



SYNTHESIS REVIEW SERIES: PAPER #4

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE:

# 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 on prevention



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Primary Author: Dr. Monica Biradavolu

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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.



## About the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

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. In 2020, the UN Trust Fund managed a grants portfolio of 150 projects aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women and girls in 71 countries and territories across five regions, with grants totalling \$72.8 million. Grant recipients are primarily civil society organizations (CSOs). Since 2018 (cycle 20), the UN Trust Fund has been funding only CSO projects. In 2020, the majority (58 per cent) of these CSOs are women's rights organizations.

## About the learning from practice series on prevention

In this series, the UN Trust Fund has prioritized engagement with what has – to date – been a fairly neglected area within research on prevention of violence against women and girls, practice based insights from civil society organisations. In 2020 it commissioned a synthesis of this knowledge emerging from 89 UN Trust Fund civil society organisation grants, implemented or closed during the period covered by its 2015-2020 Strategic Plan. Findings were captured from two types of source documents from grantees: final progress reports (written by grantees) and final evaluation reports (written by external evaluators commissioned by grantees). The first step in the series was a synthesis review and identification of common approaches or thematic areas in prevention across the 89 projects, to determine the focus of knowledge to be extracted (Le Roux and Palm, 2020). Ten key thematic areas or “**Pathways towards Prevention**” (Box 1) were identified through an inductive process including a desk review of reports *and* a series of consultations

with grantees/practitioners in English, French and Spanish. The UN Trust Fund aims to analyse and co-create knowledge under each pathway. Each pathway has been analysed and the corresponding synthesis co-created by a researcher/s and ten grantees per pathway whose work generated significant practice-based insights on the particular theme and who could offer contextual and embedded best practices, challenges and useful tools on the topic that emerged from iterative learning from practice. The intended audience for this brief is threefold: (i) practitioners (ii) donors and grant makers and (iii) researchers, all working in the area of EVAWG. The learning from practice series is intended to elevate practice-based insights from CSOs as highly valuable and important to planning, designing and funding interventions and research in EVAWG. Each longer synthesis review will be accompanied by a shorter, summary brief available on the UN Trust Fund website.

### BOX 1: PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION IDENTIFIED

1. Community Mobilization
2. Engaging faith based and traditional actors
3. Exploring intersectional approaches
4. **Mobilizing Women**
5. Training for behaviour change
6. Adolescent-focused approaches
7. Resistance and backlash
8. Adaptive programming
9. Working together for a survivor-centered, multisectoral response
10. Working together for law and policy implementation and reform

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Participants of Story Workshop in Nepalgunj, Nepal.  
Credit: Jaya Luintel/The Story Kitchen.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

Strengthening the empowerment of women and girls is an important factor in reducing the risk of violence against them, and is one of seven central intervention strategies outlined in the RESPECT framework for preventing violence (WHO, 2019). Empowerment has many dimensions – social, political, economic and psychological – and there is promising evidence that creating safe spaces, enhancing life skills, mentoring, and supporting collective action to build assertiveness, negotiation abilities and self-confidence can contribute to reducing violence against women and girls (VAWG) (United Nations, 2015). A strategy often used to implement social empowerment VAWG prevention interventions is recruiting a cadre of community facilitators (CFs), which involves mobilizing a group of women to participate in projects, building their self-confidence, training them on their rights and on issues specific to interventions (e.g. legal literacy or lay counselling) and having the women, in turn, mobilize others like themselves to become active intervention participants.

This synthesis review centres the voices of key practitioners in the field and their practice-based knowledge, and draws on insights from focus group discussions with project staff and findings in monitoring and evaluation reports on 10 diverse projects funded by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. The projects covered different countries and territories, worked with populations generally underrepresented in VAWG studies and engaged a variety of mobilization strategies to address different types of violence. The review of these projects includes rich reflections on lessons learned from practice.

## Key emerging themes

- **All projects used the strategy of working with a team of women Community Facilitators (CFs),**

who formed an intermediary cadre to facilitate the link between the intervention and the broader community of women that the projects wanted to engage with. The CFs worked with a population whom they had similar social, environmental, behavioural or occupational experiences to and among whom they were trusted. The 10 projects show the range of roles that CFs can play – for example, as paralegals, reporters and lay psychological counsellors. In some projects, the CFs were survivors of violence themselves, whereas in others they had a similar background as project participants (e.g. minority women or indigenous women) but were not necessarily all survivors.

- **Some projects identified and recruited CFs, whereas in other cases women organized themselves into a group organically.** This points to **different pathways to mobilization**, and the synthesis review highlights the conditions that projects can create that foster and support women to collectively organize, mobilize and become agents of change.
- **All projects aimed to increase women's self-confidence and awareness of their rights.** They did so with a focus on transforming gender norms towards advancing gender equality and inspiring change through discussions around healthy and unhealthy relationships and how power and control underpin relationships. They also focused on the meaning and necessity of establishing personal boundaries and negotiation and communication skills to build non-violent relationships.
- **The projects increased women's agency over time through the creation of safe spaces and by expanding their networks.** As projects trained the women CFs and gave them increasing roles and responsibilities over time, it became very clear that their agency was enhanced, and this inspired other women to collectively mobilize as well. It is important to understand that, although women's

agency can be enhanced over time, not all projects have the same starting point. If women participants are living in fear and silence (e.g. lesbian, bisexual or transgender women who are living in forced marriages with men in conservative societies), the project needs to take the time to create safe spaces where women can meet, build effective allies, generate trust and slowly create the conditions that allow women to mobilize. The projects created physical safe spaces for women to gather, socialize, problem-solve, reflect, rest and relax. Safe spaces can also be created by ensuring that the women's native language is used in the spaces.

- **The projects also reveal several challenges in the recruitment and retention of women CFs as agents of change.** However, project staff also developed mitigation strategies. For example, projects responded to challenges in recruitment by conducting advocacy with potential women participants on project goals and ensuring a participatory approach to foster local ownership, with women CFs and project participants co-creating project activities. Some projects paid a salary or stipend to CFs, but more research needs to be done to fully understand the pros and cons of paid versus volunteer CF work. Projects mitigated the challenges relating to retention by anticipating risks that women CFs face, including vicarious trauma, burnout and retraumatization, and included self-care practices for women CFs, for example by providing support and therapy and giving them time off from the work. Projects also invested time and resources in enhancing women CFs' skills and diversified project activities to be more responsive to women's needs.
- **Projects also encountered challenges in making project outcomes sustainable and sought to counter these by expanding to more intervention sites and shifting the project staff's role to technical support and institutionalizing project results.** One significant challenge in sustaining CFs is that CFs need support to foster stronger links with other multisectoral VAWG prevention initiatives at local level and in a meaningful way. CFs may need a longer handholding period to continue the work

that they have started as part of a project. In some cases, a timeline of 2–3 years for implementation was only a starting point for mobilization activities.

- **Although the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women funding for the projects had concluded prior to the pandemic, activities undertaken during the funding period were useful during the pandemic.** Teams of women CFs who were trusted as leaders among the broader community helped project staff to understand the community's needs and to nimbly adapt their responses to the context. The CFs were crucial in outreach and provision of services. They reached out to potential victims and survivors of gender-based violence, including through posters placed in pharmacies and by devising radio programmes to spread messages on COVID-19 and, for those experiencing violence, how to access services (e.g. through helplines). Using digital tools, they brainstormed opportunities for earning an income, and they also conducted a study and presented findings to policymakers to ensure that women's and girls' needs were included in aid policies.

## Conclusions and recommendations

All projects reviewed demonstrate the importance of the following.

- **Working with women CFs.** This is an important community mobilization strategy because projects not only create visible and inspirational examples of increased agency but also “safe spaces”, including in the form of a leader in whom participants can confide in and lean on for support and strength. Such increases in individual and collective agency are the precursors to the implementation of comprehensive approaches that are needed to end VAWG. They contribute to slowly breaking down structures that keep women subjugated and powerless to oppose violence.
- **Employing a participatory approach,** which is critical in providing support and mentorship for mobilization efforts to ensure that design strategies are meaningful, culturally sensitive, locally relevant,

and enhance a sense of ownership of project activities and outcomes among participants.

- **Supporting and mentoring women** to be at the forefront of change and **including measures to ensure their safety and well-being** by instituting self-care practices to mitigate the risks of re-traumatization, vicarious trauma and burnout.

### Fourteen recommendations target three specific groups.

**Practitioners** should (1) mobilize women to be agents of change in their own lives; (2) co-create projects with participants, with support from global guidance and tools; (3) ensure a mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches, and strategies to mitigate risks to participants; (4) create safe spaces for women to meet and collectively organize; (5) consider ways to make project participants more visible in places of authority; (6) consider intervention strategies that take into account the continuum of violence that women experience across multiple settings.

**Donor partners** should (1) consider funding projects for a longer duration, as mobilization strategies require a lengthy time frame for implementation; (2) develop guidelines on paying an honorarium, stipend or salary to CFs after a careful discussion on the pros and cons; (3) require projects to dedicate resources to self-care strategies; (4) consider developing guidelines on what is meant by “participatory”, as greater clarity can go a long way towards translating research into practice; (5) support the participation of women agents of change in high-visibility events at local, regional and global levels and in disseminating learning from these.

**VAWG researchers and project evaluators** should (1) consider conducting a process evaluation of the intervention to see how a programme outcome or output was achieved; (2) allow some time to pass after the project has come to an end to assess the sustainability of the results and if there were unplanned consequences; (3) conduct more research on having a cadre of CFs as a mobilization strategy, to help donors and practitioners to design evidence-based policies.



Participants in a training for outreach volunteers with War Child Canada in Jordan.  
Credit: Lina Jawabreh/War Child Canada.



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# ABBREVIATIONS

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<b>AALGBT</b>	Alliance against LGBT Discrimination
<b>CF</b>	community facilitator
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization
<b>ECMIK</b>	European Centre for Minority Issues Kosovo*
<b>EfG</b>	Equality for Growth
<b>EVAWG</b>	ending violence against women and girls
<b>FGD</b>	focus group discussion
<b>FYF</b>	Free Yezidi Foundation
<b>GBV</b>	gender-based violence
<b>IDCH</b>	Institute for Development and Community Health
<b>IPDF</b>	Initiatives pour la Protection des Droits des Femmes
<b>LBT</b>	lesbian, bisexual or transgender
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>PFA</b>	psychological first aid
<b>RNPM</b>	Red Nacional de Promoción de la Mujer
<b>TSK</b>	The Story Kitchen
<b>VAWG</b>	violence against women and girls
<b>WJI</b>	Women's Justice Initiative

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

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Strengthening the empowerment of women and girls is recognized as an important pathway to reducing the risk of violence against them, and is one of seven central intervention strategies outlined in the RESPECT framework for preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) (WHO, 2019). Empowerment has many dimensions – social, political, economic and psychological – and interventions can target these dimensions at many levels – individual, interpersonal, community and societal. There is promising evidence that creating safe spaces, enhancing life skills, mentoring, and supporting collective action to build assertiveness, negotiation abilities and self-confidence can contribute to the reduction of VAWG (UN Women and Social Development Direct, 2020a). Such interventions, especially when combined with other strategies such as economic empowerment, advocacy to create safer environments or working with men and boys, have been shown to reduce violence across low- and middle-income countries among different groups, including sex workers in India (Beattie et al., 2010; Beattie et al., 2015; UN Women and Social Development Direct 2020b), women participating in microfinance loan programmes in Tanzania (Kapiga et al., 2019; The Prevention Collaborative, 2020) and married women in Tajikistan (Matsonshoeva et al., 2020).

**Supporting women’s empowerment in ways that lead them to become agents of change rather than only project participants can be an intentional project strategy, but it can also happen in unplanned ways.** A strategy often used to implement social empowerment VAWG prevention interventions is the identification, recruitment and mentorship of an intermediary cadre of women, usually project participants, who lead mobilization towards social change. **For the purposes of this review, the intermediary cadre of women are referred to as “community facilitators”** (CFs) because they facilitate the link between the intervention and the broader community of women that the projects want to engage with – although civil society organizations (CSOs) and women themselves often use different names (see more on this under Section 1.2 on Terminology Notes).

CFs are not project staff, but, through outreach, they work with a population whom they have similar social, environmental, behavioural or occupational experiences to and among whom they are trusted (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009). CFs are important in interventions because they can leverage existing networks to reach larger numbers of individuals, foster community identity and cohesion, and catalyse change in social norms and environmental conditions. They also generate a sense of ownership of intervention activities, which leads to the sustainability of programme activities and outcomes (Chandrasekaran et al., 2006; Chakravarthy et al., 2012; Galavotti et al., 2012).

**There are also significant challenges in mobilizing CFs.** First, programmes aiming for transformative change in social norms require extended implementation time frames to ensure that communities accept and believe in the new norms and that the CFs have the skills, support and resources to implement and scale up complex and sensitive programmes (Cornish and Campbell, 2009). Second, CFs are often either volunteers or activists, and are generally not regular paid staff, which raises concerns about sustainability. Third, most interventions are under resourced and dependent on donor time frames, and organizations struggle to meet expectations of sustained support and mentoring. Finally, a strategy of having CFs manage activities risks doubly burdening women who have experienced violence themselves (Stephens et al., 2018). When well-funded and well-designed, programmes that have mobilized CFs and mentored them to become agents of change have been found to be scalable, leading to sustained outcomes (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Glassman and Temin, 2016; UN Women and Social Development Direct, 2020b).

**Research on mobilizing CFs for VAWG prevention remains limited.** Much of the literature on CF mobilization comes from research on interventions for HIV prevention of which VAWG was a significant but not a primary component. There is limited research on CF strategies where the intervention’s primary goal was addressing VAWG. Given that CF mobilization

is a frequently used strategy in VAWG prevention programming, it will be useful to answer the following questions. What can we learn from practitioners who have been able to mobilize women to become agents of change? How did projects facilitate this process, how did they support it and how do they sustain it? When these women are survivors or at risk, how do we recognize and support their vulnerability and victimhood, while challenging and capacitating them to become actors and leaders? What are some mechanisms and risk mitigation strategies for ensuring the safety and security of women who participate in mobilization activities, particularly when they are from marginalized communities and experiencing multiple vulnerabilities?

**This review examines interventions by CSOs funded by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund)** to gain an understanding the opportunities and challenges presented by using CF mobilization strategies to transform women from beneficiaries to agents of change. It combines a desk review of monitoring and evaluation reports and focus group discussions (FGDs) with project staff from 10 geographically representative and diverse projects that used CF strategies. The 10 projects addressed different forms of violence, recruited women CFs from groups that face multiple forms of discrimination and oppression and are at a heightened risk of violence, and were implemented in different countries and institutional contexts.

## 1.1. Conceptual framework: VAWG prevention and agency

**All interventions that use women CF strategies aim mobilization efforts at empowering project participants.** Empowerment means having the power to exercise choice and, conversely, disempowerment is the inability to exercise choice. It is possible to seek alternatives and act on them when three interrelated dimensions come together: preconditions (resources), a process (agency) and outcomes (achievements) (Kabeer, 1999). The review focuses on agency because the data on the 10 projects allows an in-depth exploration of the process through which projects supported the empowerment of CFs and the broader community of women participants.

Kabeer defines “agency” as the “**ability to define one’s goals and act on them**” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). A few caveats are necessary to understand how the term “agency” can be applied to the experiences from the projects. First, it is well understood that the ability to define goals is heavily constrained by social circumstances that limit the choices available to women in even imagining goals, let alone acting on them (Sen, 1985; Kabeer, 1999). These are constrained circumstances and contexts where resources are scarce, norms are constraining, the legal environment is unsupportive and the risk of transgression is high. Gender inequalities, social and political exclusion, and challenges such as social conflict, displacement, illness, poverty and food insecurity restrict women’s capacity to respond to violence and limit the range of options available to them for doing so (Campbell and Mannell, 2016). Therefore, when projects aim to increase women’s agency, they are in fact seeking to increase women’s “socially mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). This means that the social, political and institutional contexts are paramount in determining the course of action for violence prevention. Second, it is possible that sometimes women’s preferred choices in fact perpetuate or justify their subordinate status; for example, women might believe that it is justified for men to be violent. Such situations point to the importance of understanding the power relations underpinning gender norms, which are internalized and normalized to reproduce inequalities that oppress and subordinate women. Therefore, any attempt to shift women’s agency must involve transformative norm change based on a clear understanding of gendered power relations. Third, agency is not only about observable actions; it can take forms that are harder to observe and measure, such as the skills to reflect, analyse, bargain, negotiate and resist (Kabeer, 1999). This points to the importance of strategies to increase agency such as enhancing women’s life skills to improve their ability to reflect on and analyse how gendered power relations keep them subordinate and use this understanding to develop self-confidence, build assertiveness and improve negotiation abilities. Finally, agency can be exercised not only by individuals but also by collectives. Expanding the concept of agency from individuals to collectives allows an understanding of how projects can aim to increase women’s agency so that they can mobilize for collective action.

Many of the UN Trust Fund projects worked in constrained circumstances such as those mentioned above, aimed to improve women’s abilities to exercise choice through reflecting on gendered power relations and improving life skills, and sought to support collective action. Therefore, the review uses a conceptual framework on agency to analyse the implementation experiences and strategies of the 10 selected projects. The framework – developed by Campbell and Mannell (2016) – identifies three dimensions along which agency is constructed: across time, across space and across networks.

- Agency can be developed **over time**. Building women’s self-confidence, creating a cadre of women CFs and engendering a shift in women’s participation from service recipients to agents of change takes time. Progress may also be non-linear. It is not the case that women switch from “not having agency” to “having agency”. There may be stop-and-start and trial-and-error changes in women’s agency, which may have a cumulative effect over time.
- Agency can be distributed **across physical spaces, and women’s positioning in them impacts agency**. There are different ways in which projects can create “safe spaces” to enhance women’s agency and support women to enter “unsafe spaces” to demand their rights.
- Finally, women’s agency can be distributed **across social networks** – both interpersonal and wider networks – that offer varying degrees of protection from harm and violence.

## 1.2. Note on terminology for women community facilitators

There is a long history of development projects employing the strategy of mobilizing a cadre of women as agents of change. The UN Trust Fund projects refer to the intermediaries in terms that are understandable, relevant and specific to their projects, for example “brigade”, “volunteers”, “justice reporters” and “paralegals”. In the literature based on data from development projects around the world focusing on ending VAWG, the terms used for intermediaries include “activists” (see, for example, Kyegombe et al., 2014), “community workers” (see, for example,

Izugbara et al., 2020), “peer educators” (see, for example, Beksinska et al., 2014) and “social change agents” (see, for example, Cornish et al., 2014). For the purposes of this review, we use the term “CFs” to best reflect the broadest range of activities and experiences of the intermediary cadre of women. However, the aim is not to homogenize the experiences of these different types of agents of change by using this catch-all phrase; on the contrary, the review aims to acknowledge and carefully unpack the diversity of the lived experiences, challenges and opportunities faced by a broad range of actors. Moreover, it is important to note that in most VAWG prevention projects, CF mobilization is among several strategies through which women project participants are empowered. Other strategies include exposure to project activities through training activities, where women learn about their rights and avenues for seeking support. The empowerment and increased agency of project participants in general is beyond the scope of this review. Rather, it focuses on intervention strategies that involve the intentional or unintentional creation of a cadre of women as agents of change to implement some part of the project’s activities.

## 1.3. Case study selection

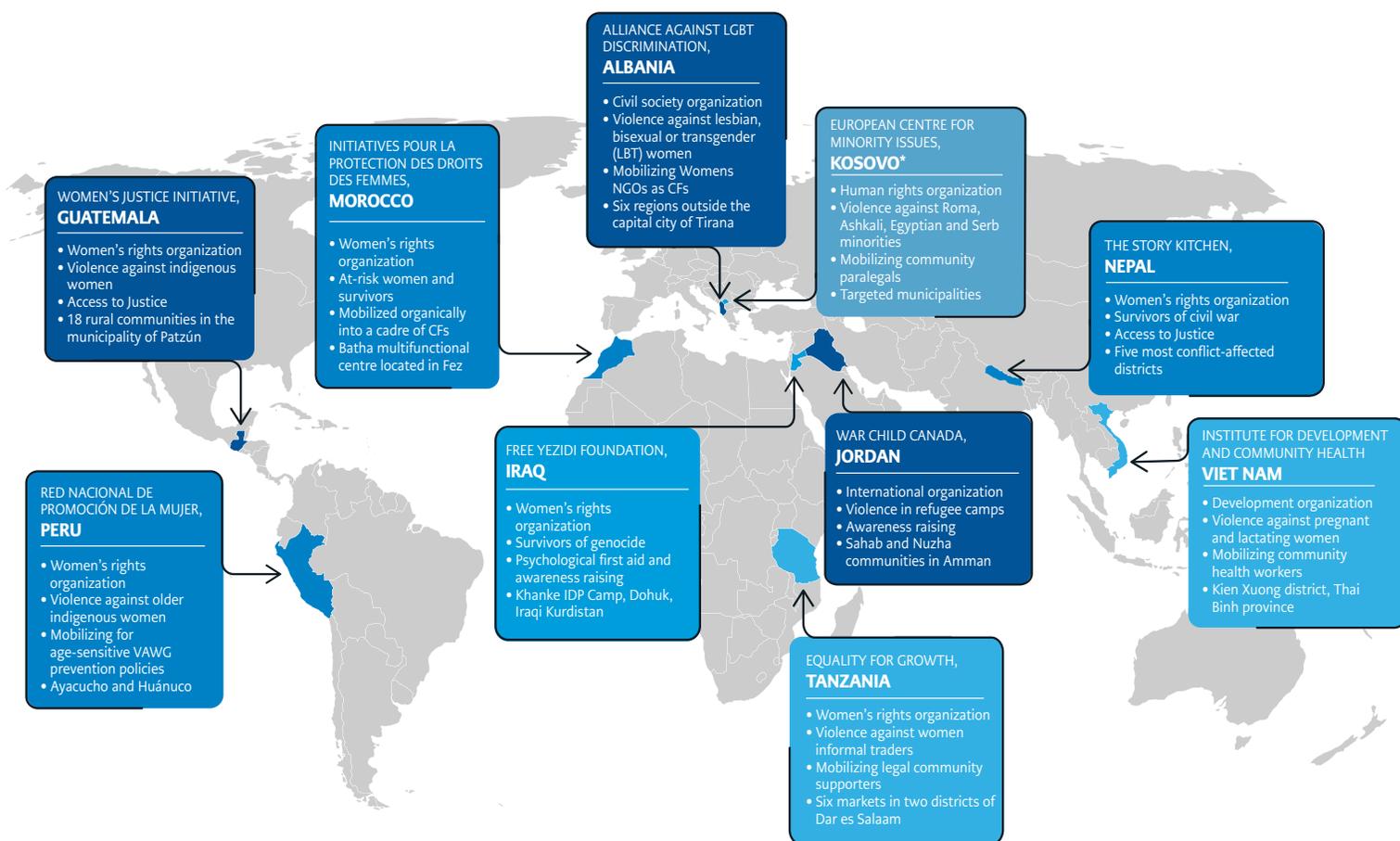
The 10 projects in this review were selected based on a rigorous identification and sampling process in the synthesis review conducted prior to this synthesis review (Le Roux and Palm, 2020), and following confirmation from UN Trust Fund managers that the projects used mobilization strategies including CFs to increase women’s agency. The selection ensured that all geographical regions covered by the UN Trust Fund were represented, as well as both large and small projects (ranging in value 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 marginalised and/or underrepresented women and girls. The populations targeted by the projects include **indigenous women** (Women’s Justice Initiative (WJI) in Guatemala); **lesbian, bisexual or transgender** (LBT) women (Alliance against LGBT Discrimination (AALGBT) 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); **survivors of genocide/civil war** (Free Yezidi Foundation (FYF) in Iraq and The Story Kitchen (TSK) in Nepal); and **women informal traders** (Equality for Growth (EfG) in Tanzania). Six projects were implemented by women's rights organizations (Initiatives pour la Protection des Droits des Femmes (IPDF) in Morocco, EfG in Tanzania, RNPM in Peru, WJI in Guatemala, TSK in Nepal and FYF in Iraq). One each was implemented by a CSO (AALGBT in Albania), a development organization (Institute for Development and Community Health (IDCH) in Viet Nam), a human

rights organization (ECMIK) and an international non-governmental organization (NGO) (War Child Canada in Jordan). The projects also worked to address the many different forms of violence that women face – physical, sexual, psychological and economic – and across various settings – in the home at an interpersonal level, in the workplace and in dealing with various state-level actors in the judicial system.

**FIGURE 3:**  
The ten UN Trust Fund projects included in this synthesis review



## 1.4. Types of community facilitators in the 10 selected projects

**All 10 projects used the strategy of identifying, training and mentoring a cadre of women CFs.**

However, there were three crucial differences in what this meant in practice. First, in 8 out of 10 projects, the projects identified, recruited and trained women to become CFs. Two others took a different approach: IDCH in Viet Nam mobilized an existing cadre of women community health workers and trained them to include VAWG as a health concern, and for IPDF in Morocco the creation of a cadre was an unintended positive consequence of the intervention. Second, in 9 out of 10 projects, the women CFs belonged to the same group as the project participants. The exception to this was AALGBT in Albania, which was based in the capital city, Tirana, but worked on behalf of LBT women in six smaller conservative towns, where LBT women keep their sexual identity hidden for fear of reprisals. The UN Trust Fund grant was the organization's first and it used it to develop linkages with existing women's NGOs in the six towns as the first entry point to safely identify LBT community members without putting them at further risk by making them visible agents of change in the community. In effect, the women's NGOs and their project staff were the CFs for this project. Third, of the nine projects in which the CFs belonged to the same group as project participants, the extent of peer identification varied. In some cases, projects used an explicit "survivor-to-survivor" strategy. For example, TSK in Nepal recruited women CFs who, like the broader community of project participants, were also survivors of the violence perpetrated during the country's civil war. However, ECKMIK, which worked to prevent VAWG among Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian and Serb minority women, recruited women CFs who were also Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian or Serb women, but they were not selected because of their survivor status.

## 1.5. Recruitment and work of community facilitators in the 10 selected projects

As a general principle, women CFs are selected because they are well recognized and respected by other members of their communities, are knowledgeable about their communities, demonstrate a serious commitment to working on behalf of others, are open-minded and willing to learn, demonstrate initiative, reflect the diversity within their communities, are willing to work regular hours on an ongoing basis and are willing to commit to the project goals (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009).

**The CFs recruited for each project are described below, together with the work that they were recruited for.** Although women CFs in the 10 projects were recruited for a diverse range of interventions, all CFs conducted outreach activities to raise information and awareness on project goals among the larger community of project participants, in addition to working on and managing aspects of the intervention's core VAWG prevention activities.

- TSK in Nepal recruited 15 women CFs to become "justice reporters" and trained them to wield handheld cameras to record life history narratives from other survivors of the civil war, with the goal of seeking justice for war crimes.
- FYF in Iraq recruited and trained around 30 project participants as CFs to provide psychological first aid (PFA) to survivors of the Yezidi genocide living in refugee camps.
- WJI recruited as "community advocates" Mayan women in Guatemala and trained them to develop and oversee the implementation of community action plans to prevent and respond to VAWG.
- RNPM in Peru recruited older indigenous women in rural communities as "senior women leaders" to advocate for gender- and age-sensitive policies with local authorities.
- ECKMIK recruited eight women activists as CFs and trained them to be "paralegals", providing a coordinated response to VAWG among minority women in Kosovo.

- EfG trained 55 women CFs as “legal community supporters” and “paralegals” in six informal markets in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, to provide support to female traders experiencing violence.
- War Child Canada in Jordan recruited and trained refugee women “volunteers” as CFs to provide legal awareness, life skills and psychological counselling to similarly placed refugee women.
- AALGBT recruited staff from women’s NGOs as CFs to reach LBT women safely.
- IDCH in Viet Nam did not create a cadre of CFs but trained existing women community health workers in primary health settings to provide counselling and prevention messaging on VAWG to pregnant and lactating women.
- Finally, users of IPDF’s Batha Centre in Morocco for women survivors of violence organically formed a cadre and set up a mechanism that they called “*woulina mounadilat*”, which translates as “we have become activists”.

## 1.6. Methodology

The data come from annual monitoring project reports written by the 10 grantees and end-of-project evaluations conducted by external evaluators. Where possible, additional project documents (including reports, photographs and booklets) were included in the analysis. The coding was conducted in Excel. Practitioner knowledge was critical to the production of this synthesis review; the key findings were shared with project staff from the organizations that were part of the sample for the synthesis review, and further insights were drawn from virtual FGDs, interviews and written comments. Thematic experts in the field provided critical feedback. In the end, the recommendations were co-created with the grantees, expert reviewers and UN Trust Fund managers.

## 1.7. Structure of the report

The lessons from projects on mobilizing women to become agents of change are presented in Section 2, which is divided into five subsections. Section 2.1 examines how projects mobilized women as CFs and agents of change to shift women’s agency over time, Section 2.2 considers how projects mobilized women as CFs and agents of change through safe spaces, Section 2.3 analyses how projects developed women’s agency through networks, Section 2.4 focuses on lessons learned on opportunities for and challenges in supporting and sustaining CFs, and Section 2.5 sheds light on how projects adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. Section 3 offers conclusions and makes recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and donors, and the broader research community.



# 2. LESSONS ON MOBILIZING WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

## 2.1. Mobilizing women as community facilitators and agents of change can effectively shift women's agency over time, but the process is not linear

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is now growing evidence that interventions that focus on gender, power, violence and relationship skills and are participatory, reflective and transformative can help to reduce VAWG. Such interventions focus on transforming gender norms and inspiring change through discussions around healthy and unhealthy relationships, how power and control underpin relationships, the meaning and necessity of personal boundaries, and skills in negotiation and communication towards building non-violent relationships (Ellsberg et al., 2015; Stern et al., 2016; Prevention Collaborative, 2020). **Recent research has shown the importance of understanding the impact of such interventions through the lens of agency that shifts over time.** A randomised controlled trial of a gender-transformative and livelihoods intervention in South Africa showed no reduction in women's experiences of intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. However, qualitative research conducted alongside the trial offered a more nuanced perspective. The women shared that they had changed their behaviours because of the intervention: they had more power in relationships, improved communication and relationship skills, increased resistance to controlling partners and had shifted their relationship expectations (Willan et al., 2020).

However, because these are unobservable acts of

agency that are hard to measure (Kabeer, 1999), they may be difficult to capture quantitatively. The changes in behaviours that Willan et al. captured are the precursors to actions that may eventually bring an end to a violent relationship when, for example, a woman leaves an abusive partner. **However, the shifts in agency can build over time, changing relationship dynamics subtly if observed day-to-day but significantly if viewed over time. In other words, such behavioural changes are ever-evolving processes and are not necessarily singular events.** Women should not be expected to “have agency” or “not have agency”, as agency is not a static attribute and changes in agency do not always occur linearly (Campbell and Mannell, 2016; Willan et al., 2020). Instead, the skills to bargain, resist and negotiate might vary by context, and there can be a stop-and-start process that changes throughout a woman's life. Most importantly, these are also actions that matter to the women because they are experienced and perceived as significant shifts in their own agency. While there is increasing attention on understanding how mobilization activities slowly shift women's agency over time, more evidence is needed to capture the different pathways through which change takes place. The 10 selected projects offer insights into the processes of change, the different strategies that interventions use and the impacts these have on the women CFs and the project participants.

**The projects in the UN Trust Fund portfolio mobilized women CFs to develop their self-confidence, had them reflect on gender and power dynamics, and over time engendered shifts in their agency.** The CFs, in turn, became role models for others. Typically, projects first identified women CFs who were trusted in their communities and could take a leadership role on behalf of other project participants. Next, they provided training to these CFs on their specific new roles. Finally, over time they gave CFs increasing responsibilities, which developed their sense of ownership over the project. When asked about the challenges faced in mobilization, grantees spoke about confronting the lack of agency.

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*The biggest challenge was to convince the women in the training [of CFs] of their own power. In the beginning, they are so defeated, they feel so powerless. Once they believe in themselves, it becomes very easy. But in the early days, we really had to work hard to build their self-confidence, convince them of their own abilities (TSK, FGD).*

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*How to work with a group of women in a context where they are not yet entirely out of the spiral of violence, where they can see for themselves that their problems, which seem to be divergent, have a common origin and need a common response. How to help them build together the elements of this response when they are not entirely aware that it is their experience of violence and male domination that makes them incapable of understanding the contours of the problem and acting to end it (IPDF, written response).*

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**The example of FYF shows how the project built the agency of women CFs over time and supported them through the process.** The project's mission was to provide psychosocial counselling and trauma therapy to survivors of genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) against the Yezidi community, who were forced out of their homes and were living in refugee camps in Iraq. At the start of the project, FYF identified women among the participants who could be trained as CFs to provide lay counselling to other Yezidi refugee women. Following training, the CFs were continuously supervised, and as the project progressed, they were given increasing responsibilities. By the second year, the CFs were able to run group sessions while the project's professionally trained counsellors

focused on the most severe cases – returnees from ISIS captivity or women who were at risk of harming themselves or who were unsuitable for groups for different reasons. In a show of increasing confidence and sense of ownership, the women decided to give themselves a name, calling themselves *harikara*, which means “helper” in Kurdish. In FYF's annual reporting document from the first year of the project, the CFs are referred to as the “PFA Brigade”, but by the end of the second year, FYF changed the terminology to match the name that the CFs gave themselves, and the term “*harikara*” appeared throughout project documents.

With the project's support, the *harikara* were able to mobilize others and influence intervention activities over time. The women CFs were visible testaments to the possibilities that come from increased agency. In the first six months of the project, a project participant, who was a former ISIS captive, underwent PFA training, became a *harikara*, and started supporting group discussion sessions and the art and knitting classes. The project's first annual report states: “*Her presence in the groups inspires our beneficiaries and engenders feelings of resilience and hope.*” In addition, the outreach by the trained CFs enhanced the project's coverage. Thirty women CFs were each able to knock on one hundred doors in the camps, thus reaching 3,000 Yezidi refugees. They informed women about the services available at FYF and offered them lay counselling. Furthermore, the CFs improved their skills over time. During home visits, the *harikara* encountered the whole family, so the project gave further training to the *harikara* on PFA specifically oriented towards children. Finally, towards the end of the intervention period, FYF set up gender-based violence (GBV) discussion circles because CFs reported that there was great need in the community for selected prevention programmes such as providing women with tools to deal with interpersonal violence and manage conflict at home. Once mobilized and activated, the CFs were no longer just recipients of the project's activities. CFs' increased agency led to a sense of ownership over intervention activities and **FYF supported CFs by listening to them, encouraging their participation and becoming demand-driven in their initiatives.**

Other projects also confronted a lack of agency among their participants and, using mobilization strategies, improved women's skills over time to

recognize violence and find ways to address it. War Child Canada in Jordan recruited and trained refugee women volunteers as CFs to provide life skills and psychological counselling to Syrian and Jordanian women and girls, including out-of-school girls. When the project first approached the women, it had limited resources for recognizing and addressing violence. The intervention activities that the women and girls valued most were the life skills sessions, where, as reported in the project's document, they got the chance to

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*“think about their relationships and communication styles, discuss the effects of aggression and violence at home and explore different stress management techniques and coping mechanisms”.*

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**The women and girls used these techniques at home, and where they felt powerless before, they now felt that they had skills that enabled them to break the cycle of violence.** Having a cadre of volunteer CFs was essential to the project achieving these results. The CF volunteers conducted home visits because several women and girls were not allowed to leave their homes, or the project office was too far away or they did not have the time to travel there. These home visits thereby allowed the services of the project to reach the most vulnerable, that is, those whose mobility was severely curtailed. Similarly, RNPM in Peru trained senior women leaders as CFs and raised their awareness on their right to lead a violence-free life.

**The women leaders recognized over time that violence is unacceptable and learned skills to understand and change their behaviour patterns, which is an important pathway towards violence prevention.** RNPM supported change by providing women with the tools and the language to reflect on behaviours that they experienced and recognize them as abusive. Whereas before women blamed themselves for any violence they faced, over time they began to resist and view the same actions in a different light. Such changes have a cumulative effect on increasing agency and preventing violence. The change in one of the women CFs was described by the RNPM's Project Director as follows:

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*In a private conversation, 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, otherwise I will denounce you.” When her son came to see her, her partner complained to him, but her son agreed with her. (RNPM, written response).*

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While increasing resilience can seem to place the burden of change on the survivor and may seem like it does little to bring systemic change, the practitioners' experiences highlight a few important points. First, when women can shift the power dynamics in their favour, they experience a significant shift in their own agency and start to believe in their ability to change their circumstances. Second, the project participants themselves expressed a need to focus on interpersonal violence at home and the feelings of despair and anxiety, and the projects rightly responded. Even when projects focused on preventing violence outside the household, the beneficiaries requested assistance in tackling domestic violence. For example, EfG's focus in Tanzania was on ending violence against women traders in informal markets, but the CFs found that women were often dealing with violence at multiple levels, and it was difficult to separate what transpired at home from the incidents at the marketplace. Finally, women reported that the coping skills enabled them to become better parents after realizing that they were taking their stress out on their children.

**Learning conflict management skills shifted the power dynamics at the household level in favour of the survivors and prevented intergenerational transmission of violence.**

The examples above highlight how projects can create a cadre of CFs and expect that their agency will grow over time, although the change might not occur linearly, thereby benefiting the project, the broader community of peers and the CFs themselves.

**Even when projects do not set out to intentionally create a cadre, women who are mobilized and brought together as a group can coalesce organically over time around a common cause**, as was the case with the project implemented by IPDF in Morocco. The project encouraged reflection among survivors to understand the problem of GBV as a collective problem and to look for collective solutions. Fifteen survivors who used the project's Batha Centre for women set up a group called "*woulina mounadilat*", which translates to "we have become activists", and organized activities to raise awareness on GBV, accompanied each other to courts and hospitals, created birth announcements and organized fun activities. It took some time for a cadre of CFs to form organically, but once formed, they were able to inspire and mobilize others to join in their collective actions.

It is also important to recognize that **not all projects are at the same starting point**. Some projects are among the first, if not the first, to work on behalf of marginalized communities. An example comes from the project implemented by AALGBT from Albania, which aimed to ensure a violence-free life for LBT women. Although AALGBT is based in the more progressive capital city of Tirana, it worked in six regions outside the capital city, in smaller towns that are much more conservative. There is also deep societal stigma and resistance, not just in granting rights and recognition but also in talking about LBT issues. The project's annual report describes the extent of resistance. When an advocacy session was conducted at a school, a teacher said: "Talking about these issues with kids creates bad role models." Although there are NGOs in the smaller towns that work on behalf of survivors and women at risk of violence, there are none that work on behalf of LBT women. This was a conundrum for AALGBT because women's NGOs were trusted by heterosexual women who are survivors of violence, but not all women's NGOs were fully trusted by LBT survivors. AALGBT's first task was to carefully identify the women's NGOs in the towns that could be effective allies to LBT women and train the selected women's NGOs on LBT rights. Once they became an effective CF cadre, AALGBT was able to reach its intended project participants. During the second year of the project, AALGBT organized a summer school for

LBT women and girls who came from remote regions in Albania to participate in workshops to raise their capacity to advocate for themselves and empower them to do so. LBT women and girls who participated in the project were also eager to produce posters for health and education institutions. AALGBT said in the FGD that the biggest challenge in mobilization was "building trust" among LBT women that AALGBT and the women's NGOs were allies.

The previous example also highlights that **there is no one "right time", and the context of the projects must be borne in mind when considering when and through what pathways women's agency is developed over time**. The agency of LBT women was built slowly by first mobilizing and training an intermediary cadre of women's NGOs in remote towns and then the LBT participants.

#### KEY TAKE-AWAYS ON MOBILIZING WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE OVER TIME

- 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. When combined with learning life skills for conflict management and managing stress and anxiety, such efforts can help to prevent violence. When projects begin, one of the biggest challenges that they face is a lack of agency that harms women's confidence. Over time, projects aim to bring about a shift in women's understanding of gender dynamics and the root causes of violence, as well as women's skills in recognizing and changing behaviour patterns to address violence. These changes are not linear and occur in a start-and-stop manner.
- Projects are confronted with women experiencing a continuum of violence – at home, in schools and in the workplace – which highlights the need to consider violence prevention across multiple settings.
- Even when not induced by the project, the creation and activation of a cadre of women CFs and the mobilization of project participants can occur organically.

- With their eyes and ears on the ground, mobilized women CFs can influence intervention activities, making CSOs more demand-driven in their initiatives and ensuring that the most marginalized are included in all activities. Projects can support and mentor CFs by being participatory, listening actively and being open to CF suggestions on intervention activities.
- Projects move at a different pace depending on the context and profile of the project participants. When measuring change, evaluations must consider the time it takes to implement aspects that are hard to measure, for example building trust or creating subtle but significant shifts in relationship dynamics.

## 2.2. Mobilizing women as agents of change through safe spaces

### LITERATURE REVIEW

**Private and public spaces are gendered and affect levels of agency. In societies where women’s mobility is restricted, public spaces are dominated by men and signal disempowerment to women.** For women in violent relationships, the same physical space – the home – may allow them to feel a greater sense of agency when the violent partner is not there, and the sense of disempowerment may return when the space is shared with the partner. How did projects create spaces where CFs and the broader community of project participants felt safe and could be mobilized to increase their agency? What impact did this have on violence prevention?

A safe space can be defined as “a structured place where women’s and adolescent girls’ physical and emotional safety is respected and where women and adolescent girls 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” (Megevand and Marchesini, 2019). Such safe spaces where women can engage in group-based interventions, share, and learn new skills have been found to contribute to improvements in psychological

wellbeing and improved social support (Stark et. al. 2021). Safe spaces have also been used as centres for providing clinical services, running skills building sessions and conducting CF meetings for project planning, while also being spaces where CFs can sleep, rest, access childcare and shower (UN Women and Social Development Direct, 2020b). **The importance of such safe spaces cannot be overstated and ensuring that they are available is recognized as an important strategy in violence prevention and perhaps even in the creation of community-based organizations** (Dhungana et al., 2017; Megevand and Marchesini, 2019; UN Women and Social Development Direct, 2020b). Although there is ample literature on physical safe spaces, less attention has been paid to other ways of creating safe spaces for violence prevention interventions.

The UN Trust Fund projects highlight the different safe spaces they created, which are discussed below. Safe spaces are essential: research shows that survivors’ voices are silenced because negative reactions from family and other kin reinforce the feeling of self-blame and negative reactions from service providers lead survivors to question whether or not future disclosures would be effective (Ahrens, 2006). The 10 selected projects allow the exploration of how the creation of safe spaces breaks down psychological barriers, increases agency and ends the silences that prevent women from living a violence-free life.

**Several projects had a physical location where women could gather.** Women walked into the project’s space and felt their agency transform. FYF operated from a space it called the women’s centre, which was where the project’s professional therapists were based but also where women came for group meetings, vocational skills training and other activities. The project’s monitoring report included a statement from a participant that highlights, simply and succinctly, the impact of having a safe space:

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*“When I come here, I feel like I can breathe.”*

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The space was accessible to the women and their families, both of which are critical elements when

considering the types of spaces that feel safe (UN Women and Social Development Direct, 2020a). Project spaces helped to support a sense of agency through posters and flyers with women-centric messages, and project staff made beneficiaries feel welcome, offering an insight into alternative ways of being. Such safe spaces are critical to CFs' transformation from beneficiaries to actors.

**Projects also created temporary safe spaces**, for example by organizing workshops. TSK in Nepal held “storytelling workshops”, where the women CFs – who were survivors of the country’s civil war – became agents of change by interviewing women like themselves on their experiences of violence, which offered them a chance to reclaim their dignity and become authors of their own narratives to break the cycle of intergenerational violence. In the FGD, TSK said that it not only conceived of such spaces as “safe spaces” but also “brave spaces”. The IPDF project in Morocco did not activate a cadre of CFs, but it offered a safe space for women– the Batha Centre. The support and friendships formed in the space led to the creation of a cadre of women who themselves set up a mechanism called “*woulina mounadilat*”, which means “we have become activists”. Conversely, practitioners felt the lack of a physical space when it was not available. For example, EfG in Tanzania trained CFs to be legal community supporters on behalf of women traders in informal marketplaces to ensure that they could safely exercise their economic rights. However, the CFs did not have a physical space to gather in the marketplaces, which the CSO noted would have been useful to protect women and help to adjudicate cases.

**Projects can also create safe spaces by paying attention to the language that is used by the practitioners when communicating with participants** – for example in training sessions, when speaking with staff or in the written materials developed by the project – as it is well understood that language has power. Many CSOs worked in countries and territories that are multilingual and the native languages of the most vulnerable are 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 thwarts agency by creating fear**

**of confronting authority and seeking justice.** Two CSOs from the Americas (WJI in Guatemala and RNPM in Peru) worked with indigenous women who felt powerless in spaces of authority (e.g. in health-care settings, courts and police stations) because they were unable or hesitant to speak in Spanish, which is the dominant national language. By conducting training sessions and other activities with women in their native tongues (Kaqchikel in Guatemala and Quechua in Peru), the projects created a safe space where CFs felt comfortable, learned about their rights, and discussed how to approach local health and legal authorities to end violence. The project’s annual monitoring report included the thoughts of a CF, who said that having activities conducted in Kaqchikel made it easier for her to convince her peers to seek the project’s services:

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*“The truth is that one of the things that influences women not to seek support or file a complaint is the fear of not being able to speak Spanish ... if we tell them that they can go to WJI’s office and that the lawyer will speak to them in Kaqchikel, then it is easier for them to seek help.”*

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**While project-affiliated physical spaces enhance the agency of women CFs and several projects provided such spaces, some went a step further.** These projects trained and encouraged CFs to enter spaces that were previously considered “unsafe”, because they are spaces of power and authority, particularly over women (e.g. courts and police stations) or where women feel diffident or uncomfortable (e.g. offices where services are provided in a language other than one’s own or offices where the bureaucracies are hard to navigate without appropriate knowledge or connections). RNPM in Peru strengthened the knowledge, skills and abilities of women CFs/senior leaders to make themselves visible, as VAW was considered only an issue for women of reproductive age and not older women. The CFs raised their voices to bring attention to VAW issues in older women and entered spaces of authority to place their demands in front of decision makers in civil society, state and the media. The CFs mobilized younger women as well as other senior women in their communities to form intergenerational alliances to prevent violence. The project’s monitoring report documents the thoughts of project participants. One said:

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*“I went with my companions the first time, but it was important to be there, talking to the authorities about violence against women and for them to listen to us.”*

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Another said:

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*“It wasn’t simple. You had to insist on getting a meeting. But we got there.”*

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**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.** Rather than creating a new safe space for beneficiaries, the IDCH project in Viet Nam took a different approach. The CFs in the IDCH project were a pre-existing cadre of village health workers who conducted home visits for antenatal services and who, through IDCH’s intervention, were now also tasked with preventing and reducing violence among pregnant and lactating women. In the FGD with project stakeholders, an IDCH representative stated that the project’s strategy was designed keeping in mind the country’s context, namely, where the civil society sector is weak and where there can be harmful consequences if the actions of CSOs are viewed as challenging the status quo:

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*“[The] civil society sector in Viet Nam is weak. NGOs cannot be viewed as challenging the system. It is better to work within government institutions and government workers.”*

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**Institutional contexts are very important when considering the types of roles and responsibilities that CFs take on** (Evans and Lambert, 2008; Cornish and Campbell, 2009; Simoni et al., 2011). In countries and territories with a strong history of political activism, CFs can exercise agency by challenging the status quo to demand their rights. In the example from Peru, the senior women CFs were activated to confront state authorities in a country with a long history of indigenous activism as well as RNPM’s decades-long history of working on behalf of marginalized groups. However, where civil society activism is weak, projects must be careful that the engagement with state authorities does not bring harm to the CFs or the broader community of women participants.

Keeping this in mind, IDCH worked with the existing health infrastructure in Viet Nam – the Department of Maternal and Child Health Care, the local reproductive health centres, and the village and commune health workers – and trained them to provide GBV services to pregnant and lactating women. It took a familiar space utilized for antenatal services and made it safe for seeking services related to GBV. The health workers also conducted home visits. For many women, homes were not always “safe spaces”, and this gave the health workers an opportunity to identify risks of violence at home. The use of existing spaces elevated the issue across the health system and introduced the importance of addressing GBV among a long-standing cadre of health workers.

**What was the impact of having safe spaces?** One phrase came up repeatedly in the monitoring and evaluation documents of projects when describing implementation achievements and during the FGD when discussing the importance of mobilization, that is, “breaking the silence”. **Practitioners agree that the first barrier to confront is the deafening silence around women’s violence.** Through the project’s safe spaces, women learned to recognize the violence they face and understand its root causes. Project staff from RNPM in Peru stated in a written response about how the project managed to break through the silence when they began their work with senior indigenous women leaders who faced political violence decades ago:

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*“Painful stories surfaced in the first meetings, requiring psychosocial support. The older women themselves did not recognize at first that they were victims of gender-based violence.”*

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When projects work with women CFs, the **CFs themselves are viewed as people who are safe to confide in.** WJI in Guatemala trained a cadre of community advocates on their legal rights and to provide support to others. One such community advocate spoke about how survivors approached her for help, highlighting that any space can be a safe space if the person occupying that space considers it safe.

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*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 and that she does not have to live a life of violence. We tell her that she deserves to live a life without violence and that she can seek help and support (WJI, project monitoring report).*

Often gendered norms surrounding violence blame the survivor, causing women to feel shame and guilt. Rather than providing support and solace, women face stigma from family, the community and state institutions. When TSK in Nepal and the cadre of women CFs (trained “justice reporters” who used handheld cameras to gather stories from survivors like themselves) began their work, survivors would at first only speak about the physical violence that they faced from warring factions during the country’s civil war or about the after-effects of violence (e.g. becoming widowed or becoming destitute). Talking about sexual violence was taboo. It was only when women CFs shared their own experiences with wartime sexual abuse that others felt that there was a safe space where they too could finally overcome feelings of shame to break through the biggest taboo topic. The project’s annual monitoring report details a participant’s experience at a project-organized safe space, the “storytelling workshop”:

*“I was sexually abused during the conflict. After coming here and meeting with other sisters, now I have the feeling that I am not alone in this journey.”*

Once the CFs and project participants felt safe, increased their agency and were mobilized, they took greater ownership of the project’s goals and objectives. For example, for the project, justice for the women was about seeking redressal from impersonal state actors in courts, tribunals, human rights commissions, and truth and reconciliation committees, from which the women could potentially also receive compensation. However, for the survivors themselves, justice was about an acknowledgement from their families and communities that instead of being supported, who they had been shunned and stigmatized by after they learned about the abuse that they had suffered. By being open and listening to what the project participants needed, TSK recognized that the survivors felt a stronger sense of

agency when they confronted their marginalized status in their own homes and communities.

#### **KEY TAKE-AWAYS ON MOBILIZING WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE THROUGH SAFE SPACES**

- Safe spaces are critical for mobilization and increasing agency. Physical spaces – the project offices, training centres and workshop settings – can enhance agency and be used for solidarity, support, rest and reflection. Safe spaces enable violence prevention by allowing women to become authors of their own narratives, reclaim their dignity and become advocates to break the cycle of intergenerational violence.
- Non-project spaces (e.g. antenatal clinics) can be made “safer” by ensuring that VAWG becomes a safe topic for discussion. Safe spaces can also be created by ensuring that the women CF’s native language is used in the spaces instead of the dominant national language, which could create feelings of alienation and disempowerment.
- Once mobilized, women CFs can spearhead entry into “unsafe” spaces of power and authority, provided they are trained to do so and supported in the event of backlash. However, the institutional contexts of interventions must be borne in mind when deciding if CFs should engage in “unsafe” spaces. Where civil society sector space is limited, projects can work in government institutions, for example introducing GBV as a safe topic in a health intervention.
- Safe spaces help to prevent violence by breaking the silence around violence. They allow women to reflect on and recognize violence, offer a chance for women to open up about their experiences and provide a space where women can seek support. All three – recognizing violence, sharing one’s trauma and supporting each other for collective action – are critical elements that increase women’s agency and which, once activated, enable women to end the cycle of violence. Once women feel safe, they break the silences around violence, including taboo topics such as sexual abuse, and feel confident to speak up about the types of redressal and justice that matter to them.

## 2.3. Mobilizing agents of change through networks

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies show that women's networks have significant impacts on empowerment, including in reducing intimate partner violence (Kyegombe et al., 2014), challenging gender norms (Contreras-Arias et al., 2013) and passing laws against violence (Ellsberg et al., 2015). A core aspect of forming social networks is fostering critical reflection skills to identify common challenges and create a platform through which strategies and actions can be devised (UN Women and Social Development Direct, 2020b). Networks are important for transmitting information, raising awareness about legal and other rights, and overcoming systemic hurdles that are stacked against the marginalized (Klugman et al., 2014). Networks fostered by prevention projects widen a woman's circle beyond family and kin, which forms a vital link between collective action and agency. Associating with others improves women's psychosocial well-being, which, in turn, supports women's self-esteem and self-confidence (Evans and Nambiar, 2013).

**How did projects engender support networks and why was this important?** The projects in the UN Trust Fund portfolio mobilized women CFs and other project participants, which resulted in women forming interpersonal networks to develop shared understandings and take collective action. The project participants widened their networks, both at an interpersonal level and more broadly with institutional actors in legal, medical, welfare and other service arenas. **Through participating in project activities, women developed networks of friendship and mutual support, which had a cascading effect.** For example, War Child Canada in Jordan trained a cadre of Syrian refugee women and Jordanian women (from the host society) as volunteers who conducted 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 to be very valuable and started inviting their peers, sisters and neighbours and other women who they felt

would similarly benefit from the support sessions. The project concluded in its monitoring report that there was a cascading effect initiated through home visits by women CFs and the dissemination of knowledge about gender, justice and rights and information about available services, and this was one of the best ways to mobilize "*the most vulnerable women and girls*". Even without an active cadre of CFs, the users of IPDF's Batha Centre for women formed interpersonal networks to accompany other women survivors to court hearings so that they felt supported and protected in a context where the perpetrator could cause further harm. These examples show **how networks enhance women's capacities through increased knowledge of VAWG and its root causes, information on available services and ability to take actions collectively to prevent violence, so that the most vulnerable person in the group can be reached and so that no one person must bear the burden of change. Rather, the change in both knowledge on VAWG and action to prevent it can spread through support networks.**

The UN Trust Fund projects also worked to strengthen the networks between project participants and actors in the larger institutional space of service providers that are critical to preventing violence and ensuring justice, primarily providers in the health and legal sectors. Several projects worked as the bridge to help CFs (and the women that they represent) to establish a network of ties with those in positions of power and authority. For example, both ECMIK in Kosovo and EfG in Tanzania created a cadre of women CFs who were trained as paralegals. The CFs were part of stakeholder meetings that the projects organized, giving them an opportunity to develop ties with important institutional actors. In the case of EfG, women CFs engaged with trader associations, police, paramilitary, municipal officials and the media. In the case of ECMIK, the paralegals developed ties with the police, social workers, municipal officers and ministry officials. In Guatemala, the CFs worked to develop action plans with community leaders. RNPM's CFs in Peru worked to get mayors to sign agreements on the rights of women. TSK in Nepal worked with the National Alliance for Women Human Rights Defenders, so that their justice reporters could become aware of a much larger global transitional justice movement and learn from the experiences of

women in other countries. IDCH in Viet Nam trained village health workers and involved them in activities with the wider institutional health sector, including officials in the ministry and local departments of health.

**The importance of fostering networks between the women CFs and the wider institutional actors is highlighted by the experiences of WJI in Guatemala.**

WJI's original plan did not incorporate the women CFs (community advocates) into the community action planning process. The community action plans are a critical step in developing local mechanisms to respond to VAWG and ensure survivors receive adequate support in their communities. The process involves participatory workshops with decision makers, including mayors, religious leaders, midwives and health providers. During the project, as WJI began implementation of the community action plans, it quickly noted that the success of the plans would depend heavily on the CFs' involvement in the development and implementation processes. As the majority of community leaders are male, the women CFs provided a critical female voice and perspective during the development of the action plans. The challenge for implementation was that community leaders are elected on an annual basis. Thus, CFs, who are locals, were key to providing continuity and introducing the community action plans to newly elected leaders. Finally, CFs played a significant role in overseeing the implementation of the plans. They ensured that leaders stayed on schedule with planned activities and reported on the process to WJI. The project significantly increased the agency of CFs, as they were able to interact with powerful institutions and actors. In the monitoring document, a CF was reported to have said:

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*We women can do many things that perhaps at one time we thought only men could do. For example, participating in a community meeting or speaking in public, now I realize that we can also do all of this. This is how I have begun to feel over the past two years, but all of this has come from the trainings with WJI. Now everything is different, I am not even afraid to go to the police alone, but before, I wouldn't leave my house (WJI, Project Monitoring report).*

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This example highlights that **building women's capacities through networks beyond the interpersonal level benefits the CFs, the wider community of project participants and the project.**

The CFs see an improvement in their own abilities – for example, from feeling fearful to leave their homes to now speaking confidently in public and engaging with powerful actors such as the police. The wider community of women benefit by having a trusted source in their community who they can lean on for support. And finally, the project benefits because the CFs appreciate the project's work, feel ownership and take an interest in ensuring that the activities are implemented as planned.

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**KEY TAKE-AWAYS ON BUILDING AGENCY THROUGH NETWORKS**

- When women develop interpersonal support networks, they draw from each other's strength and the most vulnerable person in the group can be reached. No one person has to bear the burden of change; rather, the change can spread through the support network.
- When women CFs feel empowered to deal with powerful institutional actors, this benefits not only them but also the wider community of project participants and the project itself. CFs witness a significant shift in their agency, other project participants have an anchor in the community and the project has a committed cadre to ensure implementation of project activities.



## 2.4. Lessons learned on the opportunities for and challenges in supporting and sustaining mobilization of women community facilitators

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is growing agreement on the key challenges in supporting and mobilizing CFs. Studies point to important considerations for implementers, including that such interventions are not easy to implement and take time and resources, and CFs must be mentored and supported with care (Struthers et al., 2019). Cornish and Campbell (2009) find that a key ingredient is the active involvement of the community in project planning and implementation; if there is greater participation, the project is more likely to provide solutions that are sensitive to the local context and with local commitment. Echoing Struthers et al. (2019), they conclude that disadvantaged communities are not in a position to lead complex interventions from the start. Without committing resources and having a lengthy time frame, interventions are at risk not only of failing but also of causing harm. This harm includes, but is not limited to, social or physical harm for being associated with the intervention if there is backlash from groups who 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 might incur (e.g. investing time in project activities if the same time was previously dedicated to more monetarily productive activities) and even legal harm (e.g. if the intervention supports survivors to file cases but is unable to protect survivors from the risks of filing cases in a legally unsupportive environment) (Stephens et al., 2018).

The insights from the 10 selected UN Trust Fund projects contribute to this growing body of work to highlight not only the challenges but also the strategies that projects used to mitigate the challenges. During the project's implementation period, there were **challenges in recruitment and retention of women**

CFs, and in the post-implementation period there are **challenges in sustaining project outcomes.**

**Recruitment challenges occur when it is not clear from the outset how the projects can benefit the lives of the proposed participants.** For example, EfG in Tanzania struggled initially with recruitment issues. In a written response, the representative of EfG said that the most significant challenge in mobilization was convincing women traders in informal markets to volunteer for EfG as a cadre of legal community supporters.

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*The main challenge was during the recruitment of legal community supporters. Few applications were at first received after the advertisement of the post in markets. This necessitated EfG staff to go back to marketplaces to solicit people who qualified to be legal community supporters and, by informing them of the work of EfG and the objectives of the project, then many people applied for the posts (EFG, Written Response).*

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In the case of EfG in Tanzania, the legal community supporters were unpaid volunteers, and women were reluctant at first to give their time to the project without compensation. The mitigation strategy adopted by EfG was to spend time with the women to explain the project's objectives to convince them of how the project can benefit them, and this resulted in overcoming the recruitment challenge. Another example comes from TSK in Nepal, which also recruited a cadre of CFs that worked on a volunteer basis – whom it called justice reporters – but this project's experience provided a different perspective. The project did not experience recruitment challenges, and when asked to reflect on this in the FGD, the project representative said: “Our motto is ‘jasko savaal usko netrita’, meaning, the one whose issue it is, makes the decisions.”

The representative elaborated that TSK's intervention approach was from a position of awareness of the power imbalance between the project and the participants and, to give participants greater voice and agency, **the project placed the women CFs and the participants at the centre of project activities.** TSK strongly believed that survivors should drive the agenda of the project, not vice versa, and the project worked

with participants using a “survivor-to-survivor, woman-to-woman” approach. Women were convinced because they responded to the project’s approach. They felt empowered when the project believed their stories of wartime abuse and thought that they could help others like themselves. They also knew that they would be in charge of wielding the handheld cameras. Although at first the women CFs were intimidated by the thought of the technical skills involved in using the camera having never used one before, they drew strength from the project’s belief in their abilities and were soon actively participating and enjoying working behind the camera to collect life stories from others like themselves. Similarly, RNPM in Peru began with an understanding that they did not want to reproduce patterns of social exclusion of indigenous women and instead wanted to “generate new forms of relationships” with project participants. The goal was to set aside “vertical views” and co-create the project by including women CFs and project participants in all phases of the project. In other words, the mitigation strategy used by TSK and RNPM was to take a participatory and inclusive approach from the very beginning. Such a strategy fits with existing evidence on mobilizing women for collective action, which finds that **as long as the rewards are perceived**

**as sufficient for coping with the tensions, women will become involved** (Contreras-Arias et al., 2013). See Appendix 2 on the UN Trust Fund website on the extent of participation of women CFs as seen in the results frameworks of UN Trust Fund projects.

**On the other hand, some projects in the UN Trust Fund portfolio chose to compensate the women CFs for their time.** ECMIK in Kosovo provided a salary to the paralegal CFs, which was raised midway through the grant period because it was found to be inadequate considering the workload. Similarly, WJI paid stipends to its cadre of community advocates. The *harikara* in FYF’s project were made paid positions after the project had started. In fact, the *harikara* earn the same wages as local teachers. The project’s representative opined in the FGD that, as earning members of their households, the *harikara* are challenging traditional patriarchal gender norms as well as becoming leaders in their communities. The experiences from the 10 projects therefore suggest that whether or not women CFs should be paid is indeed context-dependent, and the different experiences from the 10 selected projects contribute to the evidence base.



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

**Even if women CFs are successfully recruited, the retention of CFs can be challenging.** One issue is that CFs, being the first point of contact for project participants, become overburdened in trying to meet the needs of the project participants that they are attempting to mobilize. For example, initially the paralegals' role in ECMIK was outreach and providing referrals to minority women facing violence in Kosovo, which they did through home visits. However, the absence of a functional institutional protection system in Kosovo created a gap in service provision, which the paralegals tried to fill with their commitment and presence, even though they were not trained in this, recruited for this purpose or compensated for the extra work. The project took several steps to correct this. They stopped home visits to protect the CFs from burnout and potentially violent situations in participants' homes, established psychological support systems for the CFs and increased the compensation amount. ECMIK also recognized that there should have been a much more detailed preparation phase that included an assessment on the availability of general and specialist service provision. Other projects also recognized the importance of checking for vicarious trauma and burnout among CFs. **FYF in Iraq supported the CFs by monitoring the CF's emotional well-being, periodically checking for vicarious trauma, and providing individual therapy and support if the *harikara* themselves experienced negative life events.** Anticipating burnout, FYF emphasized the importance of self-care for staff and *harikara*, conducted mindfulness sessions, and ensured that time off was built into the work schedule.

**A second issue related to the retention of women CFs in projects arises when CFs feel that they are not engaging with their peers in a meaningful way and lose interest when participants do not respond to their outreach.** Some projects anticipated this and devised strategies so that CFs were engaging project participants in more than one way. For example, WJI in Guatemala worked with their CFs – community advocates – to understand the needs of the indigenous women and support them in ways that best suited their needs. For some women, this meant that they were accompanied by a CF to court when cases against GBV had been filed. Other women did

not want to file court cases for various reasons and instead preferred mediation, which the CFs facilitated. Others wanted WJI's help with property rights or child support. Similarly, IPDF in Morocco found that it had to diversify some of its activities to keep up the momentum generated by the women who had organized themselves organically into a group. It did so by setting up different community support activities in the women's neighbourhoods that were relevant to the women, for example rotating childcare and recreational activities or mobilizing women to work on issues in their neighbourhood that are relevant to their daily lives. These issues included schooling for children or having adequate streetlights for safety. **When the CFs' goal was designed to respond to the needs of the women, that is, when the project was demand-driven, the project found that the CFs were more invested in retaining their position.** By doing so, the projects were able to support and strengthen prevention activities, because deeper engagement of CFs improved outreach to the broader community of project participants. Another strategy for both recruitment and retention was for the **project to invest in CFs through training activities that improved skills.** WJI in Guatemala provided a 2-year long, in-depth training course in legal literacy and leadership skills to women, and upon graduation, they become community advocates who assist WJI with the implementation and coordination of programme activities in their communities.

**The final challenge that projects must contend with after overcoming the obstacles of CF recruitment and retention is what happens after the funding period ends.** There are several lessons that the 10 projects offer on the sustainability of project results. It should be mentioned at the outset that all 10 projects at the time of the FGDs were continuing their work following the end of the UN Trust Fund grant period using the strategy of working with women CFs, which is the most significant evidence of sustainability. In the FGDs, a number of practitioners said that the UN Trust Fund grant was their "first big grant", which allowed them to put into practice the CF-specific theory of change that animated their approach. For all projects, mobilizing CFs has been key to the sustainability of results, and projects have found different ways of extending their efforts after the conclusion of their UN Trust Fund

grant. **First, the projects' approach of using CFs has won recognition from donors, which has allowed them to secure further funding to expand their work to other locations.** For example, FYF's approach was recognized by the United States Agency for International Development, and the project now trains *harikara* in two other refugee camps using the strategies first tested with the UN Trust Fund grant. The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs stepped in after the closure of the UN Trust Fund grant to fund the *harikara* and the trauma programme. The need for psychosocial counselling services remains high among the Yazidi refugees in Iraq; in fact, as noted by the practitioners in the FGD, in the past year, suicide rates among young women have increased. The project has built on its strengths – although it previously relied entirely on international therapists, it has now also hired a Yazidi psychotherapist who was trained locally, in Iraq, through a programme that was developed in partnership with international programmes.

**Second, projects continue to support the networks formed during the UN Trust fund grant to scale up in different regions.** The network of survivors formed by TSK's project in Nepal has received further funding from other donor agencies, including UN Women Nepal. The network has expanded to include survivors in other districts, and TSK now sees its role as providing technical support to develop the network's organizational skills. **Third, project results have become institutionalized;** for example, IDCH's approach of mobilizing and training village health workers to identify and address VAWG as part of the health services that they provide for pregnant women is now part of the national guidelines of the Ministry of Health.

**Finally, all projects felt that they "left something behind" by beginning to break down the patriarchal order that suppressed women and led to silence about VAWG.** The projects mobilized women CFs to raise their voice, provided CFs with navigational capacities and showed beneficiaries how to shift the balance of their power to develop new skills and work with others to end violence. Within the time frame of the UN Trust Fund grants, which run for between 2 and

3 years, projects consider the last to be their biggest achievement in terms of sustainability.

**It is also recognized that there are challenges in sustaining mobilization efforts.** Women CFs thought that, while they had learned valuable skills imparted by the project, they were not certain that they could work without the project umbrella. The project gave them an identity, without which the community of peers would not trust them. If something were to go wrong, the CFs would be blamed without the project's support. A few project evaluations concluded that the handholding period was not adequate and the CFs felt that they had much more to learn. As noted above, compensation is an issue. Even if projects did not directly pay for CFs' time, there were indirect payments, for example for transport or meals, which are critical (if understudied) elements of mobilization in development projects. CFs did not express confidence that the networks would continue, because there were many competing claims on women's time. This does not mean that projects should not mobilize women because of the challenges it presents for sustainability. As noted above, even after the UN Trust Fund grant ended, the projects have continued their work in different ways, with the CFs becoming more, not less, central. Projects can strategize around sustainability challenges and consider the risks and benefits of ways of mobilizing CFs even before implementation begins.



### KEY TAKE-AWAYS ON RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF WOMEN CFS AND SUSTAINABILITY OF MOBILIZATION INITIATIVES

- Recruitment is a challenge in CF mobilization. Projects have mitigated the challenges by conducting advocacy with potential participants on project goals and taking a participatory approach by having women CFS and their peers co-create the project's goals. Some projects have paid a salary or stipend to CFS, but more research needs to be done to fully understand the pros and cons of paid versus volunteer CF work.
- Retention is also a challenge in CF mobilization. Projects have mitigated the challenges by anticipating risks that CFS face, including vicarious trauma, burnout and retraumatization, and including self-care practices for CFS, such as support and therapy and incorporating time off into the work schedule. Projects have recognized the need to have a detailed preparatory phase where the workload of the CFS is devised in ways that do not lead to burnout. Projects have also invested time and resources in enhancing CFS' skills and have diversified project activities to make them more responsive to women's needs.
- Projects have sustained their efforts by expanding to more intervention sites, creating a network, shifting the project's role to that of technical support and institutionalizing project results. Significant challenges in sustaining CF mobilization are that CFS may think that they need a longer period of handholding and that, without the project umbrella, they may lose a sense of identity. CFS did not express confidence that the networks would continue, because there were many competing claims on women's time. Dropout of CFS meant loss of the time spent in training them.
- Importantly, all projects mentioned that it was also necessary to recognize sustainability in less material terms and the importance of increasing women's agency. Therefore, a timeline of 2–3 years for implementation is only a starting point for mobilization activities.

## 2.5. Lessons learned on mobilization of women as agents of change during the COVID-19 pandemic

### LITERATURE REVIEW

According to UN Women, the COVID-19 pandemic created a “shadow pandemic” when lockdowns and confinement, often in cramped spaces, increased women's vulnerability to violence. Government authorities, women's rights activists and civil society partners across the world reported significantly increased calls for help to domestic violence helplines and increased demand for emergency shelters (Sanchez et al., 2020; UN Women, 2020). Women's requests for protection against violence increase after natural disasters, and research has shown that this increase lasts for an entire year following the catastrophic event. Post-disaster stressors, such as economic disruption, food insecurity and an increase in mental disorders, contribute to increased aggressive behaviours between partners. Disasters may also limit access to important sources of support for women, including family members, friends or professional service providers (First et al., 2017; Viero et al., 2020). UN Women reports that survivors have limited information and awareness about available services and limited access to support services.

On the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, Evans et al. (2020) noted that the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable. Social distancing restrictions have limited women's access to shelters and travel restrictions have prevented women's access to safer places. When shelters had to limit their capacity because of the social distancing guidelines this further exacerbated women's risk of experiencing violence (Kofman and Garfin, 2020). Many providers demonstrated their capacity for flexible responsiveness by switching to providing services from their homes using digital technologies, but as Gunby et al. (2020) point out, little has been mentioned about the difficulty that service providers faced, most of whom were women. Women in general have had a much more challenging time transitioning

between work life and home life, as both housework and childcare have fallen on their shoulders. There is also evidence that, although health professionals are essential for screening and responding to VAWG during the pandemic (Sanchez et al., 2020), health workers in general and female health workers in particular have been facing violence as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic because of fears and misconceptions that health workers are spreading the disease or because the public has taken their frustrations out on frontline workers (George et al., 2020).

The context above is an important background for understanding the key role that women CFs played for projects and the wider community of project participants during the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, the projects already had assets – a cadre of women who had been mobilized and trained to be leaders in their communities and networks that had been activated between the CFs and the broader community of women. When routine services and mobilization activities came to a halt because of strict lockdowns, the UN Trust Fund projects turned to the CFs to understand the needs of the community and brainstorm to devise solutions.

The situation during the pandemic was described by both EfG in Tanzania and IPDF in Morocco project representatives in written responses:

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*During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization was not in the position of reaching our participants through normal routine mobilization, day-to-day monitoring or capacity-building activities (EfG, written response).*

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*COVID-19 had a great impact on our approach. We continued our accommodation service [housing survivors] but everything else was in strict lockdown. Even when restrictions were removed, we had to limit the number of users of the centre (IPDF written response).*

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**However, though direct contact between the project and the broader community of project participants was severely curtailed, the CFs became the main mechanism through which the projects could understand what was happening on the ground**

**and adapt and adjust quickly to the women's needs.**

The CFs lived in the same neighbourhoods and could be activated to provide crucial information and to be a source of support for women facing violence. IPDF in Morocco mentioned that its cadre of *woulina mounadilat* enabled the project to continue some degree of outreach.

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*We made use of the social networks of the group woulina mounadilat, which have neighbourhood cells. The women put posters in neighbourhood pharmacies with contact information and that way they could do outreach to break the isolation of potential victims (IPDF, written response).*

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**Similarly, EfG came up with an innovative way of continuing to engage women informal sector traders. It trained its women CFs online in the use of digital technologies.**

Using mobile phones and online tools, CFs reached out to their peers and collected narratives from fellow female traders both to understand any ongoing VAWG issues and facilitate online meetings to brainstorm with each other on how to revamp their businesses and find a means of earning an income during the pandemic.

Two projects mentioned that the communities they serve were experiencing severe food shortages. Although this was not their core competency, the projects pivoted to meet the expressed need, using their organizational skills to distribute food. Notably, the women CFs were critical to the changed strategy. The CFs were the eyes and ears of their community, conveyed the urgent needs that the communities faced and helped in distribution efforts. AALGBT in Albania delivered food and medicine packages to 20 LBT families at the beginning of the pandemic and increased it to 100 families over time. WJI distributed a month's worth of food to 1,000 families in Guatemala. In the FGD, AALGBT said that providing food to project participants was important because:

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*There was severe food shortage. It was the women's biggest need. Their children were going hungry. By responding to their immediate needs, we show the participants that we are there for them, not them for us. This is important ... that they trust us. (AALGBT, FGD)*

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**As noted in the preceding sections, projects have a better chance of retaining CFs when they are participatory in their approach and include CFs in project planning.** By letting the CFs communicate the needs of the broader community of project participants and responding to them, both AALGBT in Albania and WJI in Guatemala ensured that women CFs felt a greater sense of ownership of the project. Both AALGBT and WJI made two further innovations. AALGBT worked with its cadre of CFs – women’s NGOs – to conduct a study using virtual methods on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic among LBT families and shared the results with the government to shine a spotlight on how these families were being left behind by government aid policies. Note that the women’s NGOs were already an effective cadre of allies with the LBT community in the six regions where the intervention worked. Had these networks not existed prior to the pandemic, there would have been no mechanism for the LBT women to have their voices heard among government stakeholders. Similarly, recognizing that radio remains a powerful tool for communication in rural indigenous communities, WJI worked with its cadre of CFs, along with three other NGOs, to create radio programmes in four Mayan languages to broadcast health and safety information on COVID-19 and also used the opportunity to generate awareness about the hotline for psychological services.

**Service providers face dangers when communities are experiencing extreme conditions and stressors. An active cadre of women CFs that has been mobilized to be agents of change becomes critical in such situations because they are not outsiders in their communities and are not viewed with suspicion;** they are known and trusted and have, through their engagement with the projects, built deep networks in the broader community of women and, sometimes, even with a wider network of institutional actors. Women already mobilized by projects were able to play an effective leadership role on behalf of their peers and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and did their best to ensure that there was help and support, particularly for those experiencing violence. However, the examples above also highlight that considerable burden and extra work must have inevitably been placed on the CFs, as they were relied on for reaching

community members when project staff were not able to. More attention must be paid to how CFs can be mentored and supported to prevent burnout and vicarious trauma.

#### **KEY TAKE-AWAYS ON MOBILIZATION IN CONSTRAINED CIRCUMSTANCES**

- Some projects had a mobilized and activated cadre of women CFs in place prior to the pandemic; these CFs were trusted as leaders among their peers and the broader community. When the pandemic hit, these projects made effective use of this cadre to understand the greatest needs of the community and nimbly adapt their responses. CFs were crucial in outreach for violence prevention and provision of much-needed services in the community.
- Extra burdens placed on women CFs during an already stressful time risk increasing burnout among CFs.
- It may be too early to conclude how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the organic mobilization of women to become agents of change (in cases where active cadres were not in place); however, this could be a useful opportunity to fill a research gap.

# 3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 3.1. Conclusions

The 10 selected UN Trust Fund projects are very diverse in the populations that they represent, the institutional contexts in which they were implemented and the types of violence that they addressed. The projects used the strategy of mobilizing women CFs and participants to become agents of change. The projects worked with CFs to achieve their twin goals of increasing agency and breaking the cycle of violence through the creation of safe spaces and by widening women's networks. Over time, women increased their self-confidence, felt that they had greater control over life events, learned skills in conflict management and formed mutually supportive networks, all of which formed the scaffolding upon which a strong set of violence prevention actions were built. Along the way, the projects also confronted several challenges. The mitigation measures employed by the projects also offer insights into how projects can foster, support and mentor women to help sustain project outcomes.

A few key elements are crucial to increasing the agency of women so that there is a transformative shift when they switch from being project participants who receive services for violence prevention to becoming agents of change who take charge of preventing and ending VAWG. **First, working with women CFs is an important mobilization strategy because, in this way, projects not only create visible and inspirational examples of increased agency but also a “safe space” in the form of a person in whom participants can confide in and lean on for support and strength.** Such increases in individual and collective agency are the precursors to ending violence because they contribute to slowly chipping away at the structures that keep women subjugated and powerless to oppose violence. Importantly, while the majority of the projects in this set of 10 identified and recruited a cadre of peers whom

they designated as women CFs, the experiences from the UN Trust Fund projects highlight two other ways of working with CFs. Projects can work with a pre-existing cadre (e.g. government frontline health workers) and designate them as CFs. It is also useful to understand that when projects create conditions in which women and girls feel safe to critically reflect on their situations and are provided with tools to understand how power and gender dynamics operate to oppress women, a cadre of CFs can emerge organically. Examples showing that induced mobilization (through active recruitment of CFs as part of the intervention) and organic mobilization (the emergence of CFs in unplanned ways) have similar outcomes in terms of increasing women's agency point to the critical element necessary for mobilization: it is not about simply identifying and recruiting a group of women; projects must create the conditions for enabling their agency, fostering and supporting women through the process of change over time and ensuring that they are protected from harm.

**Second, projects must adopt a participatory approach when providing support and mentorship.** When projects operate from a position of awareness of their own power and are open to being inclusive, they enable co-creation of project activities. When project activities are co-created, there is room for women CFs to communicate the needs of the community and ensure that planned activities are meaningful, context-specific and culturally sensitive. When projects allow themselves to be guided by CFs in adapting and adjusting their intervention strategies, the results are powerful. Women CFs increase their agency and sense of ownership of project activities, and the overall community of project participants trust CFs and feel supported by the project. The effects of co-creation of project activities were demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when projects worked with an already activated cadre of CFs to nimbly adjust to a new

and constrained reality in which normal and routine mobilization activities were halted.

**Third, there are challenges in the mobilization of women CFs, and projects must support and mentor women to be at the forefront of change while ensuring that they are not at risk.** Most projects work with women with limited power in society, and there are serious risks to projects, CFs and the overall community if projects do not anticipate and have mitigation strategies in place to overcome obstacles. Women risk bearing the burden of change and facing a backlash for challenging the status quo. They may also lose time and money by engaging in project activities as volunteers, which may exacerbate their already marginalized status. Projects can use a mix of top-down and bottom-up strategies. From the top down, projects can provide women with safe spaces for discussion, negotiation, problem-solving, critical thinking, stress relief and conflict management. Such spaces are also crucial for the emergence of networks – both interpersonal and with the wider community and institutional actors – which buffer women from social isolation. Projects can also devise self-care practices to mitigate the risks of retraumatization, vicarious trauma and burnout by providing counselling, instituting vacation time and flexible schedules, organizing leisure activities and planning workload in advance. From the bottom up, projects must pay attention to the impacts of intervention strategies and not use a “one size fits all” strategy. Once again, a participatory approach helps in devising solutions that are empowering to the women.

**The experiences from the 10 selected projects show that when projects take the time to support and mentor women to increase their agency and mobilize for change, it leads to sustained outcomes.** While resources are crucial, the projects included in this review are recipients of both small grants (less than \$150,000) and large grants (more than \$150,000) from the UN Trust Fund, which suggests that CF mobilization strategies are possible even with limited resources, provided that projects are participatory, combine a mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches to foster change, and create safe spaces and networks for women to break the cycle of violence.

Fourteen recommendations are offered below on mobilizing women to become agents of change. These are informed by practitioner insights from the 10 projects but also by the process of synthesizing these insights. The recommendations target three specific groups: (1) practitioners, (2) donors and policymakers, and (3) the ending VAWG research community.

## 3.2. Recommendations for practitioners

**(1) Mobilizing women to be agents of change in their own lives is a key strategy for prevention projects,** and a common effective strategy is to develop a cadre of women CFs or support an organic community of CFs who can, in turn, support other women at risk. Practitioners are therefore advised to develop strategies in which mobilization is an explicit aspect and part of the theory of change. There are different pathways through which mobilization can occur. One pathway to mobilization is for CSOs to actively identify, recruit, train and mentor CFs, but it is also possible that a cadre of CFs will emerge organically without active intervention involvement. In cases of organic mobilization, the CSO can help to bolster the mobilization efforts and ensure that future intervention activities include the cadre of CFs more explicitly. Moreover, where possible, CSOs can select CFs who are peers, as peer-to-peer outreach and learning has been shown to be an effective strategy because project participants identify with, and trust, peers with similar backgrounds.

**(2) Co-create projects with project participants,** with support from global guidance and tools, and adapt and adjust 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 greater risk of multiple forms of VAWG in private and public spaces. There are many strategies for achieving this, one of which is the creation of a cadre of women CFs. CSOs can support and mentor CFs by being participatory, listening actively and being open to CF suggestions on intervention activities. By becoming more demand-driven, CSOs can make their projects more meaningful to participants and,

in doing so, engender a sense of ownership that leads to sustained outcomes in the long run. Projects have highlighted that being inclusive of CFs' voices and even incorporating CF suggestions to shift intervention strategies can begin in the first 12–18 months of a project's implementation period, even when projects are being implemented for the first time. CFs can bring to the forefront the types of VAWG are facing in the community, and projects can devise effective strategies to address the realities on the ground. On a practical note, projects can critically examine their results frameworks and reflect on the extent of CF involvement in each of the listed activities, and the outputs and outcomes that flow from them. This will help project staff to decide on the extent to which they plan to co-create project actions together with CFs and project participants in the future.

**(3) Ensure a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches to mobilizing women as agents of change through the CF strategy**, with a pre-implementation strategy that considers a few key questions related to assessing capacity needs to inform skill development investments for CFs, compensation of participants, and strategies to mitigate risks related to low participation and harm (e.g. a lack of safety or retraumatization). Co-creation does not mean that CFs and project participants do not need mentoring and continuous support. Projects must carefully plan how they are going to allocate resources for mobilization so that women who are leading the change are adequately supported in their efforts while being protected from harm. Projects must prioritize advance planning around some key questions: (i) Is the expected workload of the CFs commensurate with their hours and pay? (ii) If CFs' time is not compensated monetarily, what are they getting in return? (iii) Are there plans in place to deal with burnout issues and vicarious trauma? (iv) What are the plans to help CFs to develop their skills over time? Projects must undergo this exercise every year, because, as they evolve, and with them potentially the work of the CFs, it is important to keep track of work expectations and strategies to mitigate harm.

**(4) Create safe spaces for women to meet and collectively organize**, paying close attention to safety in physical and online spaces and the language or

languages used in project activities, and considering networking strategies to ensure that “unsafe” spaces for the marginalized (e.g. courts or police stations) are made “safe”. It is critical for women to have accessible physical spaces where they feel welcome and secure, and can critically reflect, find others like themselves, create networks of mutual trust and support, find services and information, participate in project-related activities, and rest and relax. While physical safe spaces are essential for violence prevention, projects must consider other forms of safety. Many projects work in contexts where participants speak languages that are non-dominant, the communication materials are in languages that are not the native tongue of the participants or project staff cannot communicate in languages other than the dominant language. Language connotes power, and to make participants feel safe, every effort must be made to ensure that the participants' native languages are in the foreground in project activities. This could take the form of translating materials into native languages or ensuring that translators are built into programme activities and not an afterthought. If projects do not have the resources for physical safe spaces, they can consider setting up temporary safe spaces, for example by organizing workshops. Projects can also brainstorm with project participants to list all the spaces that are important to them and devise solutions on how to make them “safe”, for example by ensuring that there is a rotating roster of networked women who can accompany their peers to service providers such as courts, the police and health centres. Projects can also help women to create safe spaces in their own neighbourhoods. For example, women might come to a project's physical space from different neighbourhoods in a city or town. Projects can be intentional in their approach in creating hyperlocal networks among women, so that in times of crisis, such as during a pandemic, there are safe places for women who live close to each other to come together and support one another. Although such safe spaces in terms of language and networks may seem removed from the end goal of ending violence, they are in fact the key building blocks upon which increased agency rests and from where empowered actions can emerge to halt the cycle of violence.



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

**(5) Consider ways to make CFs and project participants more visible in places of authority**, including through intermediary organizations (e.g. the United Nations and NGOs) so that they become advocates for themselves, but with careful consideration of the institutional context, the readiness of participants to engage in such activities, and the ability of projects to support and mentor the women through the process. Once projects and CFs mature, and depending on the institutional context, projects can slowly aim to give CFs and project participants greater power to engage with ever-widening groups of people. If projects work with government stakeholders in the legal or health systems, who are the project spokespersons? Who attends meetings with stakeholders and offers insights? Who presents project achievements? Who receives awards? Who is the “face” of the project? Would project staff consider ceding space to CFs to take charge of such activities? Projects should consider the pros and cons of giving CFs ever-widening responsibilities.

This is important for violence prevention, because in many cases CFs are survivors themselves. If, and only if, women feel safe and shed feelings of shame, and if they feel ready, there is nothing more powerful to inspire change than their own narratives, expressed in their own voices and words.

**(6) Consider intervention strategies that take into account the continuum of violence that women experience across multiple settings.** Projects are confronted with women experiencing a continuum of violence – at home, in schools and in the workplace – which highlights the need to centre the project participant and address violence in whatever setting is creating the conditions for it, regardless of the first point of contact between the intervention and the project participants. If projects focus their attention only on the “primary” setting, the cycle of violence cannot be broken.

### 3.3. Recommendations for policymakers/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 preventing VAWG. Some UN Trust Fund projects are, as one project representative put it, a “trampoline” from which to embark on addressing VAWG issues in the community that they seek to work with. This means that the 2-year time frame is adequate to start building alliances with effective allies and create conditions in which marginalized populations feel safe to reveal their identities. For example, for a project to work with LBT women who suffer abuse in forced marriages with men, there is a considerable lead time to build trust, provide safe spaces and find effective allies. For such projects, 2 years of funding is not sufficient to plan activities that can end violence in LBT communities. Even if a project does not work with invisibilized populations, project efforts that involve social norm change, among other goals, will require a longer duration of support.

**(2) Allow CSOs to use funds in a flexible manner so that they can be more responsive to emerging issues.** CSOs cannot anticipate all the potential issues that may emerge during implementation. For example, a CSO may realize that it is worthwhile to rent space for project participants and CFs to gather and meet closer to the intervention site or sites rather than expecting participants to travel to project offices. However, if the funding is not flexible, it will not be possible for the CSO to adapt its strategies based on the reality on the ground.

**(3) Develop guidelines on paying an honorarium or stipend to CFs.** The pros and cons of paying CFs is beyond the scope of this review. However, projects have different views on this. Some pay salaries – for example, in one case the CFs’ salaries are commensurate with the salaries of teachers in the same local contexts, which makes it an attractive job – whereas others rely on CFs as volunteers. Policymakers and donors must debate and discuss the pros and cons of compensating CFs for their time and labour beyond meals and transport, to

devise meaningful guidelines for the projects that they fund and allocate resources accordingly.

**(4) Require projects to dedicate resources to self-care strategies.** It is not just women CFs who face issues of burnout and vicarious trauma while dealing with possible negative life events of their own; project staff in general have the same experiences. Therefore, policymakers must consider not only suggesting that projects dedicate resources to self-care strategies but requiring that they do so, in the same way that projects are required to dedicate a certain amount to end-of-project evaluations.

**(5) Consider developing guidelines, using examples, on “participatory” versus “non-participatory”.** The word “participatory” can mean different things to different people. It can range from information-sharing through consultation to co-creation. When can projects say that they are being participatory and when can they not? Unpacking the word and providing clarity to practitioners can go a long way in translating research on this subject into practice on the ground.

**(6) Support the participation of women agents of change in high-visibility events** organized at local, regional and global levels (online and in person) to increase agency and amplify the voices of women leaders in advocating for the role of women CFs in community mobilization efforts to end VAWG, and their participation in disseminating learning from these forums to other women agents of change on the ground, as part of knowledge transfer.

### 3.4. Recommendations for researchers in the field of ending VAWG

**(1) Consider conducting a process evaluation to understand how a programme outcome or output was achieved.** When measuring change in outcomes to end VAWG, evaluations must consider the time it takes to implement aspects that are hard to measure, for example building trust among marginalized and vulnerable groups of women. Evaluations must also include data collection methods that can capture the subtle but significant shifts in women’s agency in

relationship dynamics, which are difficult to capture quantitatively. Mixed methods research that includes ways of collecting data on processes would highlight the mechanisms at play as these shifts occur.

**(2) Allow some time to pass after the project has come to an end to assess the sustainability of results.**

In general, evaluation time frames are too short. Conducting evaluations after the implementation period is over will provide greater insight into what was sustained and whether or not there were unplanned consequences, either positive or negative.

**(3) Conduct more research on having a cadre of CFs as a mobilization strategy, which will help donors and practitioners to design sound, evidence-based**

**policies.** The jury is out on whether CFs should be paid or remain volunteers. Another question to be answered is whether or not there are different outcomes when projects recruit CFs who represent the full range of diversity among project participants and when projects do not pay attention to the degrees of differentiation among participants, thereby perpetuating existing hierarchies and power imbalances. Is there a dilution of impact as the project scales up its CF strategy? That is, do CFs sustain the same quality of support that was provided to them by the project staff? These are pressing issues because they impact the lives of project participants in a very direct manner and have implications for implementation strategies for practitioners and funding strategies for donors.



The Free Yezidi Foundation's women's centre in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Credit: Pari Ibrahim/Free Yezidi Foundation.

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220 East 42nd Street  
New York, New York 10017, USA

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