

ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR SURVIVORS: EVIDENCE FROM WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Highlights of the 2025 UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls report to the Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council

March 2026





Key Findings

JUSTICE UNDER STRAIN

Survivors and the organizations supporting them face persistent barriers to justice, intensified by civic space restrictions that amount to a rapidly evolving denial of justice.

CIVIL SOCIETY DELIVERS

Women's rights and civil society organizations play a critical role by putting the "access" in access to justice and redefining justice as relational, community-rooted and grounded in lived realities.

THREE PATHWAYS

UN Trust Fund grantee partners show how to operationalize justice through three pathways: anchoring justice in communities; building survivor-centred care and accountability; and shifting power through legal change from the ground up.

FUND AND PROTECT

The CSW70 report calls on Member States to recognize women's rights and civil society organizations as essential justice actors and ensure sustained, flexible, multi-year funding.

About this brief

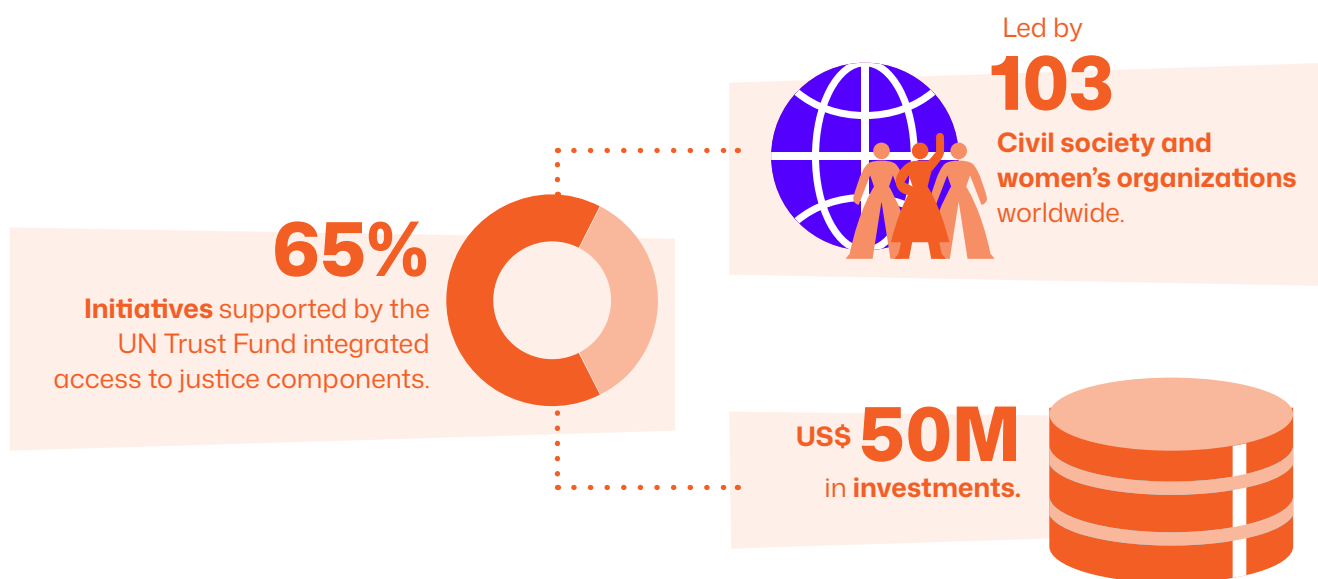
This brief distils key findings on access to justice from UN Women's 2025 [report](#) to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the Human Rights Council (HRC) on the activities of the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls (UN Trust Fund).¹

The UN Trust Fund is the only General Assembly mandated, UN system-wide, inter-agency, pooled financing and accountability mechanism dedicated exclusively to ending violence against women and girls. Since 1996, it has invested more than US\$250 million in over 725 initiatives across 140 countries and territories, providing quality

financing and comprehensive support to women's rights and civil society organizations across humanitarian, development and peace contexts.

In 2025, 65 per cent of supported initiatives integrated at least one access to justice strategy, representing nearly US\$50 million in multi-year investments across 103 grantee partners. UN Trust Fund partners' solutions and lived realities highlighted here are offered to support CSW70 and HRC62 deliberations and Member State efforts to advance SDG target 5.2 and ensure justice is reachable for all women and girls.

In 2025:



¹ Source: UN Women, Report to the Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council on the activities of the United Nations Trust Fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women (New York, 2026), [E/CN.6/2026/7](#).

A defining moment: Systemic denial of justice

With four years left to achieve the 2030 Agenda, accelerating progress on SDG target 5.2 – ending all forms of violence against women and girls – is essential to saving lives and advancing peace, equality and sustainable development. Yet violence against women and girls remains a global emergency: one in three women (736–852 million) have experienced violence in their lifetime, underreporting masks the true scale and rates have remained largely unchanged for a decade.²

Access to justice is an essential service for survivors, a minimum guarantee of rights, safety and well-being, and without it, violence flourishes with impunity. While States are ultimately accountable, civil society and women’s rights organizations often shoulder this mandate in practice, particularly for historically marginalized women and girls.

In 2025, UN Trust Fund grantee partners described unprecedented strain on this frontline work. **Rising**

authoritarianism, militarism, backlash and digital repression restricted civic space and intensified constraints on civil society organizations. Legal, bureaucratic and digital tools were used to delay approvals, freeze accounts and disrupt funding flows. Together, such mechanisms represent a new form of systemic denial of justice: silencing those who work to deliver it.

In this context, women’s rights organizations continue to keep justice pathways open for survivors and to drive the longer-term system changes that make justice possible in practice. Despite this, they remain critically underfunded and their contributions to access to justice remain under-documented. The report demonstrates how UN Trust Fund grantee partners (civil society and women’s rights organizations) are indispensable actors when it comes to access to justice.

The critical role of civil society and women’s organizations: Putting the “access” in access to justice

Access to justice is often understood as a matter of laws, courts and formal institutions. Evidence gathered through UN Trust Fund partner organizations shows that **for survivors, justice is not a single courtroom moment. It is a journey: one that begins with safety and trust, continues through accompaniment and care, and depends on institutions that are willing and able to act.**

Their evidence also explains why justice remains distant even where legal frameworks exist: fear and stigma, geographical isolation, language barriers, costs, low legal literacy, care burdens and weak enforcement mean that rights on paper do

not always translate into protection or redress in practice, especially for historically marginalized women and girls.

In contexts marked by austerity, conflict, displacement and backlash, these organizations fill critical gaps in protection, prevention and accountability. They deliver essential services, document violations, strengthen multisectoral responses, and drive legal and policy reform. Crucially, they are not only extending the reach of justice systems: they are redefining their purpose and meaning for survivors as relational, community-rooted, intersectional and grounded in lived realities, putting the “access” in access to justice.

2 World Health Organization (WHO), Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-Partner Sexual Violence against Women. Executive summary (Geneva, 2021).

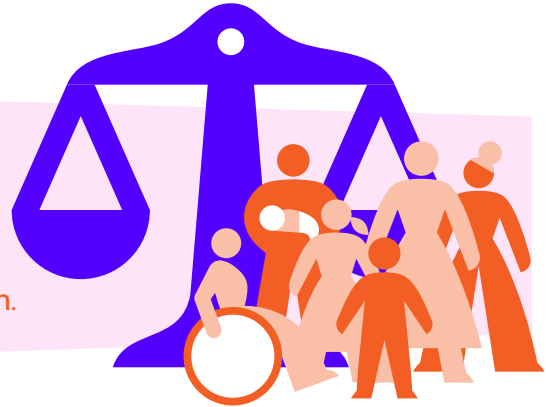
Three pathways to justice

This shift in how access to justice is understood and delivered is evidenced in the approaches used by UN Trust Fund grantee partners across humanitarian, development and crisis-affected contexts. Their evidence points to three interconnected ways of operationalizing justice: anchoring justice in communities, building survivor-centred care and accountability, and shifting power through legal change from the ground up.

1

Anchoring justice in communities

Civil society organizations map and strengthen entry points to justice in informal spaces, where survivors first seek safety, support and information.



Building survivor-centred institutions of accountability

Women's organizations connect legal accountability with safety, trust and multisectoral care, ensuring justice works for survivors in real life.

2

3

Shifting power through legal change

Women's rights organizations drive lasting legal and policy reform, embedding equality and survivor-centred approaches into laws, institutions and norms.



1 Anchoring justice in communities

Evidence shows that justice becomes reachable when it is anchored in communities. For many survivors, justice begins in homes, shelters, health centres, refugee camps and informal spaces where women first seek help, turning these everyday settings into a key to protection and redress.

Across regions, organizations create community entry points and pathways to justice by combining legal literacy, accompaniment and trust-building with culturally and linguistically appropriate approaches. In contexts where systems are inaccessible or unresponsive, these community-anchored strategies ensure that survivors are not excluded from justice altogether.

In **Kenya**, UN Trust Fund partner **Physicians for Human Rights** has linked health services – often the first point of contact for survivors – with justice systems through digital documentation tools, strengthening forensic evidence and improving

reporting and accountability. In **Bolivia**, community-based research by **Centro Yanapasiani Bolivia para el Desarrollo de la Mujer y la Familia** revealed levels of sexual violence that were absent from official statistics, underscoring both the scale of underreporting and the importance of localized, survivor-centred data collection. In **Serbia**, **Labris** has created safe spaces, emergency hotlines and institutional training to address same-sex partner violence in a context of persistent stigma and limited institutional response.

These initiatives show that justice must be socially, culturally and geographically accessible, not only legally available. By anchoring justice in communities, civil society and women’s rights organizations keep pathways to protection open, including in contexts of backlash, displacement or fragile governance.

2 Building survivor-centered institutions of care and accountability

Access to justice requires survivor-centred institutions of care and accountability, not legal remedies alone. Civil society and women’s rights organizations are building ecosystems of care that prioritize safety, trust and accountability, and create entry points to justice across homes, shelters, health centres, refugee camps and other informal spaces, linking survivors to coordinated, multisectoral support.

Across the UN Trust Fund portfolio, organizations are strengthening multisectoral models that support survivors throughout the justice process. In **India**, the **Migration and Asylum Project** supported refugee women from Myanmar who face acute vulnerabilities, including heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence by establishing an inclusive legal framework that protects refugees and addresses their long-term needs. In **Ukraine**, the organization **Insight** supported internally displaced women, women with disabilities and women of diverse sexual and gender identities through trauma-informed legal and mental health services amid armed conflict and heightened risk of violence.

In **Ecuador**, where rising levels of insecurity and femicide create significant barriers for survivors, **Centro de Planificación y Estudios Sociales** and partners are advancing litigation, observatory operations and national advocacy, demonstrating effective adaptation to political risks and repression. In **Cameroon**, community-embedded paralegals supported by the **Libra Association for Widows** enabled survivors to access legal aid and pursue cases despite insecurity and displacement.

These experiences show that survivor-centred justice is built through practice, coupling care with accountability even in fragile or repressive contexts.

Entry points for justice

- ✓ homes
- ✓ health centers
- ✓ shelters
- ✓ courts
- ✓ community centers



3 Shifting power through legal change from the ground up

Durable justice requires shifting power through legal and structural change from the ground up. Civil society and women's rights organizations embed equality within constitutions, courts and community norms by monitoring implementation, documenting gaps and holding authorities accountable so justice frameworks respond to survivors' realities and work in practice, not only on paper.

In **Armenia**, the **Coalition to Stop Violence against Women** contributed to sustained advocacy that led to amendments to the Criminal Code and domestic violence legislation, including clearer provisions, removal of reconciliation procedures, criminalization of stalking and expanded protections for survivors. In **Lebanon**, **Justice without Frontiers** is using a multilevel strategy of raising community awareness,

training police and ministries and drafting reforms to harmonize personal status laws, which currently vary across 19 sects, to counteract a fragmented legal system that exacerbates inequalities in access to justice in a context where many women are in survival mode. In **Liberia**, the **Women NGOs Secretariat** organized coalitions to advocate the Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Bill, positioning survivors and practitioners as central actors in the national reform movement.

Together, these examples illustrate how long-term civil society engagement transforms justice systems by combining survivor support with advocacy, research and coalition-building, helping commitments translate into meaningful implementation.

When civil society is sustained, justice becomes durable

Over three decades since Beijing, the UN Trust Fund has supported frontline civil society and women's rights organizations with multi-year grants in 140 countries and territories. Across this footprint, partners have helped expand legal recognition and institutional entry points to ending violence against women, strengthen survivor-centred procedures, improve evidence and documentation, and expand legal aid and accompaniment for women and girls most at risk. Over a ten-year period alone, UN Trust Fund-supported initiatives reached more than 91 million women and girls worldwide, advancing access to essential services, prevention and justice.

These gains are not automatic, or not guaranteed, nor are they built through short-term projects or isolated reforms. The UN Trust Fund's 30-year

experience points to what helps justice endure: long-term, flexible support, combined with institutional legitimacy in high-risk contexts, sustained accompaniment that strengthens movements over time, and the elevation of partners' evidence, including the demand signal from its open Call for Proposals, into CSW and HRC as accountability spaces for Member State action.

In today's context of shrinking civic space and disrupted funding flows, justice is being rolled back by constraining the very organizations that deliver services, document violations and hold systems accountable. Sustaining comprehensive support is essential. Defunding civil society is not neutral; it is a direct withdrawal of justice from women and girls.

30 years of milestones that shifted systems

Legal recognition and entry points: Early UN Trust Fund partners helped put domestic violence on the legal agenda, contributing to some of the first national protection frameworks and criminalization efforts (e.g., **Venezuela/Ecuador**, late 1990s; **Mongolia**, 2000). This created the legal "entry points" survivors rely on today.

Making laws work in practice: In **Bhutan**, national consultations helped shape gender-responsive judicial procedures and police training (2006). This is what turns laws into real-world response: safer reporting, better handling of cases, and clearer pathways for survivors.

Accountability through evidence: In **Mexico**, feminist organizations helped advance femicide investigation protocols adopted in 11 states. This strengthens documentation and investigations, a prerequisite for prosecutions and for ending impunity.

The moment is now: a call to action

CSW70 is a moment of responsibility and choice for Member States. The evidence is clear: access to justice advances when women’s rights and civil society organizations can operate, organize and lead, and it erodes when those actors are constrained, defunded or silenced. In the final stretch to 2030, advancing access to justice and ending violence against women and girls requires protecting civic space and resourcing the organizations closest to survivors’ realities.

These lessons are not historical; they are a blueprint for the next three decades of collective action. They point to the following **five priorities for the international community to ensure access to justice for all women and girls:**

1. **Act on commitments.** Deliver on the promises made at CSW69 to end all forms of violence against women and girls, ensuring that no context or community is left behind;
2. **Recognize and strengthen civil society’s role in justice.** Support survivor-centred justice systems and provide legal aid, accompaniment, documentation and accountability for violence, which States cannot ensure alone;
3. **Fund civil society and women’s rights organizations on the frontlines.** Provide sustained, flexible and long-term funding to enable delivery, especially in contexts of conflict, crisis and backlash, including through the UN Trust Fund;

4. **Protect civic space and those who lead within it.** Safeguard the ability to organize, advocate and implement freely and safely without fear or restriction;
5. **Sustain global solidarity and shared accountability.** Uphold normative frameworks as foundations for systemic reform and to translate global commitments into coordinated, well-resourced and evidence-based action.

A world free from violence against women and girls starts with justice that survivors can reach – and that is how lasting progress becomes possible.

Read the full report here:

