



SYNTHESIS REVIEW SERIES: PAPER #7

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE: RESISTANCE AND BACKLASH TO PREVENTING 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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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 were 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 organizations. In 2020 it commissioned a synthesis of this knowledge emerging from 89 UN Trust Fund civil society organization 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 synthesis review is threefold: (i) practitioners, (ii) donors and grant makers and (iii) researchers, all working in the area of VAWG prevention. The “learning from practice” series is intended to highlight practice-based insights from CSOs as highly valuable and important to planning, designing and funding interventions and research in VAWG prevention. Each longer synthesis review will be accompanied by a shorter summary, 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-centred, multisectoral response
10. Working together for law and policy implementation and reform

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Engaging with men and boys on Alternative Masculinity. Credit: Wesal Abdullah/Arab Women Organization of Jordan (AWO)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organizations working on the prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG) face numerous contextual challenges and forms of resistance¹ in the course of their work. In the prevention space, resistance to work that seeks to end VAWG is quite common: the forms that it takes include institutional inertia, pushback on what are considered progressive feminist agendas, attacks on civil spaces, the re-emergence of resistance because of shifting political agendas or a change in the civil society discourse, and even delegitimization of prevention programming due to cultural backlash. Resistance is often political, and civil society organizations (CSOs) may also have to manage geopolitics and ideologies (even donor/funder ideologies). Scholars and practitioners point out that manifestations of resistance need not signal an end to VAWG prevention work, because feminist work is disruptive and backlash to a certain manifesto, project or activity can be taken as a sign of progress. The question, therefore, is **how do CSOs, especially women’s rights organizations, in this space steer through it?**

This synthesis review explores the complex pathways that organizations working on prevention projects took to mitigate, respond to and manage resistance, and is based on practice-based knowledge from nine projects funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. Projects from Armenia, Jordan, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Serbia and Turkey are included in this synthesis review. These projects have been selected to give an understanding of resistance across a range of interventions, sociocultural contexts and CSOs using different approaches with a variety of outcomes.

Resistance can be understood as a form of pushback against change – that is, resistance to something. It involves inherent opposition or presenting a challenge to something. Most definitions of resistance and backlash in the context of gender equality refer to the preservation of the status quo. A framework used in this review adapts a framework on resistance against gender equality to

violence against women (VAW), mapping the different types of resistance across a spectrum that ranges from passive denial to aggressive action to preserve the status quo: it includes omission (absence of VAW in laws and policies); denial of the issue; disavowal of responsibility for taking action; inaction; appeasement; appropriation and co-option of feminist goals, gender-based movements and gender-sensitive language; political backlash and backsliding on gender commitments; and repression and violence.

Key themes emerging from practice

The most common forms of resistance in the interventions in this review were at the passive end of the spectrum. Nearly all the projects faced some form of passive resistance, such as denial that there was a problem, reactions that deflected the issue away from violence prevention, inertia in taking action, and expressions of prejudice and discrimination. More active forms of resistance emerged in instances where stakeholders recognized VAW as an issue but covertly attempted to disrupt the process of change and limit its impact. Even more aggressive opposition to prevention work was common, and was found to occur when, for example, community leaders or elected representatives or officials who were associated with political and social ideologies took public positions on VAW, or when debates on gender and violence were triggered in societies and communities. More hostile forms of pushback can occur when certain groups attempt to subvert a process of change, or when vulnerable groups face discrimination and violence from those in power. There were examples of appeasement, co-option and appropriation, repression and backlash across the experiences of the grantee organizations.

¹ This paper discusses “negative” resistance against women’s organizations and the fight for women’s rights and ending VAWG, rather than the more positive forms, such as feminist resistance that is seen in progressive social movements.

Organizations use several strategies to mitigate resistance, including:

- advocating publicly to secure the support of the public in advancing specific approaches, and advocating for laws and policies and to limit resistance from within institutions;
- adopting feminist approaches that mobilize and empower women to challenge power and inequality;
- mobilizing communities to unpack and dismantle resistance within communities;
- using framing strategies – that is, shaping narratives in ways that make them contextually relevant and **persuasive** and allow them to make connections with stakeholders;
- designing programmes to be adaptable and responsive, to ensure that they can hold inert institutions, services and individuals accountable and support survivors of violence;
- assessing the visibility of their agenda and their activities to mitigate repressive resistance and pushback, and constantly evaluating their positions and framing and reframing their claims and responses vis-à-vis institutions and other stakeholders to continuously anticipate and respond to opposing stakeholders;
- conducting risk mitigation exercises and having strong risk mitigation strategies to protect the intervention, their staff and their organization when there is a risk of backlash;
- building grass-roots and civil society partnerships to make their interventions resilient to backlash and sudden sociopolitical shifts.

Conclusions and recommendations

CSOs face a range of forms of resistance in working with communities to end VAW. Many of these are deeply embedded in social norms and are starting points for the interventions themselves. These are expressions of resistance to broader feminist or gender equality values and represent a fundamental opposition to forms of social change that the organizations stood for. Instances of resistance can also emerge in the course of a project’s roll-out and hinder its activities, yet resistance is not something that is written about in much detail in programmatic documentation unless it is very violent or aggressive and it has a significant tangible impact on the intervention. In most cases, where resistance simmers under the surface, it is hard to detect and can be dismissed as a “contextual challenge” (often seen as a given, or an established reality)

and may go unreported. Moreover, reflecting on the nature of resistance is not something that can be easily achieved within a short time frame. Power is central to resistance and it is beneficial to include an analysis of power dynamics when designing interventions.

Recommendations for practitioners. Recognize and identify potential forms of resistance that can occur during an intervention and see them **as** resistance and not just “challenges”; integrate power analyses into project conceptualization and design, as well as risk mitigation covering resistance in particular; build partnerships where possible with other CSOs or community members to better leverage each other’s complementary skills, capacities and approaches, and to build a more resilient civil society; and, finally, creating spaces for dialogue and sharing with other CSOs – that is, adopting inclusive and intersectional approaches rather than defensive positions when presented with opposition or questions on the prevention work – is a pathway to reaching agreement on an ultimate goal (e.g. ending VAWG).

Recommendations for donors. Adopt flexible funding and encourage more flexible implementation so that grantees are better able to respond to the evolving circumstances of their work; create more spaces for open reflection on power dynamics and resistance; help organizations find solidarity and communities of practice and consider more debate and discussion across networks on the question/risk of visibility of feminist work, as this is not necessarily an area on which it is easy for CSOs to reflect.

Recommendations for researchers. Conduct more research on resistance to prevention work. While there is literature and research on resistance to gender equality and feminist approaches, resistance to prevention work is a niche space that requires its own body of work. This is a space where practice-based knowledge can contribute significantly. Researchers should also study the visibility of feminist work and the risks involved in managing these narratives. What are the trade-offs? Do these approaches pose further risks to women’s rights in the future? Research could explore resistance to prevention work in different geographical and sociocultural contexts, as the nature of resistance varies from context to context, and documenting the cultural specificity of resistance is very important.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AÇEV	Mother Child Education Foundation
AMA	Aye Myanmar Association
APNSW	Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers
ARNB	Association of Roma Novi Bečej
AWO	Arab Women Organization
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	civil society organization
FSP	Father Support Program
GBV	gender-based violence
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
NGO	non-governmental organization
PBK	practice-based knowledge
SG	Shirkat Gah
SWV	Society Without Violence
TSK	The Story Kitchen
UN Trust Fund	United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women
VAW	violence against women
VAWG	violence against women and girls
WRO	women's rights organization

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations working on the prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG) face numerous contextual challenges and resistance in the course of their work at multiple levels. Resistance to VAWG prevention work is quite common, and, when asked, most practitioners will be able to identify some form of resistance in their day-to-day experience of working in this space, such as institutional inertia, pushback on what are considered progressive feminist agendas, attacks on civil spaces and the re-emergence of resistance because of shifting political agendas. Resistance could be the result of a broader environment of political and social conservatism when projects fight against dominant social norms, questioning gender inequality, and bringing violence against women (VAW) into focus.² The work of organizations working on gender or women’s rights or human rights issues is also sensitive to the booms and busts of economic cycles, given that they are often milestones for political shifts (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). In the recent past, instances of resistance to gender equality have been documented in many countries; for example, in Armenia, with the rise of anti-democratic feeling and societal traditionalism, there has been an “anti-gender” movement (United Nations, 2019; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). Even in environments where governments recognize the need to work on women’s rights, there may still be resistance to working on VAWG prevention, as it may be considered a private matter outside the scope of the state’s intervention.

Resistance at the interpersonal level is quite common, but it can occur at the institutional level as well. For instance, resistance to prevention projects could result in a rollback of state commitments, withdrawal of funds or patronage/support, backtracking on laws and legal agendas, or open opposition of development work (Carothers, 2016), including in the prevention space. In some cases, state institutions drive the resistance, whereas in others, partnering with institutional stakeholders can help organizations navigate resistance, and bolster their

mandate and work. At the community or societal level, resistance could be expressed as a change in the civil society discourse (e.g. attempts to render progressive language socially unacceptable), delegitimization of the prevention programming, cultural backlash against certain prevention work, withdrawal of engagement by certain community groups and their leaders, and active and open violence against physical spaces dedicated to women survivors, etc.

Scholars and practitioners point out that manifestations of resistance need not signal a finality to VAWG prevention work, because it is also acknowledged that resistance and backlash are inevitable in progressive feminist work (Flood et al., 2020). Feminist work is disruptive and backlash to a certain manifesto, project, or activity can be taken as a sign of progress. The question, therefore, is **how do civil society organizations (CSOs), especially women’s rights organizations (WROs), in this space steer through it?**

Despite the rise in “shrinking spaces” for gender and prevention work across the field, CSOs/WROs working in the sector find ways to navigate these challenges and continue working towards achieving their agendas. Although there is a body of literature on feminist resistance and backlash to gender work, **there is a lot of knowledge, evidence and experience that daily praxis can contribute to existing knowledge on this topic.** This synthesis review therefore asks: what can prevention-practitioners tell us about managing resistance? How do CSOs design their projects to mitigate resistance or prepare for potential resistance? What can we learn from the daily grind of grappling with resistance? **This synthesis review explores the complex pathways that organizations working on prevention projects take to mitigate, respond to and manage resistance,** and is based on practice-based knowledge (PBK) from current and past projects funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) between 2010 and 2020 that have been identified to contain significant knowledge on this subject.

² This synthesis review discusses “negative” resistance against women’s organizations and the fight for women’s rights and ending VAW, rather than the more “positive” forms of resistance, for example feminist resistance that is seen in progressive social movements.

2. METHODOLOGY

This synthesis review was based on analysis of routine project monitoring and reporting of organizations that received grants from the UN Trust Fund. These documents consisted of annual project reports and final external evaluations conducted at the end of each project. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative data software (Dedoose) and Excel. The primary objective was to extract PBK. This was complemented by a round of focus group discussions with the grantees, one-on-one interviews³ and written comments. The review was then reviewed internally and externally. The process was participatory, with the grantees, reviewers and UN Trust Fund offering support, comments, and input into the recommendations. More details on the methodology are in annex A.

Using a socioecological model (Heise, 1998) as an overarching model within which to understand resistance, this synthesis review will focus on resistance that manifests itself at the community and societal levels but will exclude forms of resistance that are exhibited at the individual or interpersonal level. The decision to focus on resistance at a broader, more institutional scale has been taken, as the PBK has the potential to fill important knowledge gaps in this area. At the community level, this synthesis review examines resistance that occurs through interactions with community groups and in community settings where social interactions take place. Within this, distinctions are made between community resistance and resistance perpetrated by the state and state actors (this includes law enforcement, the justice system and public social welfare institutions). At the societal level, this synthesis review addresses resistance that manifests itself when societal conditions support violence or resist gender equality and violence prevention.

Projects focusing specifically on men and boys or masculinity have also been identified as beyond the purview of this synthesis review. There are two reasons for excluding projects with a central focus on men and boys from this synthesis review on resistance. First, there is a

significant body of existing literature on resistance from men and boys; and second, a separate review on this theme was being carried out by UN Women at the time of this study, which included evidence from UN Trust Fund projects. There is one exception to this: two projects implemented by Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) in Turkey that focused on fathers have been included because it experienced significant political backlash that forced it to alter and adapt its programming.

2.1. Definition of resistance and backlash

Resistance can manifest itself as both positive resistance and negative resistance. Positive resistance is expressed by those in solidarity with progressive gender policies against incumbent powers. Women's rights movements for gender justice often resist oppression and suppression and challenge unequal systems and structures. **Negative resistance can be understood as a form of pushback against change – that is, resistance to something. It involves inherent opposition or presenting a challenge to something.** Tackling positive resistance is beyond the scope of this synthesis review; it did not come up in the PBK as such. Therefore, this paper speaks mostly to manifestations of negative resistance to prevention.

Most definitions of negative resistance and backlash in the context of gender equality refer to the preservation of a status quo. When examining manifestations of resistance, it is also important to recognize the inherent power structures at play (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008); that resistance is culturally dependent and manifests itself differently based on the specificity of the context; and that therefore experiences of resistance can be very diverse and manifold.

³ Resistance is a challenging topic to discuss in a group setting (more so when discussions are conducted virtually). One-on-one interviews allowed grantees more time and space to reflect and speak about resistance.

Hence, resistance could be to an ideology, a programme, a project or even an activity.

From its early use as a conservative reaction to feminist progressive change (Faludi, 1991), the term “backlash” has been used interchangeably and colloquially with “resistance” but has also been seen as a form of resistance. Backlash has also been defined as a reaction to social change and attempts to limit it (Flood et al., 2020), and as a reaction to feminist social movements (see, for example, Dragiewicz, 2008; Faludi, 1991), masculine backlash to feminism (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012) or the protection of incumbent power structures (Lipset and Raab, 1973).

Other interpretations of backlash focus on it being a form of resistance to preserve the status quo that involves power (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). Backlash has also been identified as a series of connected hostile

events that mark increased violence to erode or deny feminist progress (however, clearly identifying these units that form backlash is challenging and is sometimes easier to do in hindsight). From a normative perspective, backlash can be “something to be avoided ... excessive in zeal and reactionary in aim” (Cudd, 2002, p. 5). (This review presents one instance of what could be construed as backlash: political backsliding by the state on its commitments and positions on gender.) These are just a few examples that highlight two important characteristics of resistance: that it can manifest itself in many ways and can be triggered by a spectrum of factors.

A useful framework maps the different types of resistance to gender equality across a spectrum that ranges from passive denial to aggressive action to preserve the status quo.⁴

A useful framework maps the different types of resistance to gender equality across a spectrum that ranges from passive denial to aggressive action to preserve the status quo .

Types of resistance to gender equality, adapted from Flood et al. (2020).

Omission. The exclusion of VAWG and the experiences of women and girls, for example from laws and policies.

Denial. Denying that VAWG is an issue.

Disavowal. Abdicating responsibility for taking action around VAWG.

Inaction. Lack of action against VAWG.

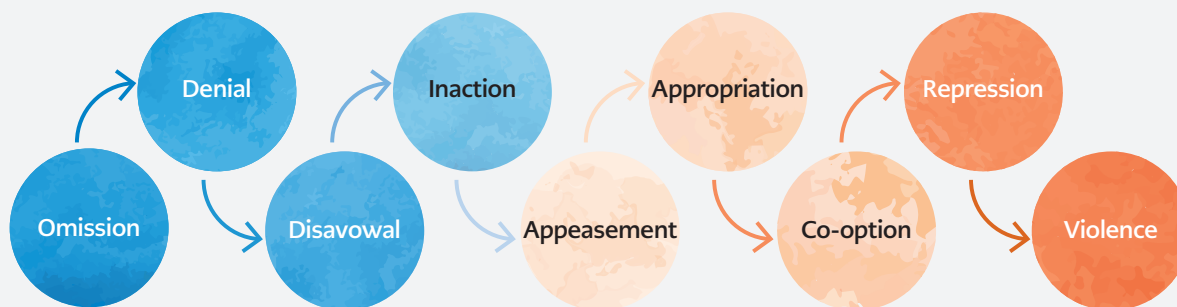
Appeasement. Appeasing those working to dismantle gender-based violence (GBV) or VAWG in order to limit their impact.

Appropriation. Overtly advocating against VAWG but covertly attempting to undermine it.

Co-option. Using progressive feminist language to preserve the status quo.

Repression. Suppressing change initiatives to dismantle them.

Violence. Using violence to harass and subjugate groups at risk of VAWG or working to end VAWG.



4 Flood et al. (2020) identify eight forms of backlash: denial, disavowal, inaction, appeasement, appropriation, co-option, repression and violence. A ninth form – “omission” – has been included at the passive end of the spectrum, as it emerged as a form of resistance in some of the interventions included in this review. Omission refers to resistance that arises from the exclusion of the experiences of women and girls in certain contexts.

This synthesis review uses this framework to understand the different types of resistance that grantee organizations experienced during the implementation of their projects. Although this continuum is derived from gender equality literature more broadly, it can be quite useful to apply it to resistance in the context of VAWG prevention work more specifically.⁵ In this framework, the spectrum of resistance captures the range of reactions that can emerge from resistance, from denying that there is an issue or fundamentally contesting it, or refusing to recognize one's role in the problem, through inertia and non-participation, and actions to undermine efforts for change by appropriating language, to the use of covert and overt tactics, and more assertive forms of resistance that can be quite debilitating, such as repression and violence (Agocs, 1997; Adelabu, 2014; Flood et al., 2020; Godenzi, 1999; Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013; Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014; VicHealth, 2018).

Another possible definition is that resistance is what emerges from the process of change, for example resistance that emerges in organizations where gender mainstreaming is under way (Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013; Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014). Similar parallels can be drawn in the prevention space – how does resistance to prevention interventions manifest itself inside institutions

that offer services for women and girls (e.g. shelters, community centres and health centres for women)? Are these instances of resistance systematic and repeated over time, or are they expressed by certain individuals in these institutions? Are they intentional or unintentional? These are important questions because institutions are essentially made up of groups of people whose beliefs are determined by a combination of norms, values, practices and cultures, etc., and more patriarchal sociocultural norms can go against the organization's principles (Longwe, 1997).

In many of the cases presented in this synthesis review, resistance points to the actions (or inactions) of individuals in institutions that were central to VAWG prevention interventions and the principles they are expected to uphold. Analysing why this resistance occurs from within institutions can offer insights on how resistance manifests itself and shed light on inconsistencies in institutions that need to be addressed, and finally explain to some extent why the implementation of laws and policies can fail or be ineffective. For example, is the resistance the result of poor awareness among individuals working in institutions that are meant to support women? Is it a result of limited capacity-building or training? Could there be a financial issue such as underbudgeting (or budgeting that is not gender-responsive) that creates resistance?



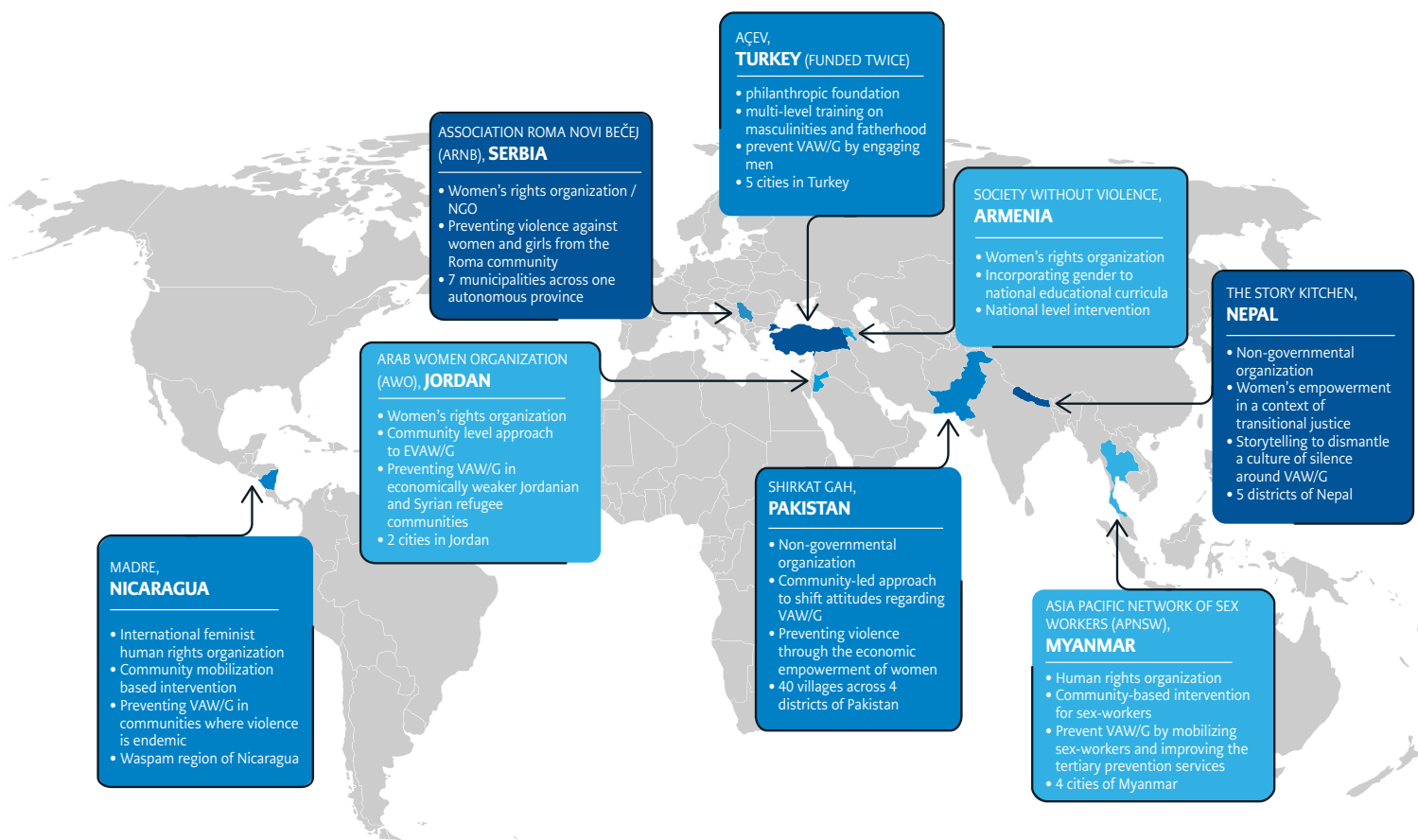
⁵ Although there is a significant body of work from the literature and applied research on resistance to gender-mainstreaming, there is much less work on resistance in the prevention space. The latter is fairly new and an emerging space. Prevention of violence also falls under the broader umbrella of gender equality, and this review attempts to situate resistance to VAWG prevention work in the larger gender/violence literature.

2.2. Case study rationale

This synthesis review is based on PBK from a set of projects working to end VAWG that have been supported by the UN Trust Fund. Working from a larger set of UN Trust Fund projects that formed the core documentation for the first phase of this exercise, a first set of projects containing PBK on resistance were identified (Le Roux and Palm, 2020). Further deliberation with the UN Trust Fund was conducted to finalize the projects for this review. Although it is impossible to achieve a representation of all criteria, care was taken during the selection process

to make the final set as representative as possible of the extensive portfolio of the UN Trust Fund. The final set included smaller and larger (in grant size) projects, as well as projects of shorter and longer durations. All the projects were funded by the UN Trust Fund for at least one cycle (a single cycle being two or three years in duration). One grantee organization from Turkey was funded twice (for two cycles). Care has also been taken to the extent possible to ensure global representation. Projects from Armenia, Jordan, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Serbia and Turkey are included in the review.

FIGURE 2:
The eight UN Trust Fund projects included in this synthesis review



In identifying these projects, several factors were taken into consideration to ensure that the set was as diverse and as much of a reflection as possible of the range of prevention-focused⁶ projects funded by the UN Trust Fund. First, the selection reflects the diversity of the primary stakeholders they worked with: cadres of indigenous women (MADRE in Nicaragua), refugees and host communities (Arab Women Organization (AWO) in Jordan), fathers (AÇEV in Turkey), women survivors of conflict (The Story Kitchen (TSK) in Nepal), marginalized women and girls in rural communities (Shirkat Gah (SG) in Pakistan), women and transgender sex workers (Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) in Myanmar), vulnerable women and girls from Roma communities (Association of Roma Novi Bečej (ARNB) in Serbia) and girl pupils in schools (Society Without Violence (SWV) in Armenia). Each organization had its own approach. This was an intentional choice, to understand how resistance against organizations with

diverse mandates – from grass-roots WROs and women’s empowerment non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Aye Myanmar Association (AMA), SG, ARNB, AWO, TSK and SWV) to development NGOs (AÇEV) and international NGOs (MADRE and APNSW) – manifests itself. Some NGOs are long established, such as AWO, which was founded over 50 years ago, and some are newer organizations, such as TSK (founded in 2015).

2.3. Overview of resistance in the selected interventions

The resistance documented in each of these interventions varied from resistance to project activities within the scope of the project interventions, to resistance to the larger mandate or mission of the organizations themselves.

TABLE 1
Overview of types of resistance identified in the interventions

Organization and country	Level	Type of resistance: omission, denial, disavowal, inaction	Appeasement, appropriation, co-option	Repression and violence/backlash
ARNB, Serbia	State	Omission of the experiences of Roma girls in definitions of GBV in laws and programmes Inaction and inertia by tertiary prevention services in responding to Roma girl survivors		Discrimination and racism faced by survivors
	Community	Denial and disavowal that early and forced marriages are an issue Ill-informed about the legality of child marriage Inaction by families and community elders, difficulty in accessing young Roma girls	Appeasement by Roma leaders when it comes to championing an end to early and forced marriages Claims around protecting Roma culture	

6 One methodological challenge that came up during project selection was whether or not certain interventions were prevention-focused. When the question “How is your intervention focused?” was posed to one of the organizations that had a strong response focus, it stated that prevention was its overarching goal irrespective of its strategies. This is perhaps reflective of the nature of practice, which is inherently intersectional, and the fact that often the practice does not or cannot necessarily separate or silo different elements of the issue. This may also be why interventions with strong response elements may contain strong prevention PBK.

Organization and country	Level	Type of resistance: omission, denial, disavowal, inaction	Appeasement, appropriation, co-option	Repression and violence/ backlash
MADRE, Nicaragua	State	Inaction by law enforcement and the judiciary on VAW resulting in delays, etc.		
	Community	Initial disavowal by customary judges		
TSK, Nepal	State	Omission of violence towards women conflict survivors in the transitional justice system		
	Community	Limited understanding of CSOs on what justice could mean to women in the transitional justice system		
SG, Pakistan	State/society	Extremely orthodox and patriarchal context that resists women's empowerment		Heavy state surveillance of CSOs
	Community	Denial/disavowal of VAW as an issue from communities	Appeasement/co-option of project objectives by religious leaders	
AÇEV, Turkey	State/society	Traditional values that uphold gender inequality		Reversal of or backsliding ^a on gender commitments Shrinking space for CSOs/NGOs
	Community	Denial of gender inequality or VAW from community members and trainers		
APNSW, Myanmar	State			Repression and violence against sex workers by law enforcement
	Community			The sex worker community is stigmatized and discriminated against, making it hard to operate or offer services to sex workers
AWO, Jordan	Community	Justification of gender inequality and VAW by women and by men or the community Resistance to "gender" work		
SWV, Armenia	State/society		Co-option of the gender discourse and language by the state to delegitimize it	Pushback against a gender discourse
	Community	Denial by interest groups of gender inequality	Co-option of the gender discourse by traditionalists and the far right	

Here, “backsliding” is defined as “states going back on previous commitments to gender equality norms as defined by their respective political contexts” (as defined by and in Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020).

For example, MADRE, an international women’s NGO provided strategic support to Wangki Tangni, a community development organization for indigenous people along Nicaragua’s north Atlantic coast (the Waspam region), for a project mobilizing a cadre of women in indigenous Nicaraguan communities to work on VAW. The project faced pushback from the local communities as well as state law enforcement and the justice system in the enforcement of new laws against VAW. AWO in Jordan is a women’s rights organization that implemented a project for Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities in two sites with significant refugee communities (Mafraq and Irbid) in Jordan. In the implementation of its programmes, AWO faced a lot of resistance from local conservative communities, as they perceived its activities as culturally inappropriate. In Serbia, the ARNB is a women’s NGO that works with women and girls from the Roma community. The Roma community is culturally orthodox and marginalized in Serbia, and as a result, young Roma girls are among the most vulnerable community in the country. As a champion for women’s and girls’ rights in Serbia, ARNB faced much resistance with the state and the various institutions that it engages with.

In Pakistan, SG is a feminist women’s rights organization that works with women at the grass-roots level. SG’s work faced a lot of institutional and community-driven scrutiny, and it had to find novel ways of engaging with existing power structures in the region. TSK in Nepal is perhaps the newest of all the organizations represented here. Established in 2015, it is a women’s organization empowering women survivors of the Nepalese civil war. It faced resistance to its approach, which centred on the empowerment of women for justice. In Myanmar, the APNSW and its local partner AMA empowered women and transgender sex workers. Sex work in Myanmar is socially discriminated against, and sex workers face a lot of pushback from state institutions, especially law enforcement. In Turkey, AÇEV works with families to promote gender equality in families, progressive masculinity among men and the prevention of VAW. AÇEV has successfully run the Father Support Program (FSP) for many years, but in recent times, as the state has become more conservative, AÇEV has faced significant challenges in the roll-out of its programmes. Finally, a ninth project from Armenia sought to integrate education on GBV into the national school curriculum. This project was anchored by SWV, an established women’s rights organization in Armenia. SWV is one of the oldest and most visible faces of women’s rights in Armenia and faced a tremendous backlash from a strong “anti-gender” campaign and the “gender hysteria”⁷ that prevailed at the time.

7 SWV implemented its intervention in a context in which gender was being publicly debated and disputed (with the term “gender” used to refer to anything not conforming to strict gender norms) and there was a messy, violent “anti-gender” campaign taking place. Many reports, including SWV’s, refer to this period as one of “gender hysteria” in the country.

3. KEY FINDINGS

The following sections examine the findings and knowledge from the projects on their experiences with resistance that arose inductively during the study across two broad categories: passive forms of resistance – omission, denial, disavowal and inaction – and more active forms of resistance – appeasement, appropriation and co-option, political backlash and backsliding, and repression. There is also a section on the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and its interaction with resistance. All the projects included in this review experienced to some degree resistance to their work – resistance at the inception of the project or resistance during the project’s implementation – and this played out at various levels: structural resistance that created obstacles for women and organizations working to end VAW (e.g. lacunae in law or poor implementation of the law), resistance from within institutions (e.g. from law enforcement or inertia and apathy on the part of social workers) and resistance from communities (e.g. gatekeeping by religious and village leaders). In discussions with the grantee organizations, it was also important to understand how they devised methods to navigate through resistance by learning from their lived experience. Therefore, response strategies are also presented. These strategies included using engagement strategies to work with other stakeholder institutions where engagement and dialogue was possible; adapting the intervention or reframing narratives where required; and building internal capacities for resilience.

3.1. Passive resistance: omission, denial, disavowal and inaction

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea that VAW is a violation of women’s human rights took prominence around the activism and the work of feminist movements in the 1980s and 1990s, and followed decades of feminist work in this area. Historically, VAW has not been considered as structural and political, and the debate around the public and private space has disadvantaged women (Bunch, 1990). Research has shown that for laws to be effective, they need to be embedded and woven into the local fabric and culture (Ewick and Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990), and contextually adapting and interpreting these international human rights to local cultural contexts is challenging (Merry, 2009). It is in this space between state institutions and local communities that NGOs and CSOs become important bridges between this interpretation of human rights internationally and local experiences (Merry, 2009), and many WROs take the approach of defending the human rights of women and girl survivors of violence. They work strenuously with the state and its various institutions to advocate for more stringent enforcement and the protection of these rights.

The most common forms of resistance in the interventions in this review were at the passive end of the spectrum. Nearly all the projects faced some form of passive resistance, such as denial that there was a problem, reactions that deflected the issue away from violence prevention, inertia in taking action, and expressions of prejudice and discrimination. The following section describes the four categories of passive resistance – omission, denial, disavowal and inaction – as they have occurred in the interventions, and presents the range of strategies used by grantees in response to them: the empowerment and mobilization of women, advocacy for policy change and public campaigning on ending VAW to



dismantle denial; community mobilization and allyship to engage with resistant communities; and, finally, adaptability and responsiveness to hold inert institutions, services and individuals accountable.

3.1.1. Omission

LITERATURE REVIEW

When VAW is excluded from articulations of the law, instances of VAW go unchecked. For example, a constant criticism from gender groups across the world has been the exclusion of GBV from many transitional justice processes (Nesiah, 2006). It is also harder for CSOs to work in the prevention space in the absence of laws that criminalize violence or when laws poorly define violence. Furthermore, some argue that from a development intervention perspective, women's empowerment can focus on the agency of women, whereas from a feminist perspective, empowerment is approached using language of inequality, power and action (Cornwall et al., 2008).

CSOs use a range of strategies to engage with and prevent VAW. Particularly in conflict settings, a powerful tool that is often deployed to help women who experience violence deal with trauma and achieve positive identities for themselves and empower them to challenge social structures is storytelling (Ali, 2014). Flipping the negative connotations around sexual violence and encouraging women to own their stories is a foundational step in mobilizing women to tackle patriarchal structures, to champion gender equality and to prevent further violence in their communities (Mannell et al., 2018).

The status quo of gender inequality, patriarchy and VAW creates some conditions of resistance in most, if not all, the interventions in this synthesis review, for example contexts where culture and heritage have been used to justify patriarchal practices or values. Denial also emerges as a common form of contextual resistance, and is a result of cultural and social norms. It is also a form of resistance to the prevention intervention itself, as opposed to resistance that occurs as a result of or during the implementation of the intervention. This first manifestation of resistance (to the prevention intervention itself) is often systemic, determined by social norms and

practices that are constructed around power hierarchies and present a foundational challenge to feminist work around which interventions are designed. ARNB reported expressions of denial from Roma families, who would argue in favour of early and forced marriage of girls, saying that "Roma girls must comply with [their] family's demands", and that individuals working in service centres for survivors discounted the gravity of cases of early marriage in Roma communities by referring to them pejoratively as "gypsy issues". In Pakistan, SG reported that women's ability to resist violence was hindered by deep-rooted patriarchal values that normalized violence by and submission to male counterparts. AWO in Jordan faced similar pushback from the communities it worked with, where VAWG was culturally normalized. In Myanmar, sex work is illegal, and there is also a strong social sanction against sex work; APNSW and AMA reported that sex workers (female sex workers in particular) faced significant discrimination that excluded them from accessing support or care services and made them vulnerable to violence.

The presence of laws criminalizing VAW is varied across the countries in which these projects were implemented. The assertion of women's rights as per the law was a central issue for some of the interventions, such as TSK's intervention involving women conflict survivors and ARNB's work with Roma girls. A key theme that emerged from these two interventions in Serbia and Nepal was how poor formulations of the law do not effectively capture the nature of violence or support VAWG prevention. This can limit the ability of organizations working in the prevention space to assist their primary stakeholders – that is, women and girls. For example, strategies that use the enforcement of the rights of women and girls as an entry point face significant resistance owing to laws that do not adequately recognize the experiences of violence of marginalized women and girls. This is perhaps a form of resistance by omission that can be categorized alongside expressions of denial as a passive but equally harmful form of resistance. The examples from Serbia and Nepal illustrate this form of resistance. In the Serbian context, young Roma girls are among the most vulnerable girls in Serbia, and in comparison to their non-Roma peers they fare much more poorly on social indicators (UNICEF, 2014). Although Serbian law has criminalized child marriage, the practice is widespread among Roma communities: 16 per cent of Roma girls enter early marriages (before 15 years of age) as compared to 0.6 per cent of the general population,

and over half of Roma girls are married before the age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2019). ARNB's work is conducted in a highly patriarchal context, where the Roma community places significant importance on early marriages, and Roma women live restricted lives as determined by the community's gender roles. As a result, many young girls leave school at a young age, have children early in their lives, and are exposed to domestic violence and economic insecurity (Đorđević and Gavrilović, 2017).

One of the primary challenges ARNB faced at the time of the implementation of its project was the lack of an adequate definition of a child in law – various definitions were used of minors in different Serbian laws, and there was no single legal framework for the application of the law in cases of early and forced marriage. Furthermore, child marriage is not clearly and explicitly prohibited or defined as sexual violence and a violation of a child's rights. This presented multiple challenges for ARNB. For example, when they provided legal assistance and other assistance (e.g. access to medical aid and assistance in dealing with service providers) to young Roma mothers, ARNB noted that even if they were minors (between 14–18 years), they were considered “women” if they had had children by Serbian law, whereas according to international law, they were still considered children. Unregistered marriages of minors, which were commonplace in Roma communities, were also not recognized by the state.

This meant that the laws and punishments that were applied to Roma cases of early and forced marriage did not align with the gravity of the violation (sexual violence against children), and as such the law was not an effective deterrent to violence. Consequently, young Roma girls were deprived of their rights, and this was a significant constraint on ARNB's work on the prevention of forced child marriage in the Roma community. **Part of ARNB's strategy was therefore to build support and demand for better policy and action among the general public, with the aim of encouraging people to advocate for change in the law.** It ran an advocacy and awareness campaign for the public on ending child marriage; empowered women and apprised them of the law, their rights and services accessible to them; and built awareness. In parallel, it produced communication material on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms

of Discrimination Against Women and Serbian law, and ran a series of advocacy workshops and public events to educate and inform the public. **Securing support from the public is an important strategy to advance specific approaches and limit institutional resistance.**

A second example comes from the Nepalese project implemented by TSK, where similar omissions deprived Nepalese women survivors of their rights to reparation. TSK's work began with its engagement to empower women survivors of the Nepalese civil war in the context of the post-war transitional justice processes. In 2007, following the end of the protracted civil war, which lasted nearly a decade (from 1996 to 2006), Nepal announced a transitional justice mechanism. In studies conducted by the International Center for Transitional Justice on Nepalese conflict survivors, apart from physical and economic hardship, a third (32.9 per cent) of the women respondents reported that they suffered mental stress and torture, and a fifth (21 per cent) reported mistreatment by their family (ICTJ, 2014). The transitional justice process established two truth commissions⁸ and an interim relief programme that primarily offered relief (mainly financial) to those affected by the civil war. The state's interim relief programme for conflict survivors focused its attention on the displaced, deceased and physically wounded. **Its definition of “victim of conflict” excluded survivors of rape, torture and sexual violence, and effectively excluded many women from engaging with the process** (ICTJ, 2014). In an interview conducted with TSK for this synthesis review, the organization recounted how women who approached local peace committees found there was no “category” for their experiences:

So these local peace committees were guided by these interim relief guidelines ... they also had some other kind of guiding document as well. But on the basis of these interim relief guidelines there was a form developed and in it was mentioned which categories ... and many women who had suffered sexual violence and torture they went out to those local communities, and they wanted to report about the cases they faced, but there was no such category in the form where it could be recorded (TSK, interview, May 2021).

These omissions resulted in pathways for reparation and healing being closed to women conflict survivors and exacerbated the societal stigma associated with their experiences of violence. These women were not only excluded from the process. They also took on this burden of stigma that was imposed on them by society and the state. The internalization of stigma and resistance was described in the Nepal intervention. TSK point out that the invisible power of social and cultural norms held women back as they suffered from low morale, victimization and gaslighting. In an interview, TSK described how the women survivors were considered victims, or “*peedith*” in Nepali, and said that their capability would often be questioned.

Women, they really wanted to talk about the trauma and the violations of rights they had to face during Nepal’s conflict. They really wanted to talk about it, but there was a kind of hesitation and there was all kinds of resistance as well, because they were also dealing with that dilemma within them that until that time, until 2015, nobody asked them what happened to them, particularly on the cases of sexual violence, ... because I always, you know, say that the cases of sexual violence in Nepal during the armed conflict which were committed against women at that time were silenced by the state (TSK, interview, May 2021).

TSK’s response shaped its intervention, which empowered and mobilized women conflict survivors to own their stories and challenge the social order that defined who they were. TSK used storytelling, and its approach of training justice reporters, who were themselves survivors of violence, was very intentional, with the objective of creating safe spaces for women survivors to share their stories so they did not feel instrumentalized, as if their stories were being documented for another purpose. The grantee also reported that a significant outcome of this project was the informal network of women that was created “that started with a single woman”.

Women were not asked what happened to them during the conflict. But, again, those who were asked, they were asked kind of as a researcher, a lawyer, and then churn out all the information and leave them empty, empty, empty – you know, in terms of feeling. Not like giving some kind

of relief. But when the justice reporters like them, the survivor women, went to other women in the community, and they started realizing that, OK, it is important to break the silence (TSK, interview, May 2021).

In this case, storytelling as an intervention challenges two types of resistance that arise from omission or denial: the community of women survivors themselves omitting and denying their experiences owing to internal stigmatization, and the state omitting and denying women’s trauma by not even acknowledging that women faced sexual violence – the latter needs to be addressed upfront.

Another form of omission that many women faced was a lack of documentation, which placed them at a further disadvantage. Some of the CSOs (ARNB and SG) reported that many of the women they worked with did not possess the basic documentation (certificates, identity cards, etc.) required to allow them to access services and seek justice. For example, one of the main activities that SG conducted in its communities in Pakistan was assisting the women in registering births and marriages and providing them with official identity cards.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Laws and the protection of human rights form the basis of prevention work. Therefore, the exclusion of women and their experiences of violence in them results in resistance when women (or CSOs) engage with prevention or implement prevention interventions.
- When confronted with omissions and exclusions of instances of VAW, securing support from the public is an important strategy in advancing specific approaches, advocating for laws and policies and limiting resistance from within institutions.
- Storytelling and empowering women to own their experiences is a foundational step in mobilizing women to tackle patriarchal structures, to champion gender equality and to prevent further violence in their communities.
- Strong community mobilization is a powerful and commonly used strategy that helps mitigate systemic resistance, especially denial from within communities. CSOs deploy a range of community

mobilization strategies, from developing cadres of community facilitators to identifying key allies within communities to unpack and dismantle resistance.

- The provision of documentation (identity cards, birth and marriage certificates, and other similar official documents) is an important intervention strategy to tackle omission.

3.1.2. Denial

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community norms and accepted attitudes towards VAW determine how they respond to VAW, particularly around sanctioning it (Flood and Pease, 2006). For example, the evidence has documented how communities and cultures can deny VAW to protect the community (Bhattacharjee, 1999; Dasgupta and Warriar, 1996). Scholars studying morality and philosophy also advocate for communities to take on more collective responsibility for VAW (Isaacs, 2001; Radzik, 2001). Historically, VAW has been pushed into the private domain as a matter that is outside the scope of the state (Bunch, 1990). While feminist scholarship has examined how cultures enable VAW (Bunch, 1990; Bunch, 1997), research has also studied cultures and heritages that protect women from violence (Dasgupta and Warriar, 1996; Green, 1999). In this set of projects, cultures were both enablers of violence and pathways to prevent violence.

Community mobilization also emerged as an important strategy to navigate community-level resistance and denial around VAWG. SG's project in Pakistan was implemented in very conservative and patriarchal communities, where VAWG is systemic, and women were very disempowered and lacked access to services and support. SG also reported that VAWG is commonly considered as a private matter outside the scope of external intervention. Given that these communities were highly patriarchal and male-dominated, SG's intervention also identified key male allies from the community who were able to open

doors and who acted as supportive intermediaries. This is because, in these communities, pathways to empower women have many sequential steps, and there is much work to be done to dismantle resistance that occurs at every step; even supportive community members can undermine the goals of the intervention. Finding allies is a strategy advocated by gender equality practitioners that focuses on identifying those within the community who align with the cause and using them to work within communities to effect change (VicHealth, 2018). This was a lesson echoed by AWO in Jordan: finding allies within the community was an important strategy of its community mobilization approach as well. In a focus group discussion, a representative of SG explained why it was important for it to include male members of its communities as key stakeholders. Describing a situation where they had to mediate for a young couple who got married without their community's consent, they said:

The same community who reached out to us said what can we do? The lawyer tried to help them but could not. Once learning about rights, we saw that women and girls wanted it "right now" and when they went and asked for their rights at home from their fathers, there was a lot of backlash and we saw an increase in violence. We then decided to include men in our training and give communication training to women (SG, focus group discussion, May 2021).

An important lesson that AWO shared was that CSOs need to know how to tailor narratives to the community and its ability to engage with the subject matter. When initiating communities into dialogues on prevention, they found that it was strategically easier to identify entry points into the debate that were contextually appropriate and framed in a way that created space for conversation (without being too combative) with conservative members of local communities.

Framing a narrative is a strategy deployed⁹ when narratives need to be **persuasive** to make connections

⁹ Framing theory is commonly used in mass communication, and has been adapted to many thematic work areas, such as gender equality.

with stakeholders (VicHealth, 2018), and to challenge justifications for resistance – for example, when members of the community say, “he has the right to beat her”, as AWO explained in an interview for this review:

The resistance is still there – some of these women are still convinced that, and not only elderly women – women of all ages – to be honest, that the husband has the right to beat her, if he gets angry, he has the right to beat her because she did something wrong (AWO, interview, May 2021).

For example, AWO reported that one way to reach male members of the communities they worked in was to reframe the gender argument as an economic one. These were communities that lacked economic opportunities, and money was a significant factor in their lives. One way of reaching the extremely resistant members of the community was to present the economic costs of domestic violence to them. There are similarities in the lessons shared by AÇEV in this respect:

One of the key learning[s] we can share through our experience of resistance was with our campaign and advocacy activities. In order not to encounter too much resistance and opposing views in our campaign and advocacy activities, we carefully formulated our messages and communication strategies. We first started off with more general messages on fatherhood and paternity, and then sharpened the tone of advocacy. The main reason we did this was because graduate fathers of the Father Support Program, local fatherhood networks or local organizations and institutions we cooperated with such as municipalities could freely use our posters with our campaign messages in their surroundings and to make a smooth transition against possible resistances (AÇEV, written response, May 2021).

The argument around framing a narrative is similar to the question of the visibility of feminist work. Narratives are reframed to make them less “radical” and less threatening. The framing of narratives to make them more accessible and less “radical” emerged as an imperative in practice, as one example shared by AWO was that sessions on gender equality were more effective when

framed as “vocational development, child development and democratic school environment”. As a second example, AWO narrated an instance where a workshop on alternate masculinities had to be reframed, as any “gender” work caused a lot of pushback:

So we invited people to that session, and we started to say, we will talk about alternative masculinities, and they started to say, no you cannot talk about this thing. You are ruining our community. You are ruining our society. There is no space here for LGBT ... And, just to get out of here and they refused to let us continue the session ... ironically, they were heads of CSOs. So they [are] supposed to be like ... more open-minded than the community. But they were not, they, they attacked us, and they kicked us out from the session. But we, we found out that if we just changed the title of the session, that would be fine. So we changed the title. We cancelled anything related to masculinity and alternative and all these words, and we said that it would be an awareness session about gender roles and the same, the same group just stayed there, took the session, where everything went well (AWO, interview, May 2021).

In conclusion, resistance within communities is governed by social norms that are hard to dismantle in one go, and need a longer process of engagement. There is a larger question of whether finding other entry points risks diluting the feminist and human rights argument, but it is a strategic decision that CSOs make to build longer-term engagement with the communities. In this context, and particularly **when it comes to resistance, CSOs have to find ways to overcome it, and therefore it is important to understand the cultural specificity of the resistance.** CSOs need to find different entry points that are contextually appropriate and allow them to initiate long-term dialogues on prevention with communities. Community mobilization strategies are commonly used to unpack community-level resistance, in particular the use of allies and community facilitators.

This is not to say that cultures do not carry elements that are less patriarchal and more gender equal. For instance, the intervention in Nicaragua was designed around the revival of traditional culture to advocate for the prevention of violence. Here, the antagonist culture was the

more recent culture of masculinity, violence and machismo that had permeated the Waspam region during the decades of civil war. The project therefore highlighted the reciprocity between men and women in the local indigenous culture, which was deeply rooted in the local environment and ecology. The intervention could draw on **elements and symbolism** from local, traditional or indigenous culture that were more gender equal to counteract the culture of masculinity that came with the civil war.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- It is vital to work from within communities. Identifying allies within communities creates support networks that can be relied on to help dismantle resistance in communities. Partnerships with key community stakeholders who can complement the skills of mobilizers (e.g. networking or access skills) can help establish good foundations for prevention work and minimize resistance.
- Deep grass-roots and community mobilization strategies can help mitigate resistance in communities. CSOs framed their dialogues in a manner that “built bridges” with communities, rather than taking defensive positions.
- Framing of violence prevention can influence the way in which communities receive information and make choices. CSOs found that presenting arguments or activities on violence prevention in less threatening ways by responding to reactions from the community was better received than more “radical” narratives. There are, however, risks associated with this, such as the dilution of the feminist and human rights argument. CSOs pointed out that these were strategic decisions that they had to make if they were to work collaboratively, and this perhaps reflects the many different lived realities with which CSOs work and the specific context of each instance of resistance.
- Interventions can draw on narratives, language, symbolism and elements from the existing culture that are more gender equal, thus reframing cultural norms that are not alien or foreign and are therefore more acceptable to those who are otherwise resistant to change.

3.1.3. Disavowal and inaction

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disavowal is the refusal to take action or to acknowledge responsibility (Flood et al., 2020). Often in institutions disavowal can take the form of dismissal of the issue, which could stem intentionally from a policy or directive but could also be unintentional, and the result of gaps and lack of capacity, etc. However, dismissal is still recognized as a form of “implicit” resistance (Lombardo and Maegert, 2013). In disavowing the issue, it can be trivialized, deprioritized and dismissed (Agocs, 1997; Lombardo and Maegert, 2013), creating a wall of resistance.

Disavowal and inaction, which range from abdicating or refusing to accept one’s responsibility for taking action to refusing to take action, were also forms of resistance that emerged from the PBK. It may be useful to add “inertia” to this category of resistance, because at times the intentions of the individuals or departments that were not taking action were unclear in the PBK – that is, whether they were intentionally resistant (and therefore expressing a systemic form of resistance) or whether the resistance stemmed from an inability to respond, for example owing to lack of training, capacity or resources.

Nevertheless, the PBK revealed that many of the grantee organizations faced significant pushback in completing their day-to-day activities in the context of their interventions. Their daily work often required near-constant navigation through many small instances of resistance, such as actions of denial or inaction, which further contributed to the violence that women and girls faced. ARNB in Serbia and MADRE and its partner in Nicaragua implemented prevention programmes, yet by virtue of their strong ties and trust with the women and girls in their communities they also became a first point of contact for survivors who reported violence, identified people at risk of violence, or expressed confidence in the organization’s ability to support and mediate for them. Consequently, organizations focusing on prevention interventions could find themselves becoming interlocutors between institutions or tertiary prevention services (e.g. law enforcement, the justice system or social welfare centres) and survivors of violence, as they help them navigate the

system, and often have to respond to quotidian instances of resistance that their stakeholders are faced with. In the PBK, these instances were expressed as:

- an unwillingness to take appropriate action, resulting in delays, postponements, bureaucratic complexities, and resistance to or stalling of procedures;
- expressions of prejudice and discrimination.

Two examples from Nicaragua and Serbia are presented to illustrate these forms of resistance.

In Nicaragua, years of conflict had resulted in endemic violence in the local communities in the Waspam region, along the Nicaraguan coast. MADRE, an international NGO, and Wangki Tangni, a local women’s organization, drove a community-led, prevention-focused intervention: it was a community mobilization project that supported community facilitators (local cadres of women called “*promotoras*”)¹⁰ build a strong community-level prevention and response mechanism against VAWG. The intervention in Nicaragua came at a time when the state had promulgated a new law (Law 779)¹¹ that criminalized VAW. MADRE reported that the implementation of the law was sluggish and that women faced several challenges when they attempted to have the law enforced.

There may be resistance from traditional leaders in the application of new laws, particularly if there are pre-existing customary practices that have traditionally dealt with VAW. For example, the communities in Nicaragua had a parallel customary judicial system in place in which customary or community judges called *whitas* adjudicated on many issues, including cases involving VAW. This traditional system relied on more rudimentary forms of justice. The customary judges initially exhibited a form of disavowal when Law 779 was introduced. MADRE stated that there were two reasons for their resistance: first, they may have been unaware of the implications of the statutory justice system that had criminalized violence, and second, given the dual justice system in place, there

was disagreement on how both systems would work collaboratively, and, ultimately, which law would be final.

Therefore, the project’s strategy was to engage all important stakeholders and reach agreement among them on a common goal (reducing VAWG). At the local level, the intervention brought together the customary and statutory judges to identify continuity between the two systems, recognizing the importance that the community placed on the customary system but also identifying where they needed to defer to the state and pass cases onto the statutory system.

The intervention also publicly advocated for the integration of the two systems, through its annual regional and national forums, and by requiring the *whitas* to publicly pledge their support. This latter public commitment helped mitigate any resistance from future *whitas* who would be elected to the post. This example illustrates the importance of engaging customary and community leaders, who are seen and respected as traditional mediators, in the prevention of VAW and the enforcement of the law when faced with traditional justice systems.

So by the end of the project, they became allies, but that was not the case at the beginning (MADRE, interview, May 2021).

The interventions also faced resistance in the form of inaction. MADRE reported that the judiciary at the local level was inert and unresponsive at times. For example, judges were often absent from court, and anecdotally there appeared to be a resistance to prosecuting VAWG cases because the sheer number of cases would highlight the prevalence of VAW, and prosecution was seen as disrupting communities and families. The response from MADRE and its partner organization was included in its intervention: training its cadre of women on documenting cases to create a body of evidence. In an interview with

¹⁰ The project trained women as local mobilizers called *promotoras*.

¹¹ Nicaragua, Comprehensive Law Against Violence Towards Women (Ley Integral Contra La Violencia Hacia Las Mujeres) (2012). An important strategy deployed in this intervention was to ensure that the process of justice worked: that cases of violence were brought to law enforcement and then successfully moved through the justice system. This involved integrating existing customary legal systems (helmed by customary elected judges, or *whitas*) with the statutory legal system (that was supported by the promulgation of Law 779).

MADRE, it stated that this documentation was resisted by the judicial system, in a clear example of denial (denying the problem) and disavowal (refusing to recognize the judiciary's responsibility):

And there was also resistance from the judicial system. They didn't want so many cases to arise all of a sudden. They wanted to keep it underreported ... and do not address such an epidemic of violence, right? And so they didn't want it. The police were also pushing the women and girls who came forward to denounce away ...

They were arguing "that is not enough evidence to prosecute the case". When they have videos or when they have concrete evidence that was the right case or a domestic violence case. And they were just building excuses to not really prosecute those cases. So the women started to document, the organization started to receive cases and started an intake survey to make sure that before they went to the police, the officials and the judge, they have their story, to avoid those other actors would manipulate the story and say, oh, you have no basis to prosecute this case (MADRE, interview, May 2021).

Similarly, ARNB reported that its work revolved around ensuring that "the process worked" – from reporting cases, to ensuring the cases were registered, investigated and then tracked through the legal system. ARNB submitted that often the process of accessing support services was fraught with pushback. Delays, postponements and refusals to assist amounted to – in the grantee's estimation – patterns of delays to the process. ARNB also reported that often social welfare institutions (e.g. safe houses and shelters) were unresponsive to the circumstances of the women (who were often escaping violent homes) and were slow in delivering protection to them. For example, Roma women experienced resistance when they attempted to access services and were met with little empathy from the staff that manned the centres. Roma women faced racism and discrimination when they approached institutions for assistance (ARNB also noted that Roma women are often rejected from safe houses in Serbia), and they experienced pushback from people in these institutions who took a very normalized approach to the violence experienced by Roma women. This highlights the challenges to shifting

gender norms and prevention, if violence against a particular group is normalized. Although these obstacles could be a result of some deliberate pushback, they could also reflect some common institutional challenges: poor capacities and budgets, ineffective leadership, etc.

ARNB and MADRE reflected that a strong and committed response to their women stakeholders and that negotiating instances of resistance in this manner had a strong impact on preventing violence. The fidelity to seeing the judicial process through demonstrated to the community that even though the ultimate outcomes (prosecutions) took time (the project was less successful on this front), **the process itself worked** – which, in turn, signalled that those acts of violence could no longer go unchecked. Communities were more aware and vigilant, and this disincentivized perpetrators and prevented violence in the communities.

Therefore, in response, both interventions focused on identifying potential structural gaps and creating mechanisms to temporarily fix them (externally), while holding institutions and individuals accountable and thereby making sure that the process worked. In MADRE's estimation, having a very detailed but flexible plan that anticipated unexpected or negative risks or outcomes was critical. Both organizations took a pragmatic and flexible approach: MADRE representatives reported that they were very "concrete about what they were going for" and planned for ways to mitigate in a step-by-step manner any eventualities. Being flexible and adaptable emerged as important attributes for the organizations and their interventions.

An example shared by MADRE illustrates this grass-roots flexibility. If survivors were unable to reach the police to report a case because they did not have enough money on their mobile phones, the women mobilizers in the community were empowered to quickly solve that specific problem – by giving them access to a working phone that they could use to call the police. Here is an example of how the CSO worked around resistance from the police force, provided by MADRE during an interview for this review:

If the other person said, "Oh I called the police, and the police didn't have enough gas in their boat to go to the

community.” ... they [the women] would say, “We’ll provide the gas.” Or sometimes the project would cover the costs of transportation of the police to go and get perpetrator right in that community. This allowed us to be consistent (MADRE, interview, May 2021).

Documenting and creating a body of evidence was also an important component. In Serbia, ARNB was able to deploy support to survivors of violence, offer immediate medical and psychosocial support, and assist survivors in accessing services in the form of financial support for basic necessities or to manage in emergency situations, translators and legal aid. ARNB also noted that in cases where it had to mediate with institutions such as shelters for Roma women, ARNB was expected to cover the costs, which was an added overhead for its work.

The poor availability of funds for NGOs/CSOs to use in a more immediate and discretionary manner was an issue that came up in the documentation. Two grantee organizations disclosed that they were constrained by budgets that limited the scope of their work or that they had to exclude certain activities from their project design that could not be financially supported but that would have helped their work. For example, one grantee organization found that at times its funders were less inclined to support direct interventions such as legal services and direct assistance for survivors than they were to support research and documentation, whereas the CSO could be more effective and better respond to requests from the community if it could use its funds for more practical assistance. In one case, while international donors did show more interest in supporting the project, there was less interest from the state, which also proved to be challenging.

In terms of programmatic support, ARNB cites in its documentation that it was able to establish a new service where it provided funds to offer immediate support (urgent psychosocial counselling, funds for food, shelter, transportation to safe houses, urgent medical services) to its stakeholders to help the women get out of violent situations. MADRE made a similar point: that access to funds that could be deployed when needed was useful and timely, giving its intervention vital flexibility and agility. **Access to flexible funding that can meet both long- and short-term needs could help organizations in mitigating risks and managing resistance.**

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Passive resistance tends to be exhibited in opposition to activities within the scope of programmes and interventions and was present in nearly all the projects in some form or the other, from offices’ or institutions’ unwillingness to take appropriate action, resulting in delays, postponements, bureaucratic complexities, resistance to or stalling of procedures, or expressions of prejudice and discrimination. However, these may be intentional and systemic **or** a result of inefficient practices or management and poor capacities in key prevention services. CSOs need to identify potential gaps and weaknesses in the prevention and response ecosystem and develop risk mitigation strategies that respond in the short term, as well as advocating for long-term changes and improvements. It is also important to encourage women to build their own body of evidence that can be used in a judicial process to make sure that the process is followed and to help break down barriers put up by passive resisters.
- By virtue of their strong ties with and because they are trusted by the women and girls in their communities, organizations working on prevention interventions often become the first point of contact for survivors of violence, and become interlocutors between tertiary prevention services and the larger institutional ecosystem as well as communities. In some cases, a lot of their daily work is in supporting women and girls to navigate instances of resistance. CSOs tend to respond to these daily instances of passive resistance through engagement and negotiation. Negotiating instances of resistance is important because it holds the processes accountable and ensures that women and girls are protected from further violence.
- CSOs need to be adaptive and flexible in their management of the response to resistance, and agile funding allows them to be more responsive and offer more direct and urgent support to women, when necessary.

3.2. Active resistance: appeasement, appropriation, co-option, repression and backlash

LITERATURE REVIEW

More aggressive forms of resistance tend to challenge the social agendas of CSOs, targeting their core manifesto of social change. For example, states use diverse instruments to impede civil society work, particularly if they are dependent on international (financial or technical) support. Limiting or banning funding, or increasing the bureaucratic procedures, are just two of the mechanisms that states may deploy to exert control over civil society (Carothers, 2016).

This section considers forms of resistance that appear to recognize, even partially, VAW but covertly attempt to disrupt the process of change and limit its impact, as well as more aggressive opposition. These forms of resistance were commonly found to occur when, for example, community leaders or elected representatives or officials who were associated with political and social ideologies took public positions on VAW and GBV, or when debates on gender and violence were triggered in societies and communities. More aggressive forms of pushback can occur when certain groups attempt to subvert a process of change, or when vulnerable groups face discrimination and violence from those in power. Examples of appeasement, co-option and appropriation, repression and backlash from the experiences of the interventions included in this review are presented in this section.

3.2.1. Appeasement

A first form of more “active” or overt resistance was identified in the interventions as resistance from community leaders who took public positions on GBV and VAW. This form of resistance from community leaders was evident in projects from Jordan, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Serbia. In these projects, specific community leaders pushed back against the programme being implemented: there was resistance from village leaders

and local religious leaders to the economic empowerment programme run by SG in Pakistan; resistance from Roma leaders in Serbia to advocate against early marriage customs; resistance from community judges to adjudicate cases of sexual VAW as per the statutory law in Nicaragua; resistance from host communities in Jordan to prevention work with refugee women conducted by AWO; and resistance from local communities in supporting women in speaking out as conflict survivors in Nepal. The resistance from these leaders was often couched in cultural terms (e.g. in the cases from Pakistan and Serbia). The pushback to change in these interventions was expressed as disavowal or appeasement, or even co-option, of activities by certain groups or leaders in order to limit their impact.

Established cultural practices were also a reason for community leaders to take on appeasing public positions on VAW. This can lead to a dissonance between public actions and private ones, especially among community leaders and elected representatives who are expected to uphold the law but also represent the way of life in their communities. Part of ARNB’s work with the Roma community was to advocate with the leaders of the Roma Council to take strong stands against VAWG. ARNB reported that, while these leaders demonstrated an increasing awareness of the problem of early and forced marriage, they were willing to show only superficial commitment to the cause. In this situation, elements of both denial and appeasement were exhibited. They supported the cause publicly but were unwilling to lead by example or change practices even within their own personal networks. This resistance from Roma leaders resulted in the reinforcement of regressive perceptions among the wider population:

Rejection of Roma leaders in Serbia, even representatives of the Roma National Council that early, forced marriages among Roma exist. That they are not presented in good manner and that also puts stigma on Roma as traffickers and batterers and returns us to the prejudice that Roma sell their children (ARNB, annual report).

An important take-away here is that, when designing interventions, it is important to identify both resistance and support from leaders. ARNB’s attempt to hold leaders accountable had limited success, and

this demonstrated the challenges of driving prevention interventions and advocating for prevention with representatives of communities.

Narratives around resistance often point to cultures or laws that instigate resistance and pushback. However, resistance is also embodied by individuals involved in projects, for whom those contexts are their reality. These actors are heterogeneous in nature and complex in character, and therefore it is harder to counter the cumulative force of resistance that emerges from communities and groups of individuals. Framing is a strategic pushback against resistance (as appeasement is a strategy to resist); at its heart is the need to connect with people and create a longer-term dialogue, and it reflects the very real choices that CSOs have to make on the ground.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Elected leaders often appease their electorate while championing progressive change. While the law is in the public domain, culture transgresses into the private domain, and this has led to a dissonance between public actions and private ones, especially from community leaders and elected representatives who are expected to uphold the law but also represent the ways of life of their communities.
- When designing interventions, CSOs should identify where and how support from leaders will be forthcoming, and to what extent, to understand and plan for resistance.

3.2.1. Appropriation and co-option

LITERATURE REVIEW

To not lose sight of their overarching goal of ending VAWG, CSOs working in sensitive contexts evaluate their positions and constantly frame and reframe their claims and responses to suit their immediate circumstances (Ayoub and Chetaille, 2020; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). CSOs counter and adapt to these more aggressive forms of resistance in different ways. These can range from adopting lower profiles to make their work “less visible”, developing resilience and internal capacity to resist any form of backlash (e.g. having security plans for staff), building coalitions with other organizations, and strategically identifying new ways to build and maintain the momentum of feminist movements (Carothers, 2016; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). However, criticism has also been levelled at the mainstreaming and technicalization of gender equality over the past few decades. It is said that its formalization into the development project has distanced it from its political core (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). In advocating for gender equality, and going one step further to include ending GBV and VAWG, organizations need to reconnect with notions of representation, participation and citizenship (Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

Appropriation is a form of resistance that happens when stakeholders appear to support a change initiative (e.g. use progressive language) but in effect subvert it (VicHealth, 2018). SG, for example, reported the importance of managing powerful community members so that they are on board and do not gatekeep or derail the progress of the project. (It trained its community mobilizers and field trainers on how to manage important members of a community during activities.)

“Anti-gender” campaigns, protests and physical manifestations are some of the more visible forms of resistance that are used to change the narrative around feminist/gender work and to build public momentum against gender initiatives. In such situations, where attempts may be made to appropriate or undermine the broader feminist narrative, organizations working in the



VAWG space may have to take protective measures to mitigate the risks to their interventions.

A case study of appropriation and co-option in Armenia illustrates attempts to appropriate or co-opt feminist progressive movements and their impact on a prevention intervention by the feminist organization SWV.

In Armenia, where SWV works, prevention work and anti-VAWG work is extremely sensitive, as gender stereotypes and gender inequality are deeply rooted in Armenian culture. SWV's intervention to introduce GBV information into national educational curricula came at a time when Armenia was experiencing strong "anti-gender" backlash in the form of public campaigns, protests and heated debates around the promulgation of a "law on equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men" (see UN Women, n.d.).¹² In this case the backlash came from public distortions of **gender**, its appropriation by traditional groups and its instrumentalization to threaten the gender debate and polarize it around narrow framings on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer rights, the erosion of family values, etc. (Harutyunyan, 2017).

When backlash to gender becomes overt, WROs can bear the brunt of the pushback. They can be identified and targeted for their work and therefore can be at the receiving end of violence.

In this context, SWV was a visible face of the women's movement, and it reported that its activities and its partners were attacked by "anti-gender" protestors during a public campaign on gender and human rights. This environment encouraged attacks on WROs like themselves, and SWV was also targeted by opposing media, which included their names on published blacklists of civil society activists.

SWV also reported examples of resistance by appropriation of language.

For example, the frenetic "anti-gender" campaign resulted in the word "gender" being replaced with "men" or "women", with the state's public backing in an official statement that rejected the use of this term "gender" in any official capacity. SWV recalled that in training sessions that were organized for social science teachers, some refused to use the term because of the government's open statement against it.

The foremost lesson learnt was to keep the pulse on current developments and changes in order to be ahead of the very recent dynamics for being able to solve possible issues (SWV, annual report, p. 52).

To mitigate the impact of this polarized environment on its intervention, SWV conducted a risk assessment and decided to take an approach that promoted its agenda while limiting its public exposure

to nationalist rhetoric. It did not publicize its activities and limited its interaction with other stakeholders to selected experts and partners. SWV focused its project intervention on gender education. Given that its intervention was within the scope of the state's quinquennial strategic action plan to combat GBV, SWV reported that it committed to strengthening its partnership with the relevant educational authorities (working closely with decision makers and fostering relationships with key stakeholders), and publicizing the government's commitments to the national action plan to ensure its timely implementation.

One of the biggest lessons learnt is to always be ready for negotiations and to always have a good number of arguments and necessary documents proving our opinion and claiming our rights. We adopted a negotiation strategy to bring the international obligations of the State as the main argument ... in order to achieve strong collaboration, we used the tactic of giving them a choice for either a close cooperation or us referring to all the gaps and reluctance of the government to cooperate in the civil society reports of the CEDAW [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women] and UPR [Universal Periodic Review] (SWV, annual report, p. 52).

In summary, projects and organizations that faced more overt and aggressive forms of backlash tended to use more risk mitigation strategies, limiting their exposure to the larger discourse, sharply pivoting their interventions or taking strong approaches to protect the rights of the vulnerable.

¹² SWV was the co-founder of a coalition to stop VAW and was contributing to the drafting of the law.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Appropriation is a form of resistance in which stakeholders overtly support (e.g. use progressive language) but in effect subvert any change initiative.
- When backlash to gender becomes overt, women's organizations can bear the brunt of the pushback. They are identified and targeted for their work and therefore can be at the receiving end of violence.
- In difficult sociopolitical contexts, CSOs should conduct risk mitigation exercises and have strong risk mitigation strategies to protect the intervention, their staff and their organization.
- CSOs working in conflictual sociopolitical contexts must constantly evaluate their positions and frame and reframe their claims and responses, continuously anticipating and responding to opposing stakeholders.

3.2.1. Political backlash and political backsliding

LITERATURE REVIEW

This past decade has seen increasing trends of democratic backsliding across the world (Baker et al., 2017; Bermeo, 2016). One of the consequences of these conservative shifts has been the backlash that the civil society space has faced, which has affected the ability of CSOs to continue engaging in their work (Baker et al., 2017). These movements have adversely affected feminist movements and agendas (Alonso and Lombardo, 2018; Miškovska Kajevska, 2018; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020) as moves towards traditionalism have given rise to “anti-gender” movements (United Nations, 2019 Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). These shifts have also affected the work of women human rights defenders, who are more at risk (OHCHR, 2020a). Political and social change can also create repressive environments to work in or result in instances of physical backlash or even complete sanction that prevents organizations from engaging in any form of prevention intervention.

What happens to NGOs when civic spaces shrink? How do NGOs respond and adapt to new forms of

engagement in such contexts in order to continue working to achieve their objectives? Sociopolitical shifts that directly affect the spaces in which NGOs and CSOs operate are included in this section on more overt forms of violence because they can significantly affect development work. In many such contexts, organizations are forced to adapt their programming, and do so using a handful of strategies, such as building networks and alliances with other CSOs, being “less visible” and restructuring their programmes so that they do not require state support (Baker et al., 2017; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). With respect to gender, researchers have documented a “reconfiguration of both institutional and civic spaces” that promotes the work and actions of more conservative factions that are less likely to support gender equality, as well as attempts to make work in this space difficult and heavily regulated (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020).

In Turkey, the grantee organization AÇEV implemented its projects in similar contexts of democratic backsliding as in Armenia. The dissonance between Turkey's progressive reforms and the populist conservative consolidation that the state has undergone in recent years dominates its recent political trajectory (Erensü and Alemdaroğlu, 2018). In 2011, Turkey was the first country to sign and ratify the European Council's agreement on the prevention of domestic violence and VAWG (known as the Istanbul Convention), which resulted in the formation of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. However, this past decade has also seen more conservative movements take precedence in Turkey, and there have been consequences for gender equality: changes to the abortion law, debates around the prohibition of cohabitation, etc. On 1 July 2021, Turkey officially withdrew from the Istanbul Convention. On March 22, Turkey's Communication Directorate released a statement saying, “The Istanbul Convention, originally intended to promote women's rights, was hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality – which is incompatible with Turkey's social and family values. Hence the decision to withdraw.” (Republic of Turkey Directorate of Communications, 2021) AÇEV has reported that Turkish society has also been conservative when it comes to gender, particularly around the roles of men and

women in families and in society,¹³ and its work with women and men has been based on the family as a fundamental unit in society: the organization runs a series of programmes for fathers (including the FSP).¹⁴ AÇEV stated that:

The resistance that was felt in our beneficiaries, as well as representatives of the institutions we collaborated with, was expected, considering the gender norms that are dominant in the culture. There was an overall, mostly implicit resistance to the concept of gender equality, of men being more involved in childcare and housework. Men were especially reluctant to display acts of involvement in household or childcare responsibilities out in public (AÇEV, written response, May 2021).

The UN Trust Fund has funded AÇEV twice in recognition of the work it does to undo harmful gender norms and the effort it takes to scale up interventions. During the period of the first project's intervention implementation, a partnership with the Ministry of National Education was critical to its positive outcomes. This partnership gave AÇEV access to important resources: visible backing and validation of its methodology, public schools as spaces where training could take place outside of school hours and cohorts of public school teachers who were trained to be trainers (and the backbone) of the FSP. However, in the first year of the second project, a coup attempt in 2016 changed the relationship between the government and civil society. There was backlash against many CSOs – many had to close, and many partnerships between the state and CSOs were ended. AÇEV reported that this situation resulted in a “crisis where the state and the civil sphere experienced an erosion in mutual trust, the harbinger of a new era in terms of state–civil society relations”.

In AÇEV's intervention there was a significant pullback from the state, disrupting the programme. AÇEV reported that the loss of its official endorsement by the ministry and the fact that all state and civil society joint engagements were under heavy scrutiny led to considerable hesitation from local administrations and even refusals to

collaborate on fatherhood programmes. School spaces were not available to the programme any more. In addition, the teacher trainers of the programme – who were not barred from volunteering with the intervention – were reluctant to participate because they were government employees.

In response to such disruptive backlash, organizations may have to redesign their interventions to make them more resilient and less dependent on the state.

AÇEV shared that, in the circumstances it found itself in, it was forced to adapt its programming quite significantly and shift its partnerships away from state institutions towards a model that strengthened relationships with local partners and engaged local communities much more. The intervention turned its attention to local volunteers, alumni of its fathers' programme and local networks of other CSOs. Ironically, AÇEV pointed out that strengthening links between the local community and NGOs was always a project goal.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Political backsliding is a form of resistance where the state rolls back on its gender commitments. In some cases, this can have a significant impact on the lives of women and girls, and on how CSOs work.
- When organizations face disruptive backlash, they are forced to adapt their interventions to make them less vulnerable to risks. Incorporating a risk mitigation strategy and resilience evaluation is advisable so that CSOs can plan for such eventualities to prevent sudden disruption to their activities.
- Building grass-roots and civil society partnerships can help support CSOs to navigate through periods of backlash. For example, when one entity (e.g. an institution) resists, interventions can pivot to focus on other entities to provide support (e.g. many more local networks of CSOs and volunteers).

13 This was brought up in the final evaluation and by representatives of AÇEV during interviews.

14 In the first project, from 2011 to 2014, AÇEV embarked on a systematic review of the FSP to integrate principles of gender equality and concepts of gender-based violence and responsible parenting into it. The second project, funded from 2016 to 2019, was a continuation of the first, focusing on scaling up the work.

3.2.1. Repression

LITERATURE REVIEW

Working in repressive contexts, the law as it is laid out often differs from the way it is practised (Ewick and Silbey, 1998). The actuality of policing is as much determined by the practice and habitus (Chan, 1996). The way that communities perceive VAW shapes individuals in the communities' responses to VAW (Flood and Pease, 2006). Moreover, with respect to individuals who yield power and influence in the community, this power plays a central role in the way in which vulnerable groups are targeted, and correcting these power relations can be a particularly challenging task for NGOs working in this space (Biradavolu et al., 2009). Structural interventions to improve policing in the context of sex work are advocated for as important strategies that improve working environments for sex workers and reduce their risks of experiencing violence (Blankenship et al., 2006).

At a more structural level, VAW can also result in stigma and discrimination. Evidence around addressing social stigma directs interventions to unpack the structural underpinnings that drive the stigma (Blankenship et al., 2006; Scambler, 2006), particularly through the lens of power, and how power defines social inequality and discrimination and embeds stigma into the social imagination (Castro and Farmer, 2005; Link and Phelan, 2001).

Repression is an overt form of resistance that seeks to limit and stifle activities. Some of the grantees reported that they had to work under conditions of constant surveillance and scrutiny because of state resistance to the activities of CSOs. For instance, SG's activities in Pakistan faced constant inquiry and surveillance from local government offices. Its project staff and office bearers were repeatedly called for inspection of their permissions, to check their paperwork and to ensure government offices remained in the loop.

In response, organizations that faced a lot of scrutiny to their work and their activities tended to pull back

and make their work less visible. Whether it was AWO's workshop in Jordan on alternative masculinities, or SG's intervention, for example, organizations either changed the presentation of their activities (AWO) or revised them to create distance between the organization and the activity (SG). In SG's case it removed material publicizing the organization from communication collaterals and identified lesser-known venues to conduct its events.

Some of the organizations noted the difficulties arising from making their feminist agenda visible. When the feminist agenda is placed front and centre and is visible in their work, there is more resistance to their work from stakeholders (even from supportive stakeholders). Managing the visibility of the feminist manifesto is a challenge CSOs have to constantly navigate, which can be difficult. All grantee organizations have dealt with this in some form: there was less resistance when they used lateral entry points to their interventions, such as health care, parenting, HIV, education or economic empowerment; rebranded their activities, for example as "awareness-raising"; limited their exposure to public media; and created distance between the organization and the activity.

In some contexts, repression occurs because of the types of target groups that CSOs work with. For instance, sex workers in Myanmar are an extremely vulnerable group that faces severe discrimination. Sex work is illegal in Myanmar, and there is also deep societal stigma around the practice. Moreover, it is not uncommon for self-identified sex work to be conflated with other forms of violence, such as trafficking.¹⁵ Alongside societal discrimination, the actions of the police in particular contribute significantly to the vulnerability of sex workers (UNAIDS, 2012). In Myanmar, violence, harassment and abuse have been meted out by the police to sex workers, and numerous human rights violations have been documented. Therefore, resistance faced in this intervention has been categorized as repression and violence. APNSW's intervention in Myanmar was focused on tackling human rights abuses and the vulnerability of female sex workers. **One of APNSW's core objectives was to hold law enforcement – that is, the police force – more accountable for their actions by documenting violence and by informing them of the rights of sex workers.** This component of the project

15 As shared in an interview with the UN Trust Fund.

required AMA (APNSW's local partner) to engage with the police force and conduct a series of activities, such as a baseline study of perceptions of sex worker's rights within the police, training, and awareness sessions on the institutional responsibilities of the police force. However, AMA faced significant resistance from the police force in even getting approval for the survey. The police force was very resistant to any deep engagement or survey that could collect data on the behaviours and beliefs of the police force with respect to sex workers. For example, AMA reported that the police were willing to speak informally but would not sanction any formal data collection process. Seeking approval for the survey became an inordinately complicated process. AMA reported that training sessions that were conducted with senior police officials were met with denial (that violence is meted out to sex workers by the police), which is a clear form of resistance.

Ultimately, its access to the police force was from the top-down: through the ministry. In the second year of its project, AMA was able to successfully conduct advocacy sessions with the police force. Consequently, there was a better relationship between the CSO and the individual police officers who were trained, with AMA noting that the police force was more "positive" towards them, as opposed to previously, when "police did not allow NGO staff to enter into police stations". AMA reported that its work with sex workers improved its confidence in dealing with the police force. These interactions had a positive effect on the police force: by the end of the project there were fewer instances of violence, and improved police behaviours and practices. For example, sex workers were able to demand that the police follow procedures and treat them with dignity.

Yet although this approach improved police behaviour on the ground in the short term, the final evaluation of the project noted that police brutality towards sex workers was reduced, and there were noticeable changes in police behaviour because of AMA's sensitization and training programmes, **these changes were not institutionalized in the system at all through any policy or notification. It is very challenging to dismantle institutional resistance.** One reason for this is the way in which institutions can be perceived from the outside when designing and putting together projects. In the reports, AMA reflected that the police force is not a single homogeneous entity. Institutions are complex and consist of many individuals, micro-units and

communities that are socialized by their working conditions, which vary greatly from the officer on the ground to the official at the top. In AMA's experience, there were variations within the force with respect to their perceptions of sex work and the human rights of sex workers, and even of meting out violence. This can pose significant challenges to projects and requires consistent engagement with every level of the system.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- CSOs and practitioners should not view institutions as homogeneous entities. They consist of micro-units and communities that are socialized by their working conditions, which vary greatly from the officer on the ground to the official at the top.
- In response to extremely disruptive backlash, organizations may have to redesign their interventions to make them more resilient and less dependent on the state by strengthening relationships with local partners and communities instead.

3.3. The impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and its interaction with resistance

LITERATURE REVIEW

In emergency contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic, VAWG has been found to increase (Majumdar and Wood, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020; UN Women, 2020). Scholarship on the impact of COVID-19 on resistance and its interaction with resistance is emerging. What is known is that during times of emergency, as restrictions are placed on society, women can be the first to be negatively affected, and restrictions can also lead to backlash against vulnerable communities. Indeed, international institutions cautioned against states using their emergency powers during the pandemic to restrict the rights of women (e.g. their reproductive rights), and warned of increased backlash against minorities such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex community (OHCHR, 2020b,

2020c). Much of the VAW prevention work by CSOs has been stalled as COVID-19 response work has been prioritized. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified certain feminist discourses (Kabeer et al., 2021; Ventura Alfaro, 2020).

Most of the organizations in this synthesis review¹⁶ had completed their UN Trust Fund-supported interventions before the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020. The interventions by SG and APNSW were two exceptions, as their UN Trust Fund projects ended in 2020. In reflecting on the impact of resistance in the context of the pandemic, **the grantee organizations interpreted “resistance” as heightened incidences of violence and limitations on the interventions imposed by the state.** The emergency situation brings resistance to the surface. CSOs observed an increase in GBV during this period, and often women and girls retreated into private spaces that were inaccessible to organizations.

For us, the women survivors of Nepal’s armed conflict are facing a triple trauma during the pandemic of COVID-19: a survivor of human rights violations, escalating domestic violence during COVID-19, and added trauma and anxiety due to COVID-19 and due to the loss of livelihood (TSK, focus group discussion, May 2021).

In response, most of the organizations – in particular those organizations with deep networks within communities – pivoted to COVID-19 response work. This work has its own programmatic repercussions: it introduced new costs (e.g. costs of delivering personal protective equipment kits to all their staff and community mobilizers), which had to be met with limited budgets. Organizations appreciated the responses of some donors that allowed them to divert funds to COVID-19 relief and provided additional core funding.

At a time when physical contact was limited, organizations also leveraged technologies to reach their stakeholders, but this introduced significant new challenges. SG, for example, found it hard to reach

women in its geography because women had limited access to the Internet. On the other hand, MADRE and Wangki Tangni were able to broadcast vital COVID-19 information to remote communities through their indigenous women-led radio network. ARNB was of the view that COVID-19 had aggravated the vulnerabilities of young Roma girls. Many rural Roma communities were cut off from any form of support (including medical support), and families were reluctant to expose themselves to outsiders for fear of catching the virus. This limited ARNB’s ability to intervene in emergencies. Organizations also observed very practical limitations on their work, such as delays in implementation and evaluation because of lockdowns and travel restrictions.

Interestingly, rather than sharing on “resistance” in a COVID-19 context, the organizations framed their answers to the impact of COVID-19 on resistance in terms of “challenges” and “responses”. This is perhaps reflective of the fact that COVID-19 pushed many organizations into “action” as they responded to the medical and humanitarian crisis.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- It is important, especially in times of emergency, to identify and plan for resistance proactively. CSOs also need to be able to analyse the big picture, identify mechanisms and risks factors that can affect their work and draw up appropriate risk mitigation pathways for their interventions, so that they are not caught by surprise when emergencies occur.
- In emergency situations such as a pandemic, where physical contact is limited, CSOs can leverage technologies to reach women and girls. However, this can introduce new challenges, such as access and reach. CSOs that had already integrated technologies into their programming (e.g. the use of radio) were more effective in reaching women and girls during the pandemic.
- More research is required to understand how VAWG is linked to other socioeconomic factors that are affected by the pandemic.

16 A separate synthesis review on adaptive programming explores the impact of COVID-19 in more detail.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CSOs face a range of types of resistance as they work with communities to end VAW. Many of these are deeply embedded in social norms, and tackling them is a starting point for the interventions themselves. They are expressions of resistance to broader feminist or gender equality values and represent fundamental opposition to the forms of social change that the organizations stand for. Instances also emerge during project roll-out and hinder project activities.

Organizations use several strategies to mitigate or prevent resistance, such as engagement, negotiation, framing and reframing, community mobilization and programmatic adaptation. In particular, responses to

resistance from state actors involve engagement and negotiation to fill gaps in procedures and processes. CSOs were keen to “make the process work” and prevent further violence towards survivors. **A different set of issues arises when resistance is more aggressive and overt.** These forms of backlash pose direct threats to feminist manifestos and oppose the women’s rights agenda. As a result, CSOs can respond by pushing themselves to make more defined feminist statements, or by deploying risk mitigation strategies to protect their interventions. A challenge that CSOs face is finding a balance between visibility and partnership/collaboration to get interventions off the ground. See Table 1 for an overview of types of resistance and responses from CSOs included in this synthesis review.

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	Omission, denial, disavowal, inaction	Appeasement, appropriation, co-option	Repression, violence
Types of resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Omission of the experiences of women and girls in definitions of GBV in laws and programmes Gaps in laws on violence or human rights that exclude certain examples of GBV Denial and disavowal of VAWG and GBV in communities Disavowal, delay, inaction and inertia by tertiary prevention services Patriarchal and orthodox contexts that resist women's empowerment and that uphold gender inequality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appeasement by leaders when publicly advocating for ending VAWG Claims around protecting culture Co-option of gender discourses Appropriation of intervention activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stigmatization, discrimination and racism against survivors State surveillance of CSOs State reversal of support for CSOs and gender commitments Repression and violence by law enforcement against sex workers Harassment of sex workers or other communities Shrinking spaces for civil society to operate in
	Responses and strategies		
Programmatic resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Risk mitigation planning to limit resistance to programmes Adaptive programming prioritizing problem-solving to ensure the process of prevention and response works and fidelity to the process 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redesigning interventions to make them more resilient Building programmes that are less dependent on state support Conducting risk assessments and planning to protect programmes and interventions
Community mobilization and strengthening the capacities of primary stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowering and mobilizing conflict survivors Creating safe spaces for women to share and own their experiences Mobilizing women and supporting them in their grass-roots work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging deeply with all community stakeholders and building trust Identifying and nurturing allies within communities Recognizing the value of community and customary systems but working with them to prioritize the needs of women and girls and enforce statutory law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mobilizing communities and strengthening their capacities to document and respond to human rights violations
Working with tertiary prevention services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging with state actors and other stakeholders Documenting violence 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building the capacities of tertiary prevention services to respond to VAWG and GBV
Framing the feminist narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocacy and building public support for better policy and action to hold the state accountable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Framing narratives so that they resonate with communities and manage the visibility of feminist work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using lateral entry points Limiting the external visibility of the intervention and its activities Reinforcing the feminist narrative
Collaborations and partnerships with civil society		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating spaces for dialogue with other CSOs and supporting collaboration across civil society Recognizing that engaging with differing ideologies takes time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investing in grass-roots networks and partnerships in civil society Strengthening local community linkages

Grantee organizations also found that they were sometimes constrained by budgets that limited the scope of their work. Often, resistance can demand a more immediate and direct response to support someone in or extract a vulnerable person from a violent situation. Fundraising for this kind of response was challenging, but there was greater support from international donors in this respect. **Resistance is not something that is written about in much detail in programmatic documentation, unless it is very violent or aggressive and has a significant tangible impact on the intervention.** In most cases, where resistance simmers under the surface, it is hard to detect. It can be dismissed as a “contextual challenge” and may go unreported. The way programme documentation and reporting are often designed does not always allow grantee organizations to share their experiences of resistance. Indeed, given the nature of the donor–grantee relationship, organizations stated that they might be incentivized not to report resistance, unless it was very overt and disruptive.

Moreover, reflecting on the nature of resistance is not something that is easily achieved within a short time frame. Grantee organizations reported that finding time for reflection within tight time frames for project implementation was challenging. Most organizations deeply immersed in the roll-out of a project are surrounded by the details of the intervention: reports that need to be written and sent out, daily tasks that need to be completed and finances that need to be managed. Therefore, it may be hard to recognize resistance as resistance from the inside. Some of the grantee organizations said that they had not thought of using a “resistance” lens when reflecting on their interventions, thinking of instances of resistance more as “challenges”. It was only through a longer discussion that created space for open reflection that some grantees recognized instances of resistance in their programmes. Some organizations may not even think of their intervention through the lens of resistance and backlash. Most organizations concurred that resistance was a starting point for their intervention, but their focus was more on outcomes or strategic approaches than on contextual hindrances. For example, one grantee stated, “I always thought of our project as a community mobilization project, not necessarily in the context of resistance.” Invariably the conversation gave rise to comments such as, “Now that you ask me, I’m looking at it from a resistance perspective and ...” Another

grantee said, “If you had asked me a few years ago, I would not have had this perspective. We saw it as a ‘challenge’. It takes time even for us implementers to reflect. Reflection is especially important – but finding time for that in the tight space of reporting and administration is difficult.” It may be useful to create more spaces for reflection and sharing (either laterally or more formally with donors/funders) when designing projects, particularly at the evaluation stage. One grantee said that engaging in this synthesis review had been useful to them because it offered them a more open-ended space to pause and reflect. Nevertheless, this review offered only limited space for reflection on resistance. The conversations point towards the fact that, in examining resistance in prevention interventions, it may be useful (and important) to take power structures into account. Power is an integral part of GBV and of resistance, which is a means of retaining power. Therefore, a power analysis alongside other analyses conducted during the design of an intervention would be valuable (see, for example, Michau, 2007; Michau et al., 2015; Namy et al., 2017, for more on gender–power dynamics in designing prevention interventions).

Many organizations used entry points other than feminist ones, such as education and economic empowerment, to engage with communities or to manage the visibility of their feminist work. These were strategic decisions taken by organizations to create dialogue with their stakeholders and were justified in their contexts. However, the larger question of the risk of diluting feminist narratives needs more study. For example, do these approaches pose further risks to women’s rights in the future? What are the trade-offs? Are these discussions that practitioners and funders need to have?

Some of the practitioners shared examples of other CSOs and NGOs working in the prevention, gender and development space that were resistant to their approach. This form of resistance was slightly different in that it emerged from a clash of perspectives or approaches rather than from a fundamental opposition to prevention work. One of the central challenges that can emerge (and emerged in the following example) was a clash between feminist and more development-focused narratives. In Nepal, for example, TSK’s feminist approach appeared to perplex other NGOs whose work in the transitional justice space was to document cases for their legal value (i.e. so that perpetrators of violence could be prosecuted). TSK

recalled being asked, “What will you do with these stories?” and “Can these stories serve as legal evidence?”¹⁷ TSK’s response was that justice was not limited to legal justice – it also included women finding the ability to go on with their lives as they chose to live them and gaining acceptance in their communities. Therefore, in TSK’s approach, the empowerment of women took precedence. Another example came from Turkey, where AÇEV partnered with two women’s organizations to train their staff on gender equality and GBV. It found the partnership challenging because both organizations had very divergent perspectives on working with men for the prevention of violence and had some fundamentally opposing approaches to men and boys, “the male perpetrators of violence against women”.

How do feminist approaches work alongside others in the CSO community? Is there a way for CSOs to collaborate inclusively while navigating pushback and resistance contextually? TSK chose to share its approach with and demonstrate its impact to the wider CSO community. It also trained other stakeholders (including CSOs) on feminist leadership, on addressing power inequalities and on prevention. AÇEV and its partners were able to align their approaches, but this took time and resulted in delays in achieving project outcomes. An important take-away – both conceptually and operationally – is **that building partnerships takes time, as it requires trust and an intersectional, inclusive and collaborative approach that is supportive and does not increase frictions within the CSO community.**

This leads on to another point that grantees raised: many of the organizations stressed the importance of solidarity in responding to resistance. Grantees argued that to be able to manage the burden of mitigating resistance daily, it was critical that they did not feel alone. They pointed to the value of networks of organizations doing similar work, which could help reduce the stress and burden of working in this space. This is especially important for organizations that are among the few (or even the only organizations) in their region. One suggestion that emerged was facilitating more networking and sharing between CSOs across geographies so that they can build their own communities of practice and feel less isolated.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for practitioners.

- Recognize, identify and, where possible, strategize for potential forms of resistance that could occur during an intervention. See them **as** resistance, not just “challenges” that have to be dealt with in the course of the intervention.
- Integrate power analyses into project conceptualization and design, as a power analysis can help identify how resistance could emerge.
- Integrate risk mitigation exercises into programme design to plan for resistance. For example, interventions’ pre-implementation risk mitigation strategies can anticipate different types of resistance, such as passive or active resistance, or go further to consider forms of omission such as denial and appeasement, so that they are better prepared and can pivot and adapt should the need arise.
- Create space in the timelines of interventions for project teams to reflect on resistance, including time for routine monitoring discussions and reporting exercises. For example, some routine reporting documents have sections on challenges and how they were overcome, but there could be more explicit sections to document resistance.
- Where possible, build partnerships with other CSOs to better leverage each other’s complementary skills, capacities and approaches. Recognize that organizations can collaborate and do not need to do everything by themselves. Partnerships also build resilience to resistance from state actors.
- Work to provide basic documentation to all vulnerable groups so that they can avail themselves of services provided by the state to protect them against violence.
- When identifying legitimate gaps in state provision and support, CSOs should also identify resistance within institutions (including donors) that could hinder the processes of change and adjust their interventions accordingly. CSOs should communicate and consult with donors on the forms of resistance they face, as this is key to adjusting their strategies or activities and

17 Comments made during an interview for this synthesis review.

clearing them for implementation (this links with the flexible implementation policies that are recommended for donors).

Creating spaces for dialogue and sharing with other CSOs can help build awareness, educate potential partners and bring them on board. Adopting inclusive and intersectional approaches rather than defensive positions when presented with opposition or questions on prevention work is a pathway to reaching agreement on an ultimate goal (e.g. ending VAWG).

The following recommendations are made for donors.

- Create more spaces for open reflection in monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning components, so that organizations can reflect on large-scale changes during a project's implementation alongside the requirements of programmatic reporting. This includes, in particular, more analysis, monitoring and reporting on power dynamics and resistance, as well as space for discussing the risks and the trade-offs of feminist work.
- Be open to funding and supporting components involving direct intervention.
- Help organizations find solidarity and communities of practice, especially as some grantees work in challenging and isolating contexts (e.g. they may be the only organization working in this space in a region). Helping these organizations connect with similar CSOs in other regions to discuss and share their experiences can be very useful. Specific budgetary allocations may be required to create spaces for sharing.

Consider more debate and discussion across networks on the question/risk of visibility of feminist work. It is not easy for CSOs to initiate reflections on this area.

The following recommendations are made for researchers.

- Conduct more research on resistance to prevention work. There is literature and research on resistance to gender equality and feminist approaches. However, resistance to prevention work is a niche space that requires its own body of work.

- Conduct more research on the trade-offs involved in “visible” feminist work.
- This is a space where PBK can contribute significantly.

Consider more research on resistance to prevention work in different geographical and sociocultural contexts. The nature of resistance varies from context to context, and documenting the cultural specificity of resistance is very important.



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