

# Critical Issues in Ethical *SASA!* Implementation

## Programming for Prevention Series, Brief No. 1

## Background

*SASA!* is a community mobilization approach to prevent violence against women (VAW) and HIV, developed by Raising Voices in Uganda. A randomized control trial conducted with the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Makerere University, evidenced *SASA!*'s effectiveness in preventing intimate partner violence against women<sup>1</sup> and that change can occur at a community level within programmatic timeframes. Translated into several languages and adapted to many contexts, *SASA!* is now being implemented by more than 60 organizations in over 20 countries.

Many organizations are implementing *SASA!* with integrity and attention to quality, and their work is a cause for celebration. There are also some organizations around the world using the *SASA! Activist Kit* in ways it was not intended and that does not follow the basic standards needed for sensitive issues such as VAW and HIV. This Program Brief aims to reinforce the good practices many organizations are already using and to guide others toward more ethical, safer implementation of *SASA!*

## Who can use this Program Brief?

This Program Brief can be used by organizations who are planning for or currently implementing *SASA!* It can guide your organizations' *SASA!* planning process, or to help you make improvements to your existing *SASA!* programming. It can also be used by donors to assess ethical implications of grant applications or grantee reports of *SASA!* implementation.

## Open access to *SASA!*

Raising Voices chooses to share *SASA!* (and all our methodologies) online for free because we believe when activists and practitioners share experience and learning it can support other violence prevention efforts and broader learning in the field which is essential to ending violence against women. Yet, we are concerned that using *SASA!* without following some of the critical guidance within this document may actually cause harm to women and communities, for reasons outlined below. We encourage each organization, activist and funding institution engaging with *SASA!* to reflect on the issues below and ensure your ethical and safe use of the methodology.

## Recommendations to do no harm with *SASA!*

Below we outline a few common pitfalls that could decrease *SASA!*'s effectiveness and lead to unintended harm. Recommendations are also included to help organizations implement *SASA!* ethically and safely.



### 1) Short-term programming and/or funding.

Quality *SASA!* implementation takes between 3 to 5 years. Attempting to squeeze the same process into shorter timeframes means that key aspects of the process are not respected, and all phases of *SASA!* are not completed. This can reduce quality and actually become dangerous. Often, when the *SASA!* phases are not completed or the work ends abruptly, communities are unable to successfully move through the process of change; further, this can create backlash harmful to *SASA!* activists, women and other community members living with violence and/or HIV. Disruptions in community relationships that come from delays or discontinued programming can also hamper future VAW prevention efforts and put women at risk.

### Recommendations:

- **Commit to 3 – 5 years of programming.**
- **If funds for complete implementation cannot be secured at the beginning, ensure strong organizational commitment to fundraising.**
- **Complete all phases of *SASA!*, consistently and in order.**
- **Conduct assessments after each phase to consider readiness to move to the next phase.**

## 2) Lack of accountability to women, women's priorities and VAW prevention.



It is essential that organizations using *SASA!* are rooted in a deep commitment to holding themselves accountable to women, including VAW prevention, women's rights, and other woman-identified priorities as areas of work focus. Failure to do this can lead to programs in which male staff and community activists begin to dominate, replicating the same power dynamics between women and men that *SASA!* seeks to uproot. An analysis of gendered power dynamics at an individual and structural level is essential to success.

### Recommendations:

- **Clearly identify VAW prevention as a priority in the organization prior to beginning *SASA!***
- **Include mechanisms to stay accountable to women, such as ensuring female leadership, strong support and referral mechanisms for women, and check-in meetings periodically with female community activists.**

## 3) Lack of quality training and technical support.



Any *SASA!* team implementing the approach needs quality training to prepare them for each new phase of *SASA!*, and also often need further technical support. Some staff read only portions of *SASA!* before implementing, and/or take on roles as *SASA!* trainers without sufficient community organizing skills or knowledge and experience in the methodology or VAW issues. Lack of proper training and technical support can mean that staff have not yet internalized some of the issues themselves before trying to spark change in others, or have not learned enough about VAW to truly support the community norms *SASA!* seeks to change. Staff may actually reinforce community stereotypes or misuse their own power as staff, leading to ineffective and dangerous implementation that puts women and community relationships at risk. They may also lack the technical skills to implement *SASA!* effectively.

### Recommendations:

- **Read *SASA!* to understand its process and principles.**
- **Include regular training and ongoing support to staff as they internalize issues, discover and rethink their own attitudes and behaviors.**
- **Use recommended multi-day trainings with *SASA!* staff at the beginning of each phase, using a Raising Voices accredited trainer.<sup>2</sup>**



## 4) Lack of adequate training and support for community activists.

Community activists are at the heart of *SASA!*. With adequate training and support, and regular presence of staff for mentoring, they take *SASA!* to the entire community, allowing for greater impact. Like staff, community activists need to internalize issues and discover and change their own biases, so they can use their leadership and power in a positive way. In addition, being a community activist can bring intense community pressure from those resistant to change, and community activists deserve and need strong and consistent support. Failure to adequately train and support community activists through regular training, practice sessions, and mentoring by staff can lead to ineffective implementation, community conflict, put women at risk, and can discredit the work when activist behavior contradicts *SASA!* values.

### Recommendations:

- **Conduct bimonthly or monthly meetings with community activists for support, debriefing, skill building and fostering solidarity among activists.**
- **Use recommended multi-day trainings at the beginning of each phase, facilitated by trained staff.**
- **Develop a mentoring strategy, pairing staff with particular community activists to mentor in each phase.**
- **Ensure staff spend adequate and meaningful time in the community supporting each community activist.**
- **Encourage staff to debrief with the community activist(s) after each observed activity. Talk through what went well and what could have gone better. Show appreciation and encouragement for their effort and commitment.**



## 5) Choosing only select activities without working with the core process or principles of the methodology.

SASA! has a set of 'essentials' that are guided by theory and that make the methodology effective (i.e. a gender-power analysis, following a phased-in approach, holistic community engagement, and activism). Program Brief No. 2 about program fidelity details the set of SASA! 'essentials' for maximum effectiveness.<sup>3</sup> The utilization of a few random activities or select communication materials from SASA! means the 'ingredients' needed for effective change are not included. Choosing only select activities from SASA! may create a more dangerous situation for women, since sensitive issues may be raised without enough process around them to provide support and create change. People may feel threatened by activity topics and initially resist change. This creates a backlash that can be dangerous for women experiencing violence and/or activists. However, with sufficient, meaningful activities and processes, this resistance is temporary and the community's social norms can change.

### Recommendations:

- **Read SASA! and understand its 'essentials' before beginning programming.**
- **Commit to consistent activities to analyze and explore gender and power within the SASA! team and in the community.**
- **Use all the four strategies in all four phases, and select activities that engage all the circles of influence in change.**
- **Engage community members in activism that demonstrates the benefits of change and include a sufficient number of activities to build critical mass.**

## 6) Lack of community relationships and feedback.



Strong relationships of respect between staff and community members are essential to ensure an authentic partnership between an organization and community, in which each has the power to express their own needs and priorities. Strong relationships are also critical to safe and ethical SASA! implementation; with strong relationships, staff can become quickly aware of any unintended harm or backlash against women experiencing violence and/or activists, making timely adjustments to get back on track. Lack of consistent community presence, an organizational style that does not allow for relationship development between staff and community activists, or lack of organizational grievance structures open to communities are barriers to the change process.

### Recommendations:

- **Select SASA! intervention communities where staff can have regular presence.**
- **Cultivate trusting relationships to ensure community activists and members feel safe and comfortable to give honest feedback.**
- **Provide community activists and other key community members with regular opportunities to share feedback and experiences, and report grievances.**
- **Hold timely strategic discussions that take community feedback into consideration and make needed adjustments to implementation and materials.**
- **Role model respect through language, keeping to time, remaining conscious about status symbols (e.g., jewelry, vehicles, clothing, etc) and connecting personally with community activists.**

## 7) Lack of referrals to response services.



SASA! focuses on primary prevention of VAW and HIV. However, because activities are designed to spark community dialogue on these issues, women experiencing violence and/or HIV often come forward seeking services during and after activities. Therefore, it is essential that organizations using SASA! develop strong referral systems to formal and informal response services, from the beginning of SASA! In many communities, services are lacking and/or community activists do not trust existing services, however, in most communities there are trusted women and men who act as informal service providers. If this is the case for your community, ensure that you engage them and provide training wherever possible to ensure safer, more ethical handling of VAW cases. Community activists should not be encouraged to intervene directly in response to cases of violence. This can also be unsafe for both themselves and women experiencing violence, given their lack of training in response.

## Recommendations:

- **Create and regularly update a referral list that includes formal and informal people and services for women experiencing VAW and/or HIV.**
- **Train staff and community activists on use of the referral list, introducing activists to service providers whenever possible to help build trust.**
- **Provide basic training to service providers to support increased understanding of VAW and encourage positive use of power.**
- **Create advocacy goals within SASA! to improve quality and gaps in response services, over time.**

## Moving Forward

Implementing ethical VAW prevention work using the *SASA! Activist Kit* is possible, even for organizations who have not done so before. VAW and HIV are serious issues that require skill and determination to address. We are confident that with continued attention to the recommendations described in this Program Brief, *SASA!* can continue to spark meaningful transformation in relationships and communities worldwide. Please share your experiences with us at [info@raisingvoices.org](mailto:info@raisingvoices.org) and join the global community using *SASA!*

Other resources that can help you reflect on the quality of your *SASA!* programming include:

Raising Voices (2017). Fidelity to the *SASA! Activist Kit: Prevention Programming Series, Brief No. 2*. Kampala, Uganda. Available online at <http://raisingvoices.org/resources/>



The *Programming for Prevention Series* is a collection of Program Briefs designed to address critical challenges and questions in VAW prevention programming.

Suggested Citation: Raising Voices (2017). Critical issues in ethical *SASA!* implementation, *Programming for Prevention Series, Brief No. 1*, Kampala, Uganda.



## Endnotes

1. Raising Voices, LSHTM & CEDOVIP (2015). Is Violence Against Women Preventable? Findings from the *SASA!* Study summarized for general audiences. Kampala, Uganda: Raising Voices.
- 2 For a list of Raising Voices accredited trainers, contact: [info@raisingvoices.org](mailto:info@raisingvoices.org).
- 3 Raising Voices (2017). Fidelity to the *SASA!* Activist Kit, *Prevention Programming Series Brief No.2*, Kampala, Uganda  
Available online at <http://raisingvoices.org/resources/>