

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES: ISSUE NO. 4

MOBILIZING WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

LESSONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED BY THE UN TRUST FUND TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Cover Photo Description and Credit: Women's Justice Initiative Women's Rights Education Programme participants from the community of El Llano. Credit: WJI/Olivia Jacquet.

Background

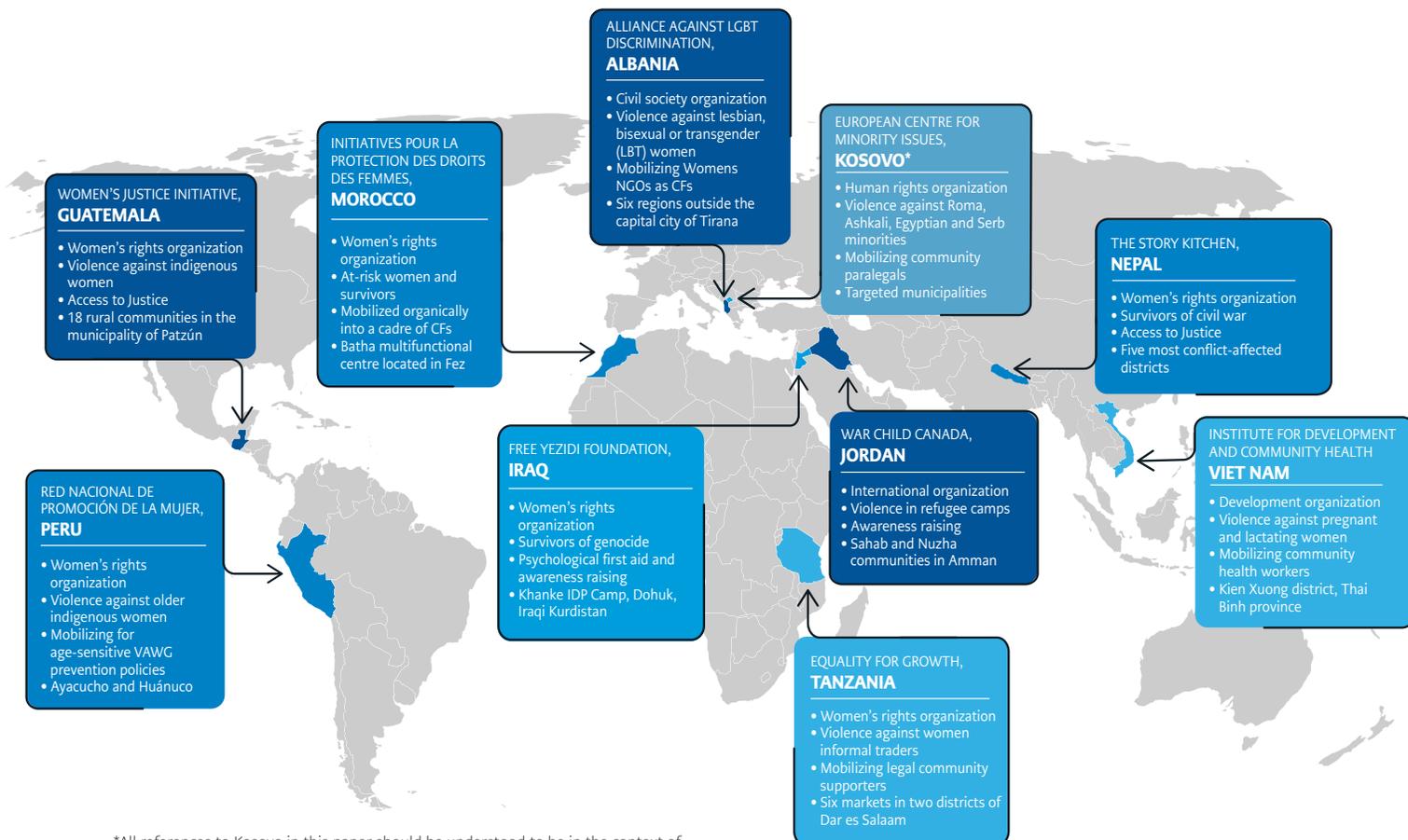
Mobilizing women to become agents of change in their own lives is a key focus for projects working to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG). A commonly used approach is identifying, recruiting and mentoring of an intermediary cadre of women who lead the mobilization of other women and their communities towards social change. For the purposes of this brief, this intermediary cadre of women are referred to as “community facilitators” (CFs), because they are a crucial link between the VAWG prevention projects and the broader community of women that they want to engage with.¹ CFs are not project staff but often work on a voluntary basis with women and girls with whom they share a social, environmental, behavioural or occupational experience and by whom they are trusted. Research on mobilizing CFs to become agents of change in VAWG prevention projects remains limited.

About this brief

This brief is a summary of a longer synthesis review and aims to fill a gap in the literature by presenting learning from practitioners who have mobilized women to become agents of change by creating a cadre of CFs, especially on how they facilitated, supported and sustained these efforts. The methodology combines a desk review of monitoring and evaluation reports and focus group discussions with project staff from 10 diverse civil society organization (CSO) projects that used CF strategies. Through a qualitative, inductive approach, practice-based insights from 10 case studies were put into conversation with existing literature on mobilizing women from beneficiaries to agents of change, to highlight how learning from practice can contribute practical lessons to the evidence base on VAWG prevention and fill knowledge gaps. It aims to provide practical tips and recommendations for practitioners planning to implement mobilization strategies in their interventions and for donors funding such projects.

¹ It is important to note that the civil society organizations and the women involved in the projects cited in this brief often used different terms in their projects.

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



*All references to Kosovo in this paper should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

Case studies

The cases selected are 10 projects that mobilized CFs as agents of change to prevent VAWG in 10 countries and territories. The selection ensured that all geographical regions covered by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) were represented, as were large and small projects (with funding ranging from \$80,910 to \$499,999). The 10 projects also highlight a unique aspect of the UN Trust Fund's portfolio, that is, a push to support projects that work with underrepresented populations on ending VAWG. The populations targeted by the projects include indigenous women (Women's Justice Initiative (WJI) in Guatemala); lesbian, bisexual or transgender women (Alliance against LGBT Discrimination in Albania); minority women (European Centre for Minority Issues Kosovo (ECMIK)); older women (Red Nacional de Promoción de la Mujer (RNPM) in Peru); refugees (War Child Canada in Jordan, Free Yezidi Foundation (FYF) in Iraq and The Story Kitchen (TSK

in Nepal); and women informal traders (Equality for Growth in Tanzania). The projects also worked to address the many different forms of violence that women face and covered various settings.

The projects selected all used the strategy of identifying, training and mentoring a cadre of CFs; however, there were crucial differences in what this meant in practice. Eight projects identified, recruited and trained women to become CFs. Two took a different approach: one mobilized an existing cadre of women community health workers and trained them to include VAWG as a health concern, and the other did not intend to create a cadre – rather, this was an unintended positive consequence of the intervention. In addition, the extent of peer identification varied. In some projects, CFs were survivors of violence, whereas in others they had a similar background to project participants.

Why does mobilizing women matter for VAWG prevention projects?

The learning from the case studies highlights at least four critical reasons why efforts to mobilise women matter for VAWG prevention projects.

- **First**, the phrase “breaking the silence” emerged repeatedly in all reviewed monitoring and evaluation materials. The CSOs were unanimous that the first barrier to confront is the deafening silence around VAWG. Over time, including through activities led by CFs, projects widened women’s networks to break the silence around violence. The projects’ safe spaces enabled women to learn to recognize the violence they faced and understand its root causes.
- **Second**, mentoring CFs as agents of change made the projects more demand-driven, because these empowered women explained their needs, and the projects responded accordingly. For example, Equality for Growth in Tanzania worked to end violence faced by women traders in marketplaces. However, through the CFs, the project learned that women faced a continuum of violence at home and at work; if it was to respond adequately, the project could not restrict its work to marketplaces only.
- **Third**, mobilization of women allows the most vulnerable in the group to be reached. For example, War Child Canada trained a cadre of Syrian refugee women and Jordanian women (from the host society) as volunteers who made home visits to spread awareness on the support groups, training and workshops organized by the project. The women who participated in the support groups found them very valuable and started to invite their peers, sisters, neighbours and other women who they felt would benefit from the support sessions. The project concluded in its monitoring report that a cascade effect resulted from home visits by CFs in relation to dissemination of knowledge about gender, justice and rights, and information about available services. This was one of the best ways to mobilize “the most vulnerable women and girls”.
- **Fourth**, mobilizing women and creating networks does not place the burden of change on any one individual. Networks enhance women’s capacities by improving their knowledge of VAWG and its root causes, spreading information on

available services and increasing women’s ability to take collective action to prevent violence.

How did the projects mobilize women to become agents of change for VAWG prevention?

At the heart of increasing agency among women is understanding how power and gender dynamics operate, which begins the process of reflection that raises self-confidence and self-efficacy among women. All 10 UN Trust Fund projects worked to incrementally increase women’s agency over time, through the creation of safe spaces and by expanding their networks.

NOTE ON THE LITERATURE:

A framework developed by Campbell and Mannell² lays the groundwork for examining how projects designed and implemented mobilization activities **over time, across space and through networks**. Each of the three dimensions provides learning and insights into the processes that lead to a shift among women from being beneficiaries of projects to authors of their own narratives and agents of change for others.

1. Mobilizing women over time

Time is a key dimension for VAWG prevention projects working to enhance women’s agency. Because the UN Trust Fund projects in this case study were funded over 2–3 years³, it is important to consider what is possible in that time frame, what activities make a difference and what past projects have discovered about how a shift in women’s agency occurs over time. **Several take-aways emerged from the research.**

First, the projects provided women with strategies that they could use in their everyday lives to help them to become agents of change to prevent VAWG. For example, War Child Canada’s project recruited and trained refugee volunteers as CFs to provide life skills training and psychological counselling to Syrian and Jordanian women and girls, including out-of-school girls. When the project first approached the women, they had limited resources to recognize or address violence. What the

2 C. Campbell and J. Mannell (2016), “Conceptualising the agency of highly marginalised women: intimate partner violence in extreme settings”, *Global Public Health*, vol. 11, Nos 1–2, pp. 1–16.

3 The UN Trust Fund stopped issuing two-year grants in 2019 in recognition of the time it takes to see change on VAWG. Only three-year grants, at a minimum, are issued now.

women and girls most valued were the lessons they learned in life skills sessions, where they got the chance to

“think about their relationships and communication styles, discuss the effects of aggression and violence at home, and explore different ... coping mechanisms”
(Annual Report Year 1, WCC).

Where the women and girls felt powerless before, they felt afterwards that they had skills that enabled them to break the cycle of violence.

Second, the projects showed that women can be mobilized to become agents of change within the 2–3-year time frame of the UN Trust Fund projects. FYF was a 2-year project whose mission was to provide psychosocial counselling and trauma therapy to survivors of genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria against the Yazidi community, who were forced out of their homes and were living in refugee camps in Iraq. A Yazidi woman first encountered the project as a beneficiary of the project’s trauma counselling because of the violence she had faced as a captive. Within the first 6 months of the project, she underwent training to become a CF to provide lay counselling to other affected Yazidi women in the camps, and by the end of the project, she could lead GBV discussion sessions. Her transition showed others that change is possible and inspired hope among other women.

Third, shifts in women’s attitudes and behaviours because of mobilization efforts are not always linear; rather, change among survivors of violence occurs sporadically, and creating change is a process of trial and error. For example, RNPM, in Peru actively supported and encouraged mobilization among senior women leaders by providing them with the tools and language to reflect on behaviours they had experienced and recognize them as abusive. Whereas before they had blamed themselves for the violence they faced, over time they began to view the same actions in a different light. The process of change took time, and even if work to mobilize women did not have an impact right away, there was a cumulative effect over time. For example, RNPM’s efforts slowly but surely pushed for greater empowerment of the mobilized women. The change in one CF was described by RNPM’s Project Director.

A well-known senior woman leader told me that she lived with her partner who was both elderly and disabled. He was abusive and, despite his age and disability, she still felt powerless against him. One day, she arrived home later than planned from a project meeting and the food was not ready. He called her, forced her to bend down, pulled her hair and hit her on the head. Initially she thought that was okay because she felt guilty for being late. But a few days later, reflecting more on what had happened, she told her partner, “You are never going to hit me or pull my hair again.” (RNPM, FGD, written response).



A local women's NGO trained by AALGBT.
Credit: UN Trust Fund Monitoring and Evaluation
Specialist/Gemma Wood.

2. Mobilizing women across space

A second dimension through which projects mobilized women as agents of change in efforts to prevent violence was through the creation of safe spaces. A safe space can be defined as “a structured place where women’s and adolescent girls’ physical and emotional safety is respected and where [they] are supported through processes of empowerment to seek, share, and obtain information, access services, express themselves, enhance psychosocial well-being, and more fully realize their rights”⁴.

Creating safe physical spaces. Several projects had a physical location – project offices, skills training centres, vocational training centres or women’s shelters – where women felt safe to gather. Spaces were safest when they were accessible to the women and acceptable to their families. Such spaces are critical to CFs’ transformation from beneficiaries to actors. For example, the Initiatives pour la Protection des Droits des Femmes (IPDF) project in Morocco did not activate a cadre of CFs, but it offered a safe space – the Batha Centre – and the friendships formed there led to the creation of a cadre of women who themselves set up a mechanism that they called “*woulina mounadilat*”, which translates as “we have become activists”. Safe spaces conveyed a sense of power through posters and flyers with women-centric messages, and project staff made beneficiaries feel welcome. The impact of having a safe space was captured succinctly and powerfully in a project monitoring report that quoted a woman commenting on the project’s safe space, “When I come here, I feel like I can breathe.” (FYF, Annual Report Year 1).

Creating safe spaces for contemplation. Projects got creative when they were unable to offer permanent physical spaces by offering temporary safe spaces. For example, TSK’s project in Nepal held “storytelling workshops”, where CFs – survivors of the country’s civil war – became change agents by interviewing women like themselves about their experiences of violence, offering them a chance to reclaim their dignity and become authors of their own narratives to break the cycle of intergenerational violence. TSK conceived of such spaces as not only “safe spaces” but also “brave spaces”.

Creating safe spaces by paying attention to language. Many projects worked in multilingual contexts where the native languages of the most vulnerable were not the official

or dominant language. Being able to speak in the dominant language opens doors and creates possibilities, and, conversely, an inability to communicate in the dominant language creates feelings of alienation and disempowerment, which thwarts the ability of women to seek justice. Two projects in Latin America and the Caribbean (WJI in Guatemala and RNPM in Peru) worked with indigenous women who felt powerless in spaces of authority (e.g. in healthcare settings, courts and police stations) because of an inability or a hesitancy to speak Spanish. By conducting training and other activities with women in their native tongues (Kaqchikel in Guatemala and Quechua in Peru), the projects created a safe space where CFs learned about their rights and discussed how to approach local health and legal authorities to bring an end to violence.

Making non-project spaces (e.g. antenatal clinics) safer by ensuring that VAWG becomes a safe topic for discussion.

Preventing and responding to VAWG is a priority for women’s health, and yet health service providers sometimes do not pay attention to the issue. In the Institute for Development and Community Health (IDCH) project in Viet Nam, the CFs were a cadre of village health workers who conducted home antenatal visits and who, through IDCH’s intervention, were also tasked with preventing and reducing violence among pregnant and lactating women. The project’s strategy was designed with the country’s context in mind: the civil society sector is weak and there can be harmful consequences if the actions of CSOs are viewed as challenging the status quo. By working through village health workers and empowering them to identify and address VAWG, this strategy navigated such risks.

Creating ‘safe persons’ in the community who became confidantes. Often, survivors and those who wanted to talk about violence have no one to turn to in their communities and fear being stigmatized and shunned if they speak about the violence they have suffered. Projects created safe spaces by supporting and mentoring women CFs who became people in whom survivors could confide. For example, WJI trained a cadre of community advocates on their legal rights and to provide support to others. One of them spoke about how survivors approached her for help, highlighting that any space can be a safe space if the person occupying that space is considered safe:

⁴ Megevand, M., and Marchesini, L. (2019), Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Toolkit for Advancing Women’s and Girls’ Empowerment in Humanitarian Settings (New York, International Rescue Committee, International Medical Corps).

“Sometimes you cannot imagine the places where women find us and tell us their problems, it can be in the community washing area or in any other place. This is when we take advantage of this opportunity to tell the woman that she has rights ... that she deserves to live a life without violence and that she can seek help and support” (WJI, Annual report, Year 2)

3. Mobilizing agents of change through networks

Another dimension through which projects mobilized women to become change agents was by widening women’s social networks – both their interpersonal networks and their networks with an array of institutional actors that women came into contact with, for example in the health sector and legal system. Several take-aways emerged.

First, through participating in project activities, women developed networks. All 10 projects enabled women to become acquainted with each other and, over time, develop bonds of friendship and mutual support for sharing problems, finding solutions and engaging collectively in intervention

and leisure activities. The projects fostered networks that enabled women to widen their circle beyond family and kin, and associating with others improved their psychosocial well-being, which, in turn, boosted the women’s self-esteem and self-confidence.

Second, women’s networks can be widened to include the service providers that are critical to preventing violence and ensuring justice, primarily providers in the health and legal sectors. Projects mobilized and empowered women CFs to engage with powerful institutional actors. CFs witnessed a significant shift in their self-confidence, other project participants benefited by having an anchor in the community who could speak on their behalf with powerful institutional actors and the project gained by having a cadre committed to ensuring implementation of violence prevention activities. For example, the CFs in WJI’s project worked with local leaders in the political, religious, legal, health, educational and other institutional arenas to develop community action plans to respond to VAWG and ensure that survivors receive adequate support. This example highlights that building women’s capacities through networks beyond the interpersonal level benefits CFs, the wider community of participants and the project.



A Harikara cohort in the UN Trust Fund-supported Free Yezidi Foundation Center for survivors of violence. Credit: Free Yezidi Foundation. Credit: Ginny Dobson.

What are the challenges in mobilizing women to become change agents?

There are critical challenges in mobilizing women to become change agents. Systematically marginalized communities may not be in a position to lead complex interventions from the start. Without enough resources and time, interventions run the risk of not only failing in their efforts, but also causing harm: social or physical harm if there is backlash from groups that oppose any change in the status quo, psychological harm from bearing the burden of change and being retraumatized, economic harm from direct or indirect costs that CFs incur, or even legal harm (e.g. if the intervention is unable to protect survivors from the risk that filing a case in a legally unsupportive environment entails).

The data from the 10 selected case studies point to three critical challenges and the mitigation strategies that the projects used.

(1) Recruitment of women CFs. Recruitment challenges occur when it is not clear from the outset how projects can benefit the lives of the proposed participants. Some projects chose to compensate CFs for their time. For example, ECMIK in Kosovo provided a salary to paralegal CFs. An alternative strategy was adopted by TSK in Nepal, which, to give participants greater agency, placed CFs and participants at the centre of project activities, based on a strong conviction that the survivors must drive the agenda of the project.

(2) Retention of women CFs. Retaining CFs can be challenging; they may face retraumatization, burnout or being overburdened with work. The projects took several steps to prevent this. For example, ECMIK in Kosovo stopped home visits to protect CFs from burnout and potentially violent situations, established psychological support systems and increased compensation for CFs. CFs may also feel that they are not engaging with their peers in a meaningful way and lose interest when participants do not respond to outreach. So that CFs were engaging project participants in more than one way, IPDF in Morocco, for example, set up community support activities in the women's neighbourhoods, rotating childcare and recreational activities or mobilizing women to work on local issues relevant to their daily lives. When CFs' goals were designed to respond to the women's needs, CFs were more invested.

(3) Sustainability of project results. All 10 projects continued their work after the UN Trust Fund grant period. The projects' results were sustained in three critical ways. First, projects' approach of using women CFs was recognized by donors, which

enabled them to secure further funding. FYF's approach in Iraq was recognized by the United States Agency for International Development, and the project now trains CFs in two other refugee camps. Second, projects continue to support the networks formed during the grant period to scale up. The network of survivors formed by TSK's project in Nepal has received further funding from donor agencies, including UN Women Nepal. Third, project results were institutionalized. IDCH's approach of training village health workers in Viet Nam, to identify and address VAWG is now included in the national guidelines of the Ministry of Health. Finally, all projects aimed to "leave something behind" by creating a crack in the patriarchal order. The projects mobilized women to speak out and showed them how to shift the balance of power, develop new skills and work with others to end violence. However, there are challenges in sustaining mobilization efforts. Although CFs thought they had learned valuable skills, they were not certain that they could work without the projects' support. A few project evaluations concluded that the handholding period was not adequate.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MOBILIZING WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

The importance of mobilization activities became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the pandemic and raising rates of VAWG, projects were able to draw on an active cadre of women CFs and change agents, who were critical because they were not outsiders in their communities and not viewed with suspicion; they were known and trusted and, through their engagement with the projects, had built networks with the broader community of women, and, in some cases, with institutional actors. Women mobilized by projects played an effective leadership role on behalf of their peers and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and did their best to ensure that help and support was available, particularly for those experiencing violence. For example, IPDF in Morocco continued to reach women facing violence by putting up posters in neighbourhood pharmacies with CFs' contact information, to try to break the isolation of potential victims. Other projects worked with CFs to conduct critical advocacy in a time of dire need. Alliance against LGBT Discrimination in Albania worked to prevent violence against lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) women, and conducted a study using virtual methods on the impacts of COVID-19 on LBT families, sharing the results with the government to shine a light on how these families were being left behind by government aid policies.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Based on the experiences of these 10 CSOs, recommendations are offered to practitioners, donors and the research community.

Recommendations for practitioners

- 1. Make women's agency a part of the theory of change.**
Mobilizing women to be agents of change in their own lives is a key strategy for prevention projects, and practitioners are therefore advised to develop strategies where mobilization is an explicit component and is part of the theory of change.
- 2. Co-create projects, especially with marginalized women.**
With support from global guidance and tools, work with women to co-create projects, and adapt strategies and actions to make them more demand-driven, including by engaging those groups of women and girls who experience multiple and simultaneous forms of oppression and discrimination and are at a heightened risk of multiple forms of VAWG in private and public spaces.
- 3. Ensure a mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches,** with a pre-implementation strategy that considers a few key questions related to skills development for women CFs, compensation of participants, and strategies to mitigate risks of low participation and harm (e.g. retraumatization).
- 4. Create safe spaces for women to meet and collectively organize,** paying close attention to safety in physical and online spaces and the languages used in project communications, and considering networking strategies to ensure that unsafe spaces for the marginalized (e.g. courts and police stations) are made safe.
- 5. Consider ways to make project participants more visible in places of authority,** including through intermediary organizations (the United Nations, NGOs, etc.), so that they become advocates for themselves, but with careful consideration of the institutional context, the readiness of participants to engage and the ability of projects to support and mentor the women through the process.
- 6. Consider intervention strategies that take into account the continuum of violence that women experience** across multiple settings (homes, workplaces, schools, etc.) and

centre the needs of the project participants without regard to the primary setting – that is, the first point of contact between the intervention and the project participants.

Recommendations for donors

- 1. Consider funding projects for a longer duration, as mobilization strategies require a lengthy time frame** for implementation and can be further leveraged to support the roll-out of other interventions that form part of a comprehensive approach to VAWG prevention.
- 2. Develop guidelines on paying an honorarium,** stipend or salary to CFs after careful discussion of the pros and cons.
- 3. Develop minimum standards on what it means to be participatory,** because local interpretations can vary from information-sharing to consultation and co-creation.
- 4. Support the participation of women agents of change in high-visibility events** organized at local, regional and global levels (online and in person), which enhance the agency and voice of women leaders in advocating for the role of women CFs in community mobilization efforts to end VAWG, and in disseminating learning from these forums to other women agents of change.
- 5. Require projects to dedicate resources to self-care strategies.**

Recommendations for researchers in the field of ending VAWG

- 1. Conduct process evaluations** as well as impact evaluations to assess how a programme outcome or output was achieved, especially when it comes to enhancing women's agency.
- 2. Conduct more research on having a cadre of CFs as a mobilization strategy** (e.g. on different modes of compensation for CFs, if different results are achieved when CF selection represents the full diversity of project participants or if any backlash results from working through CFs) to help donors and practitioners to develop sound, evidence-based policies.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

This brief is authored by Monica Biradavolu, 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.

For more information or to give feedback on this product, please contact the UN Trust Fund at untf-evaw@unwomen.org

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[Issues in Kosovo](#), [Free Yezidi Foundation](#) in Iraq, [Initiatives pour la Protection des Droits des Femmes](#) in Morocco, [Institute for Development and Community Health](#) in Viet Nam, [Red Nacional de Promoción de la Mujer](#) in Peru, [The Story Kitchen](#) in Nepal, [War Child Canada](#) in Jordan and the [Women’s Justice Initiative](#) in Guatemala.

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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