediate needs and priorities of the women and enabled them to set the advocacy agenda.

The experiences of several practitioners, however, highlight that not all project participants will necessarily be ready or willing to do such self-advocacy. Furthermore, it might not always be safe for them to do so. Moreover, there is the risk that, by making the participation of women with intersecting vulnerabilities to violence compulsory, they may become instrumentalized, for example through their token inclusion at meetings without genuine opportunity for input. One way of overcoming this is by formally partnering with organizations that already represent particular groups with compounded vulnerabilities to violence (explored further in the next section).

4. Importance of partnering for intersectional approaches to VAWG prevention

By explicitly seeking out partnerships with organizations that focus on and represent a group with specific intersecting vulnerabilities, practitioners ensured that the overall programme focused on VAWG prevention with a range of groups whose vulnerabilities to violence all intersected in different ways with gender. For instance, Equality in China works to address domestic violence, but the organization realized that domestic violence takes different forms and has different implications for different groups of women. Therefore, it partnered with Common Language (an organization specifically supporting LBT women), the Women's Network against AIDS in China (an organization focusing on women with HIV and AIDS) and Media Monitor for Women Network (which specializes in mobilizing young people and the use of new forms of media). **These organizations also had a history of cooperation on which they could draw to design a collaborative project** that engaged simultaneously with LBT women, women affected by HIV and young women, with a particular focus on creating shared awareness of, and advocacy around, domestic violence and the legislation relevant to it.

Partnerships between organizations focusing on different groups with overlapping vulnerabilities to violence were identified as a valuable practice by a number of organizations for the following reasons.

- First, as various specific groups of women are marginalized in many societies and are often uniquely at risk of and affected by VAWG (e.g. women with disabilities, LBT women and women with HIV), it can help to have specific organizations, with the relevant authority, representation and expertise,

engage with each group of women in ways that are appropriate to them, without homogenizing their needs.

- Second, the different organizations can **learn from each other,** support each other and be trained and upskilled alongside each other.
- Third, this is especially necessary, as noted during the FGDs, in the light of VAWG prevention donors increasingly requiring more project management and complex paperwork. Small organizations often do not have the capacity to deliver on such administrative demands and can then easily be overlooked or ignored by these donors. This is despite smaller organizations often being better known and more accessible to the women who donors seek to reach. Partnerships such as those funded by the UN Trust Fund can therefore have **operational advantages, since they allow organizations to pool their financial and human resources.** Such partnerships also allow smaller organizations to collaborate to apply for bigger grants, as one organization found:

Independent NGOs [non-governmental organizations] in [our country] are very small. We have very limited human resources ... and an unfriendly political environment. So, if we want to get [funding], we need a coalition of NGOs. Together, we have stronger human resources [and] we can implement a bigger project. I think this is a first very practical advantage (FGD, 1 February 2021).

- Fourth, as Corporación Humanas in Chile found, partnering with other organizations for VAWG prevention **acknowledges these organizations' expertise and credibility, and recognizes their years of service to a particular group.**
- Fifth, in terms of advocacy, partnerships are a major strength, as **joint platforms and activities tend to generate more interest** and can amplify the voices of women and girls made vulnerable to violence in multiple ways.
- Sixth, partnerships between organizations can **allow women to receive the integrated, holistic support they need, rather than having to engage with different organizations in different spaces.** An intersectional approach to vulnerabilities highlights that women's lives reach across identities and experiences and are not simply situated neatly in one category.

COVID-19, INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES AND VAWG PREVENTION

All practitioners noted that COVID-19 made many situations for the already vulnerable groups they engaged with worse, by deepening existing marginalization and invisibility, adding new dimensions of risk and creating additional barriers to accessing services, both for women and girls and for CSOs seeking to provide VAWG services in a volatile and unpredictable environment. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought some unique challenges, it can be understood as reinforcing the need for specific attention to be given to those who may be worst affected or left behind. **Many projects were able to draw on their past experiences of dealing with other emergencies or pandemics, such as HIV and AIDS or Ebola, and capitalize on lessons learned in those situations around VAWG prevention efforts.** Practitioners highlighted that **listening to the voices of vulnerable groups was key.** For example, LCDZ's earlier work to make the voices of women with disabilities an accepted, active part of policy discussions in Zimbabwe bore fruit in this crisis.

Practitioners in a range of contexts, however, noted that COVID-19 responses typically heightened the digital divide, leading to the risk of bias in collecting VAWG-related data and providing VAWG prevention services, and creating extra barriers for low-literacy groups. COVID-19-related adaptations have been made to VAWG prevention programmes by organizations working with groups with intersecting vulnerabilities **to better understand their emerging needs and the risks and barriers for those who are most vulnerable, and to develop strategies to reach vulnerable groups that could fall further behind.** For example, FSIS in Guatemala started home visits to compensate for COVID-19 restrictions on movement. However, underlying these immediate responses is an awareness of increased mental health strain on already vulnerable groups, leading to needs for expanded psychosocial support services. Furthermore, economic stresses were compounded for some of the most vulnerable groups, such as self-identified sex workers and migrant women.

Lessons learned

The case studies highlight the important roles that different types of CSOs can play in engaging with women made vulnerable to violence because of intersecting aspects of their identities or circumstances. These organizations navigate the complexities of these intersecting vulnerabilities in VAWG prevention in different ways. When intersectional approaches are used to identify the focus of programming, complex questions emerge around practical decisions involving tensions between having a targeted focus and being inclusive. Where organizations adopt intersectional approaches to project design and implementation, they may realize that they need to reconsider the focus of their programming. **This highlights how intersectional approaches to VAWG prevention challenge practitioners to constantly critically reflect on why and how they choose to implement their projects.** Organizations may take their intersectional approaches further, by focusing on the systems and power relations that drive inequalities and vulnerabilities. By doing so, they highlight the centrality of power and the importance of VAWG prevention interventions that critically engage with power relations. This key feature of intersectional approaches also challenges the VAWG prevention field itself, by calling for a more comprehensive, multidimensional focus on power.

The brief concludes with a set of recommendations. Those for practitioners are as follows.

- 1. Actively engage, co-design and implement VAWG prevention projects with women living with overlapping vulnerabilities.** While involving these women in programme implementation was effective in many projects, meaningful participation is not only a strategy – it is a fundamental right. This means taking note of “who holds the power” and may mean appointing representative women as staff, managers and trustees of VAWG-prevention-related organizations.
- 2. Start with an analysis of intersecting vulnerabilities in your specific context.** An intersectional analysis requires not only collecting data about specific vulnerable groups but also ensuring that they are analysed in ways that highlight where these intersections may compound risks of violence. Noticing if certain groups are “missing” from official data may be an important step.
- 3. Address how the invisibility of certain groups of women and girls is created and reinforced** as a starting point for prevention programming. Intersecting stigma is a key driver of invisibility, both internally (self-stigmatization)

and externally (from family, the community and society). Addressing this is an important programmatic step and involves working at two levels: with women and girls themselves and with social systems. However, increased visibility can also be risky, so this needs to be done responsibly and in consultation with the women involved.

- 4. Pay attention to multidimensional power relations**, and engage with the individuals, groups and systems that make women and girls invisible and vulnerable to violence. Engaging only with vulnerable women and girls to empower them can imply that they are responsible for changing the marginalization and violence that they experience.
- 5. Work collaboratively with partners** that engage with different groups of women to build intersectional approaches in ways that maximize resources and learning by building synergy and shared agendas.

The recommendations for donors and policymakers suggest that they should (1) seek out small local specialist organizations, which often have a stronger grasp of the complex intersections in their specific context, (2) fund collaborative work between local CSOs that are already engaging with diverse groups, which

may help to reduce fragmentation of policies or funding for separate vulnerabilities, (3) allow time and funding for adaptive programming, because carrying out analysis and design in intersectional ways requires additional programmatic steps that add time and costs, (4) equip organizations to do intersectional analysis from below and (5) pay attention to intersectional power relations in their own systems – power relations may remain latent in their processes, for example if they use predetermined categories of vulnerabilities into which all practitioners must fit their proposals or reports. Intersectional approaches must go beyond including left-out groups in the existing development system to raise fundamental questions about that system and its actors and biases.

Finally, some recommendations for VAWG researchers include (1) make perpetration and the power relations that often create and maintain intersecting vulnerabilities to violence visible, (2) be intentional, collaborative and accountable in exploring interconnections by recognizing your own linguistic power with regard to what is made visible and what is prioritized, and (3) engage with complexity and the compounded realities of women's lives that heighten their vulnerability to violence.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

This brief is authored by Selina Palm and Elisabet Le Roux, and is part of a series of briefs produced by the UN Trust Fund. For the longer synthesis review on which it is based, and others in the series, see the [UN Trust Fund Learning Hub](#).

Visit the [UN Trust Fund evaluation library](#) for access to over 100 final external evaluations of projects supported by the UN Trust Fund, including most of those mentioned in this brief. The library is searchable by country and theme.

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Women attend a programme through War Child Canada in Jordan which works to support refugee and Jordanian women survivors of violence. Photo: War Child Canada

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About the UN Trust Fund: The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) is the only global grant-making mechanism dedicated to eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls. Managed by UN Women on behalf of the United Nations system since its establishment in 1996 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/166, the UN Trust Fund has awarded almost \$183 million to 572 initiatives in 140 countries and territories.



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