



LEARNING FROM PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES: ISSUE NO. 1

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS: LESSONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED BY THE UN TRUST FUND TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Women participating in the project from MADRE in Nicaragua working to end violence against indigenous women. Photo: MADRE

Background

Community mobilization is a promising and popular strategy to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG), with the potential to reduce violence among entire communities, not just engaged individuals or groups. This strategy engages with a broad range of actors, including community activists, opinion leaders such as faith-based actors, the police, and health and social services. Community mobilization efforts can also include tactics to hold governments and other institutions accountable to national and subnational laws and policies, with communities mobilizing to bring about change.

However, evidence on the effectiveness of this strategy varies. In some studies, community mobilization interventions have been shown to be effective in reducing

VAWG through programmes lasting 3–5 years, and yet others have found no impact on VAWG.¹ This suggests that implementation and context are crucial for impact. Indeed, community mobilization interventions are highly shaped by their context – that is, what is appropriate in one context may not be in another. Yet there is limited documentation of the processes and factors that facilitate successful community mobilization in particular settings.

About this brief

This brief aims to explore the “why and how” of using community mobilization strategies in VAWG prevention, by drawing on the experiences of 10 civil society organizations (CSOs) funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund). The insights presented are based on analysis of final external evaluations and project reports,

¹ See Kerr-Wilson, A., Gibbs, A., McAslan Fraser, E., Ramsoomar, L., Parke, A., Khuwaja, H. M. A., and Jewkes, R. (2020), *A Rigorous Global Evidence Review of Interventions to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls*, What Works to Prevent VAWG (Pretoria, South African Medical Research Council); Chatterji, S., Stern, E., Dunkle, K., and Heise, L. (2020), “Community activism as a strategy to reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) in rural Rwanda: results of a community randomised trial”, *Journal of Global Health*, vol. 10, No. 1, 010406.

and reflections from the CSO practitioners themselves in focus group discussions. Through a qualitative, inductive approach, the author put these insights from 10 case studies into conversation with existing literature on community mobilization, to highlight how learning from practice can contribute practical lessons to the evidence base on prevention of VAWG and fill knowledge gaps. It aims to provide some practical tips and recommendations for practitioners planning to implement community mobilization strategies in their interventions and for donors funding such projects.

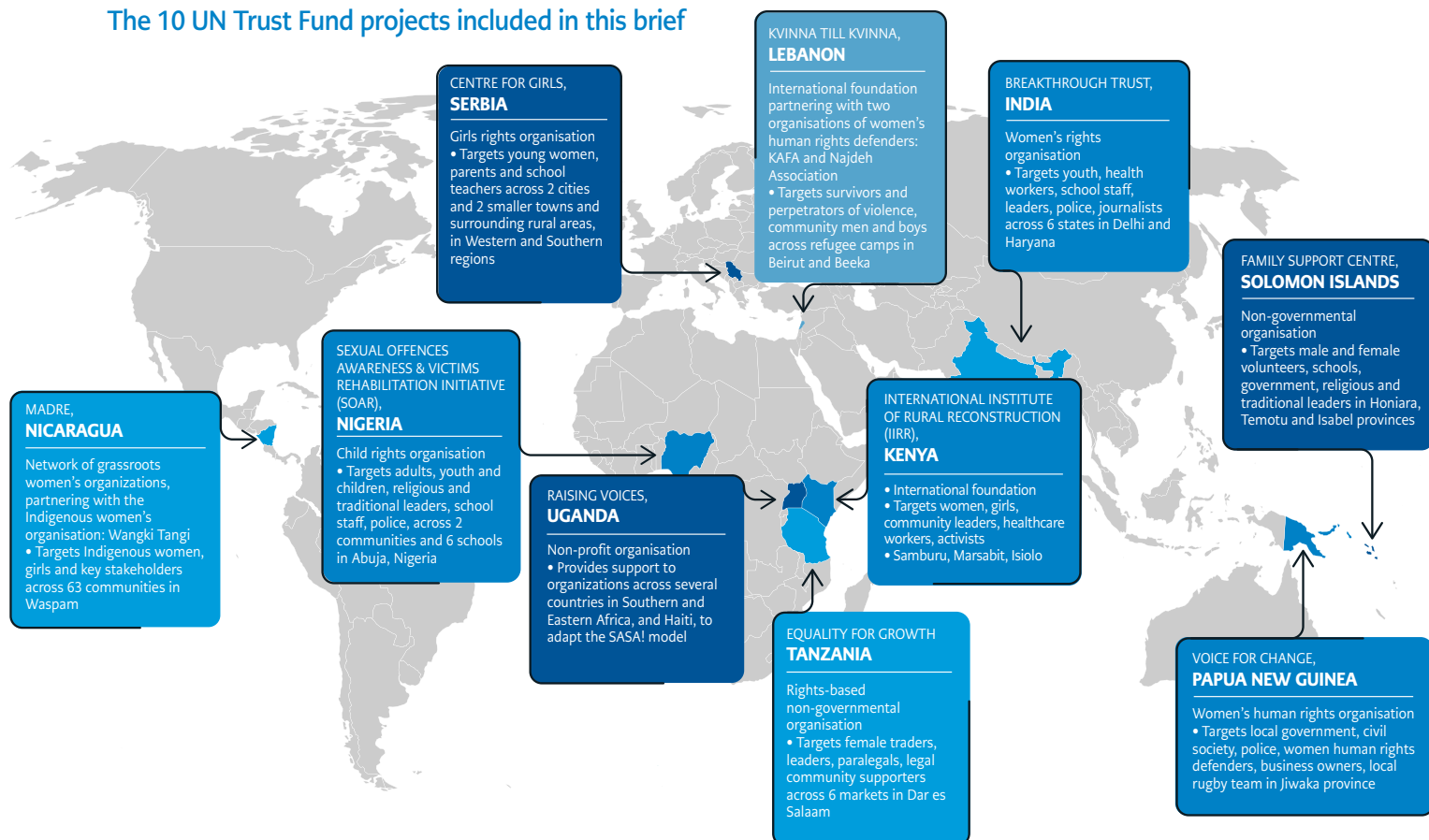
Case studies

The cases selected are 10 projects that mobilized communities to prevent VAWG in 10 countries in Africa, South-East and Central Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. The projects were carried out by various types of CSOs – women's rights organizations, non-profits and children's rights organizations – all aiming to prevent and respond to different types of VAWG. Project grant sizes ranged from \$115,412 to \$1 million and

were implemented in a range of settings. For example, the CSO Equality for Growth aimed to support female traders at risk of violence in markets in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania – therefore, the urban informal marketplace and its diverse actors were treated as the project community. In Nigeria, the Sexual Offences Awareness & Victims Rehabilitation Initiative mobilized rural communities and schools to prevent sexual violence against girls.

Various strategies were used to mobilize community members. For example, in Papua New Guinea, Voice for Change employed a rapid surveying technique in which images of different forms of VAWG were used as a basis for discussions with community members. Raising Voices supported organizations in several countries to use the SASA! model, which consists of four phases of community mobilization – Start, Awareness, Support and Action – focusing on changing power imbalances between men and women through community-based activities. This diversity of the projects and CSOs reflects the demand-driven nature of the UN Trust Fund's approach to grant giving.

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



Practitioners' experiences of community mobilization

Practitioners working for the 10 CSOs shared valuable lessons learned on how to design and implement effective community mobilization strategies, including challenges. The brief presents key lessons learned on four important aspects of community mobilization that were found to be relevant across the projects, highlighting how practice can inform theory.

Note on the literature: this brief took inspiration from Campbell and Cornish's conceptual framework for community mobilization². This framework demonstrates that the success or failure of community mobilization interventions depends on how they interact with their social environment, namely how they understand and navigate (1) the **social and cultural norms** of the community, (2) the **economic and other incentives** for community engagement, and (3) the **relationships and networks between and within communities**, community members and powerful allies. In addition, this brief looks at (4) **institutional dimensions**,³ recognizing that community mobilization should ideally allow communities to challenge broader social and institutional structures that can undermine collective efforts to prevent VAWG.

1. The importance of representation and understanding: "Know your community to know your response"

The 10 CSOs shared valuable lessons learned about the importance of meeting communities where they are in community mobilization efforts; this includes being contextually relevant, using appropriate community entry points and language, and being responsive to key needs and priorities to prevent VAWG. Engaging and equipping community members to carry out mobilization activities was important to ensure that programmes were owned and led by communities. Several key take-aways emerged:

Practitioners found that effective community mobilization interventions need to be culturally relevant, appropriate, and tailored to priorities and needs within and across communities.

For instance, Raising Voices' experience of adapting SASA! in multiple countries and communities demonstrated the importance of, for example, translating material into local languages and testing it with communities before roll-out.

Finding appropriate community entry points, including appropriate language and values for activities, was also found to be critical to gain trust and avoid potential backlash against VAWG prevention programmes. For example, the Family Support Center in Solomon Islands found that men were initially reluctant to discuss women's rights but were more open when new entry points were found, focusing on the benefits of change for both men and women. As they explained in a focus group discussion (FGD):

Talking about sharing tasks 50–50 between husbands and wives caused a lot of backlash. This was not seen as acceptable ...in many different ways. We learned that starting with gender roles was a challenging place to start the conversation that would often trigger backlash and distancing from the programme. So instead, we shifted to a focus on relationship values, asking "what do you want in a good relationship with your partner?" (FGD, 22 January 2021).

To be effective, community mobilization should support local organizations and activists, and "walk the walk" in terms of ensuring that those involved in project implementation represent the community and show commitment to project values, including through **appropriate selection of community champions and activists**. The majority of CSOs in this study recruited, trained and supported community members themselves to carry out community mobilization activities. One practitioner reflected on the value of recruiting community-based activists:

It allows community members themselves who are known and trusted [to facilitate] these deep conversations, in a way that has texture and tone and language from the community they are living in (FGD, 22 January 2021).

However, care must be taken in selecting community members for involvement:

² Campbell, C., and Cornish, F. (2010), "Towards a fourth generation of approaches for HIV/AIDS management: creating contexts for effective community mobilization", AIDS CARE, vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 1569–79.

³ Mannell, J., and Dadswell, A. (2017), "Preventing intimate partner violence: towards a framework for supporting effective community mobilisation", *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 196–211.

We would love to involve local leaders so that they are the ones who also talk about the issue, but ... background checks become important because, if they themselves have been accused of a crime against women, they cannot be seen as being involved in a process like this (FGD, 22 January 2021).

Finally, in navigating the social and cultural norms of the community, the promotion of gender equitable social norms must be included in community mobilization activities for meaningful change to be achieved. For example, in Nicaragua, the CSO MADRE used art, theatre, music, dance and other key aspects of indigenous culture in activities to prevent VAWG. In doing so, it also provided opportunities for women to participate in previously male-dominated activities, such as playing the guitar or taking part in community dance and theatre performances, thus promoting gender-equitable social norms while mobilizing the community to prevent VAWG.

2. The importance of understanding the socioeconomic context and incentives

Another key lesson learned from the 10 CSOs was the importance of engaging activists as committed volunteers while ensuring that they are not financially burdened, which is important for sustainability. Several key take-aways emerged:

Include economic empowerment activities in community mobilization projects, as economic deprivation can be a risk factor for VAWG or prevent full engagement in programming. Equality for Growth (EfG) in Tanzania identified a lack of financial means as one of the main reasons that women do not leave abusive relationships. According to EfG, the project might have been more successful if it had offered economic empowerment activities to the market traders, who had little capital and whose businesses were suffering. In Nicaragua, MADRE supported efforts to give seeds to local female farmers, which provided greater food security. This had a ripple effect, increasing women's economic independence and decision-making abilities within the household.

An appropriate balance must be found between promoting volunteer activism and ensuring that activists are not financially burdened. In Nigeria, some volunteers expected to benefit financially, despite SOAR explaining that these were voluntary positions. Consequently, some volunteers

left the project midway. Some CSOs found it effective to meet the material needs of activists through means other than financial compensation. In India, young activists volunteering for Breakthrough Trust were provided with references to increase their employment opportunities. A focus group participant explained:

We work in communities where poverty is a real issue. You find that when they perceive an organization comes to do any form of work with them, they feel you have come out with money to give out to them. Without financial incentives, they are not interested, and we had to sustain their involvement (FGD, 22 January 2021).

Ongoing training and mentoring of community activists is needed to allow them to put their knowledge and skills into action. For example, in Papua New Guinea, community activists working with Voice for Change met on a quarterly basis throughout the project for training and debriefing. Such “small wins” can be important in empowering activists. In Solomon Islands, community volunteers gained recognition for their role and were asked to be part of national consultations, which bolstered their confidence as activists:

Locally bred community mobilizers and resource persons should have their capacity built and be motivated to take up community activities by their own initiative. This may be done through recognition certificates and special mention during project events (FGD, written response).

CSOs should support the agency and empowerment of project participants to help them to engage effectively in community mobilization activities. For some projects, especially those that engaged young people, it was important to identify and engage “gatekeepers”. For example, the Center for Girls in Serbia planned to work mainly with high school girls but decided to extend participation to school staff and parents to create a supportive environment. In Lebanon, some husbands assumed that their wives were participating in project activities to “plan a revolution against them”. To address this challenge, the CSO Kvinna till Kvinna, working with local organisations Kafa and Association Najdeh, held a series of awareness sessions with men and boys, providing them with a space to discuss any issues and ask questions.

3. The importance of engaging across and within community groups

Many of the practitioner-based insights centred on the importance of meaningful engagement across and within different community groups for effective mobilization and the need to take time to foster trust and mutual respect. Relevant groups are multisectoral stakeholders including faith-based and traditional leaders, governments and justice personnel. Given their influence and role in referral networks for VAWG response services, they can promote an enabling environment. **Several key take-aways emerged:**

Meaningful engagement of communities in design and implementation requires relationship-building, which takes time, trust and mutual respect. Voice for Change in Papua New Guinea had a strong reputation and existing relationships in the communities it worked in, which enabled active community engagement. An focus group participant commented on the importance of trusted relationships with communities as a foundation for mobilization work and the risks of bypassing this important step.

Community mobilization is so different from [other] programming we do and it does come down to trust, mutual respect, the ability of activists or facilitators to come to this [with] critical thinking and sustained engagement. Taking the time to build relationships ... often gets

short-changed, especially as work starts to get scaled and there is more pressure to do more quicker, to get further, hit however many thousands of community members, that we lose the foundational stuff. I don't know any example of transformative grounded work without those relationship pieces. (FGD, 15 February 2021)

Meaningful engagement across and within communities, through participatory processes is critical to inclusive programming that leaves no one behind. In Serbia, the Center for Girls noted the importance of sensitively raising awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer rights – including in rural areas and among ethnic minorities – when raising awareness among community members on VAWG. A focus group participant explained how participatory techniques, such as theatre of the oppressed, can support more inclusive community engagement:

We try to use mobilization as a way to break boundaries and see how they can have a joint conversation on some difficult issues. We use theatre of the oppressed and this format helps people open up and share their thoughts without feeling fear or guilt. One of the learnings from development of messaging and campaigning has been to be inclusive, as violence gets aggravated for individuals with different identities. (FGD, 22 January 2021).



Betty Mtwewe, a market trader in Dar es Salaam, in her market stall which is now a safer place for women to conduct business. Photo: Equality for Growth

Involving stakeholders who hold power and influence is necessary to foster an enabling environment. In particular, practitioners identified the importance of building connections with local leaders to help mitigate community resistance, given their influence on norms related to violence. In Kenya, the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction worked with faith-based and traditional leaders to form a task force that identified alternative rites of passage to genital mutilation and cutting for girls and to use their influence to detach the practice from religion.

Working across communities also relates to access to services within the community and beyond, as raising awareness of VAWG may lead to an increase in demand.

Providing VAWG response services or referrals is an ethical imperative in community mobilization interventions. Strengthening response services and referrals in itself can build rapport between communities and organizations. In Kenya, the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction brought together community members, including community and religious leaders, schoolgirls, teachers, police, paralegals, health-care workers and circumcisers, to support a reporting and referral system. One practitioner noted:

Community mobilization is not in isolation, it is part of a larger picture. It provides a certain pathway to community members to not just know about issues but also what can they do about it and where to go for support ... So we have been trying to build bridges not just with government but also with networks and alliances to provide that support, look for partnerships across the board, because we ourselves do not provide those services. (FGD, 15 February 2021)

4. Linking community mobilization to the institutional context

The institutional context refers to the broader structural inequalities that can influence the success of community mobilization efforts and hence VAWG prevention. For instance, gender inequalities can be reinforced by formal institutional structures, such as government policy, laws, and education and health services. Even though attention has been given to its importance in prevention programming overall, it is rarely seen as an integral component of community mobilization interventions. From the work of the ten CSOs, some **key take-aways emerged on this front:**

Several CSOs carried out complementary activities to hold governments and institutions accountable for establishing and implementing policies and laws on VAWG and gender equality. In Nicaragua, MADRE and local organization Wangki Tangi worked with the police, municipal judges and local government to increase their commitment to justice for women and girls in accordance with the law. An annual indigenous women's forum brought women and girls, government officials and civil society members together to address key concerns and find solutions, bolstering collaboration between the customary and statutory legal systems. Breakthrough Trust in India also brought the community and institutions together:

One of the efforts in our project was the community-based dialogue process, which is like a local hearing. We brought people from the village, the leaders and some district officials, and we took up the issue of domestic violence and there was one ask related to the whole event which was to get a protection officer instated in that district ... Because of that effort, someone was given that duty to look into matters of domestic violence (FGD, 15 February 2021).

Community mobilization interventions can effectively identify gaps in the quality or capacity of institution-led services for survivors of VAWG. For instance, Raising Voices worked directly with service providers, including police, social workers and health-care providers, to strengthen their analysis of power imbalances as a core driver of VAW and train them to provide high-quality services to survivors. In Tanzania, Equality for Growth trained legal professionals on guaranteeing confidentiality for VAWG survivors. In Papua New Guinea, Voice for Change responded to a surge in demand for GBV response services as a result of community awareness activities by

advocating for improvements to services, including the opening of a police unit for family and sexual violence.

Practitioners found it was important to link community mobilization efforts to local or national policies or plans to enhance sustainability and credibility. For example, in Solomon Islands the Family Support Center's project aligned its outcomes with provincial government plans as a mechanism for advocacy and to increase the likelihood of future institutional funding. Project staff were later included in national consultations on VAWG. Raising Voices built on SASA! by including a specific content around institutional strengthening in "SASA! Together" which created leverage for influencing the development of national policies.

However, there can be challenges for smaller organizations with less capacity to link their efforts to the institutional level. In such cases, practitioners reported the benefits of establishing partnerships with other organizations:

Partners that are feminist, more grounded in communities, able to build relationships and meet people where they are and [be] seen as part of communities rather than outsiders, those are the organizations that excel at mobilization work ... But no one organization can do it all. Partnerships are important for the prevention and response side and to change social norms at deeply local level up to policy, national change (FGD, 15 February 2021).

ADAPTING COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Social distancing and lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic severely limited opportunities for community mobilizing in many countries. **CSOs adapted in several ways, including – as a first priority – by being responsive to community needs to protect people from the virus and the increased risk of VAWG.** In Serbia, the Center for Girls conducted a social media campaign to raise awareness of the increase in VAWG during the pandemic. In Nicaragua, Wangki Tangi used its indigenous women-led radio station to reach rural communities with updates on protective measures against COVID-19, raise awareness about VAWG and identify referral options. Raising Voices created SASA!-style posters and info sheets including aspirational messages such as "How can you support your partner during a stressful time?"

CSOs radically adapted their projects to navigate COVID-19-related restrictions by moving activities online or to virtual spaces and/or by reducing group sizes. As well as moving community outreach to WhatsApp and videoconferencing, Breakthrough Trust in India saw an upsurge in youth activism as the young people trained under the project took a leadership role and implemented community campaigns in a hyper-local manner to address some of the immediate issues arising in their communities.

However, some practitioners noted the challenges of moving community mobilization activities online, as this limits interaction and the dialogue that is fundamental to the process of change. As one practitioner noted, "Community radio was very helpful during COVID times. [But] sadly, a lot of mobilization that happened last year was more broadcasting, giving out messages from one space." More creativity is needed to create opportunities for dialogue and interaction in virtual spaces (e.g. in WhatsApp discussion groups).

CSOs working on community mobilization also saw a shift to direct service provision and protection. In Lebanon, Kvinna till Kvinna, Kafa and Association Najdeh faced difficulties identifying safe shelters for women whose lives were at risk; this was further exacerbated by the pandemic, and women found ad hoc accommodation until shelters were able to take them in. In Serbia, the Center for Girls saw an increase in demand for its helpline services. **In this context, practitioners noted how vital it is to support the well-being and resilience of staff, activists and others** leading community efforts, to mitigate the risk of vicarious trauma and burnout.



Lessons learned and recommendations

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

Recommendations for practitioners

- 1. Know your community to know your response.** The appropriateness and relevance of community mobilization strategies and messages can vary widely from one setting to another. It is critical to take time to build relationships, trust and mutual respect between organizations and target communities, and create safe spaces for sharing and identifying community needs and priorities.
- 2. Ensure community volunteers or activists are not overburdened and are carefully selected, trained and supported.** Careful selection of volunteers or activists is critical for intervention success; they need to have gender-equitable and non-violent attitudes and behaviours, and be committed as activists. Yet some financial support for activists may be necessary to ensure they are not burdened or excluded because of lack of financial means.
- 3. Strive for reflexivity and accountability on behalf of organizations.** Community mobilization should start from within, with staff encouraged to connect on a personal level with the issues of gender and VAWG. It is also important for organizations to reflect on their relationships and be accountable to mitigate inequitable power dynamics with community members.
- 4. Ensure sufficient time and intensity for community mobilization to have an impact.** Addressing harmful and embedded norms, attitudes and beliefs is a process that takes time and intensity. It takes regular presence to build trust, understanding and collaboration among organizations and communities.
- 5. Work at the nexus of violence prevention and response.** It is critical for community mobilization programmes to ensure support for survivors, by establishing referral links or partnerships and by working with providers to improve services.
- 6. Foster adaptive programming.** Community mobilization programmes should be demand driven, respond and adapt to community priorities, and ideally be co-created with communities. Adaptive programming keeps the work relevant and meaningful, and in doing so helps foster trust and respect with communities (the crux of mobilization work).
- 7. Make efforts to support an enabling environment.** This includes identifying and working with opinion leaders and gatekeepers, to support the credibility, ownership and sustainability of the mobilization work. It also includes advocacy, engagement and/or training to hold governments and institutions accountable to commitments and link mobilization efforts to local or national policies and plans. It is important to work with neither too few nor too many partners and ensure realistic and feasible engagement based on project scope.

Monitoring of progress of project activities in Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia. Photo: Sanja Krstić/Center for Girls



Recommendations for donors. (1) **Ensure longer-term, flexible funding cycles** to accommodate adaptive programming, which can ensure responsiveness and co-creation with communities. Community mobilization processes take time and intensity and warrant funding for at least 3–5 years. (2) **Foster a culture of learning to encourage reflection and monitoring on “what works” as much as what is not working.** This is especially important when it comes to community mobilization, which is complex and challenging, with impacts that can be hard to measure. Donors need to appreciate and encourage grantees to account for this complexity, rather than trying to simplify the process. And (3) **Fund and support CSOs and women’s rights organizations to do community mobilization work.** These organizations are well placed to build relationships with community members and be grounded in communities to ensure relevant, appropriate and accessible programming.

Recommendations for researchers. More research is needed that (1) acknowledges how community mobilization plays out differently in different contexts, (2) investigates how to best support volunteerism among activists and what role this has in achieving and sustaining results, (3) studies how community mobilization can be inclusive and ensure that no one is left behind, (4) examines how it can promote change at the institutional level and (5) reports on how community mobilization projects have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. **Researchers should document lessons learned through practice-based knowledge and enable partnerships between practitioners and researchers** to ensure trust, sharing and acknowledgement of different forms of expertise and knowledge.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

This brief is authored by Erin Stern, and is part of a series of briefs produced by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. For the longer synthesis review on which this brief is based, and others in the series, see the [UN Trust Fund Learning Hub](#).

Visit the [UN Trust Fund evaluation library](#) for access to over 100 final external evaluations of projects supported by the UN Trust Fund, including most of those mentioned in this brief. The library is searchable by country and theme.

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

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include [Breakthrough Trust in India](#), [Center for Girls in Serbia](#), [Equality for Growth in Tanzania](#), [Family Support Center in Solomon Islands](#), [International Institute of Rural Reconstruction in Kenya](#), [Kvinna till Kvinna in Lebanon](#), [MADRE in Nicaragua](#), [Raising Voices in Uganda](#), [Sexual Offences Awareness & Victims Rehabilitation Initiative in Nigeria](#) and [Voice for Change in Papua New Guinea](#).

About the UN Trust Fund: the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) is the only global grant-making mechanism dedicated to eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls. Managed by UN Women on behalf of the United Nations system since its establishment in 1996 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/166, the UN Trust Fund has awarded almost \$183 million to 572 initiatives in 140 countries and territories.





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

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