



LEARNING FROM PRACTICE BRIEF SERIES: ISSUE NO. 2

# ENGAGING FAITH-BASED AND TRADITIONAL ACTORS IN PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS: LESSONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED BY THE UN TRUST FUND TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Photo: Launch of project activities in Narok, Kenya. Credit: CREAW, Kenya

## Background

Faith-based and traditional actors are increasingly recognized as key actors in the prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and crucial to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 by 2030. Faith-based actors (e.g. formal and informal faith-based leaders and organizations) and traditional actors (e.g. chiefs, traditional healers, headmen and headwomen, elders, mothers-in-law and aunts) can impact VAWG programming in a number of ways. Although these actors can promote beliefs, norms and practices that support and enable VAWG prevention, they can also encourage those that hinder prevention and even encourage and legitimize certain forms of violence. Their reach and influence cannot be ignored, especially given their unique position in households and communities.

Research in the VAWG prevention field<sup>1</sup> has found several entry points and reasons for working with faith-based and traditional actors. These actors can provide access to communities, as authority figures and gatekeepers of community and household rituals, and customs embedded in faith and tradition. Faith-based and traditional actors have social capital and influence, including access to funds, buildings and institutions that can be used for VAWG prevention interventions. Finally, these actors have unique assets, namely knowledge and skills relating to sacred texts, rituals and prayers that uphold beliefs, norms and practices based on faith and tradition. Their ability to facilitate dialogue at community, local government and state levels means that mobilization of these actors can have far-reaching impact. However, research on the role of faith-based and especially traditional actors in VAWG prevention is somewhat limited.

<sup>1</sup> For literature on different types of engagement with faith leaders, see Palm, S. and Eyber, C. (2019), "Why faith? Engaging faith mechanisms to end violence against children", briefing paper (Washington D.C., Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Ending Violence against Children Hub).

## About this brief

This brief aims to explore why and how to engage faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention, by drawing on the experiences of 10 civil society organizations (CSOs) implementing VAWG prevention projects in different countries and contexts, funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund). The brief showcases the unique contributions that CSOs can make in this area and attempts to fill knowledge gaps by synthesizing lessons learned by CSOs. It also aims to provide some practical tips and recommendations for practitioners engaging such actors

in their interventions and for donors funding faith-based prevention projects.

The insights presented are based on the analysis of final external evaluations and project reports, and focus group discussions with CSO practitioners themselves. Through a qualitative, inductive approach, the authors put these insights from the 10 CSOs into conversation with existing literature on faith-based and traditional actors, to highlight how learning from practice can contribute to the evidence base on prevention of VAWG.



Photo: AMREF  
AMREF working with girls to prevent FGM through working with community and spiritual leaders in Tanzania.

## Case studies

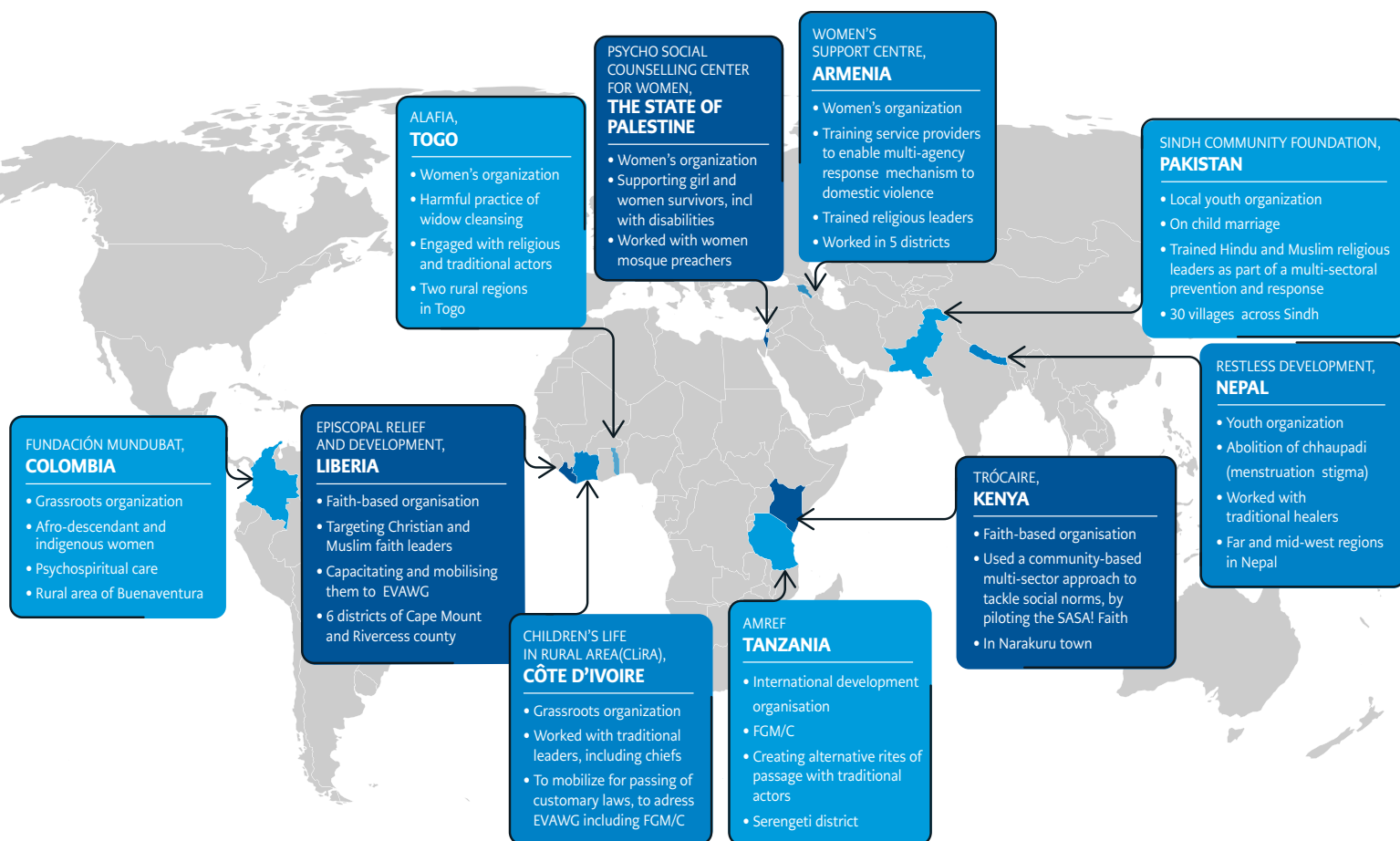
The cases selected are 10 projects conducted in 10 different countries engaging with faith-based and traditional actors in various ways, with projects from Africa, South-East and Central Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. The selected projects were also carried out by a range of CSO types: three that self-identify as women's organizations, two faith-based organizations, two youth organizations and three development organizations. These different identities enabled the organizations to engage with faith-based and traditional actors through various entry points. The projects focused on several forms of VAWG, including menstrual stigma (chhaupadi, in Nepal), female genital mutilation and cutting (FGMC) (Tanzania), harmful practices related to widowhood inheritance issues (Togo) and violence against specific groups of women, such as indigenous women and women of African descent (Colombia) and women and girls with disabilities (the State of Palestine). Project grant sizes ranged from \$54,000 to

\$1 million. This diversity of projects and CSOs reflects the demand-driven nature of the UN Trust Fund's approach to grant giving.

The 10 UN Trust Fund-funded projects show that CSOs are uniquely placed to engage faith-based and traditional actors and offer them opportunities to become potential allies in VAWG prevention. CSOs have different abilities and ways of mobilizing faith-based and traditional actors: they can develop tailored, coordinated and flexible responses that can be adaptive and put women and girls – including those most at risk in society – at the centre of interventions (see figure 1 for details). However, the review found that there is no “one size fits all” way of engaging with these actors, and the lessons from these 10 projects emphasize the need for diverse approaches and organizations in this work.

FIGURE 1:

The ten UN Trust Fund projects included in this synthesis review that engaged faith-based and traditional actors



## Why have these CSOs engaged faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention?

**Most of the 10 CSO-led projects show that faith and culture form extremely complex belief systems that shape values underpinning VAWG and are frequently transmitted across generations.** Insights from CSOs validated much of the literature on why it is important to engage faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the CSOs in this sample found that these actors hold sway over community attitudes on VAWG in at least four different ways.

- **They are custodians of customary laws<sup>3</sup>** especially in remote, fragile or conflict-affected contexts, where they may provide the only access to justice available to women and girls. For instance, in Togo, the women's organization Alafia, aiming to eradicate the harmful practice of widow cleansing, worked with traditional spiritual leaders who uphold specific ancestral laws that require widowed

women to undergo a sexual cleansing ceremony to be admitted back into the community.

- **They act as keepers of culture and influencers of social norms** that underpin VAWG. Traditional actors often play important roles as the informal or formal culture keepers and norm setters, passing harmful practices on to the next generation, and in particular to their daughters. For instance, in Nepal, Restless Development focused on engaging with locally trusted traditional healers, mothers-in-law and elderly women in the community, who are influential norm setters when it comes to the harmful practice of *chhaupadi*, which prevents women and girls from social contact during menstruation, as they are considered “impure”.
- **They are sacred ritual holders:** in areas with low literacy, where most people cannot read sacred texts, rituals may be considered more authoritative than texts. This was recognized by Alafia in Togo, where widows who refuse to undergo harmful sexual cleansing ceremonies are considered to offend the gods and disrespect the ancestors. In such cases, women and girls themselves may accept harmful practices and trust authoritative ritual holders for fear of spiritual reprisals. Thus, the influence of traditional leaders and women's and girls' beliefs can be mutually reinforcing and make it difficult to end harmful practices.

<sup>2</sup> For a literature review, please see the longer synthesis review on the UN Trust Fund's learning hub: Le Roux, E. and Palm, S. (2021), Learning from Practice: Engaging Faith-based and Traditional Actors in Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls (New York, United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women).

<sup>3</sup> Such as customs or practices accepted by members of a particular community as having force of law due to long-established usage

Girls during an activity against FGM in Tanzania. Photo: AMREF.



*Phenomena like chhaupadi are so intricately linked with [the] culture of a community that people become very defensive if only legal arguments are presented. There are multiple layers of issues which inhibit free and open discussion. These layers should be understood before attempting to change issues.*

Restless Development, final report, p. 66

- **They are tied to political and economic systems:** For VAWG prevention, it is critical to engage with faith and culture not only in their own right but also because they are deeply intertwined with socio-political and legal systems in some countries. In some contexts, faith-based systems are entangled with politics and patriarchal narratives in ways that form a harmful ideological nexus that further violates women; for instance, in the State of Palestine, the Psycho-social Counseling Center for Women (PSCCW) notes through initial analysis that religion can be used to support patriarchal culture or to support political interests in keeping women away from public life or from resisting abuse or forced marriage.

In several contexts in which the projects worked, certain forms of VAWG (e.g. child marriage in Pakistan and FGMC in Tanzania) were already unlawful and yet routinely practised. In other words, **laws alone are not enough for VAWG prevention**, and faith-based and traditional actors can play a strong role in subverting or supporting these laws.

## How have these CSOs engaged with faith-based and traditional actors?

Practitioners have engaged with faith-based actors in numerous ways.

- **Initial buy-in from these actors for the VAWG prevention intervention is crucial, and to achieve this some projects sought discussions early with top-level religious actors**, which was shown to be an effective strategy, especially in settings where there are highly hierarchical, centralized religious structures. For instance, in Liberia, Episcopal Relief and Development found that early engagement with senior religious leaders in the capital resulted in higher uptake among grassroots-level faith leaders in the counties in later VAWG intervention activities, and gained formal institutional

backing and support. This experience was echoed in Armenia, where the lack of senior religious institutional backing prohibited the Women's Support Center from being able to train religious leaders. On the other hand, in some contexts, **engaging early with more progressive religious leaders** instead of or in addition to starting at the top also worked, for example in the State of Palestine, where PSCCW started with women preachers, who gradually subverted the male-dominated religious hierarchy and created space for the VAWG prevention project.

- **Initial diagnosis and a shared understanding of the root cause of certain forms of violence or harmful practices is crucial.** To ensure projects started with this foundation of mutual understanding, organizations engaged with faith-based and traditional actors by **opening up a dialogue** and involving them in the development of tailored materials for the intervention. For instance, the youth organization Restless Development in Nepal, working on the harmful menstruation practice of chhaupadi, began several initial dialogues between project staff and faith leaders, and then between faith leaders and communities on the root cause of this practice. They discussed how to **disconnect the harmful practice from the sacredness surrounding it, which was used to justify the harm**. This process helped to form an initial diagnosis and a shared understanding of the beliefs underlying the practice (and a common direction towards a solution).

*We discuss issues related to the concept of violence and how it is linked with religious concepts, [and] about equality and justice and avoiding discrimination and violence in dealing with each other. Here in Palestine we go to the mosque and we choose some examples from Al Qur'an and discuss it with [the women preachers]. And it was a very useful way to create this kind of change in their mentality and how they understand the relation between men and women and how to use these concepts in their discussions with other women coming to the mosque.*

PSCCW, focus group discussion, 30 November 2020

- **Equipping faith-based actors to first change their own mindsets and then challenge harmful social norms was seen as a critical step.** For example, in Kenya, faith-based organization Trócaire, adapting the SASA! Faith methodology, found that some male faith leaders in Kenya were willing to speak out against violence in

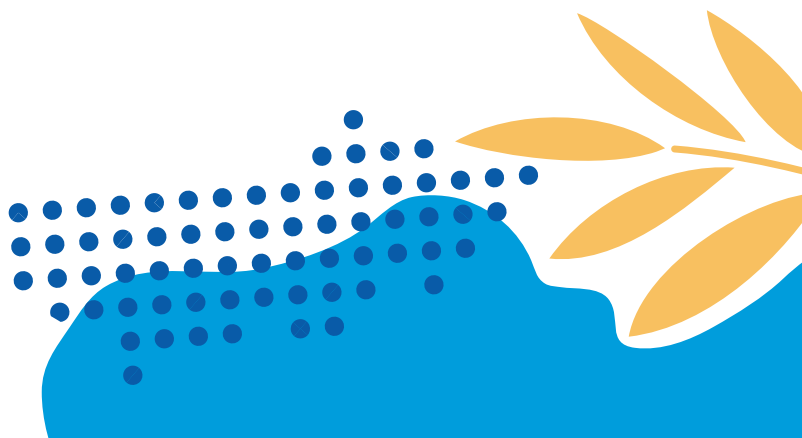
general, but not specifically on VAWG. They therefore provided these leaders with further **in-depth training and long-term mentoring** and designed a system of accompaniment in which a team member from the project would accompany a faith leader when he spoke publicly on violence and provide additional information on referrals or help answer questions from the community. Some projects found that **engaging with sacred texts critically yet respectfully** was another way of changing mindsets for VAWG prevention. For example, PSCCW in the State of Palestine worked with women mosque preachers to link issues of violence to harmful social norms often underpinned by religion, and offered alternative faith-based concepts drawn from the Qur'an, such as equality and justice. However, the centrality of written sacred texts in many religions does not mean that VAWG prevention work should be only book-based, especially in low-literacy settings. In Liberia, for example, Episcopal Relief and Development had to significantly adapt their programming to account for this in some districts. Programming ended up **using various experiential learning methods**, drawing on participatory methods such as role-playing and storytelling, rather than reading and writing. FAMA (facts, association, meaning, action) picture cards developed with faith leaders' input to stimulate learning dialogues proved to be particularly effective in facilitating critical reflection on VAWG.

### Practitioners have engaged with traditional actors in numerous ways.

- **Determining the traditional actors who are relevant for VAWG prevention programming:** compared with religious leaders, traditional leaders often form less clear-cut groups and may vary significantly from context to context. **Investing time early on finding out who the traditional actors are** who impact the specific form of VAWG that the project aims to prevent, building trust and creating ownership of the goals can go a long way. For instance, in working to end FGMC in Côte d'Ivoire, Children's Life in Rural Areas (CLiRA) focused on VAWG prevention advocacy to traditional leaders (chiefs) in rural areas. CLiRA staff took the time to get to know the rural communities first, becoming immersed in their lived realities. They used what the community called "**customary diplomacy**", which included allowing traditional chiefs to host them as guests, sharing food together and

accompanying chiefs in traditional activities as an important trust-building phase. This process also served as an unofficial acknowledgement of the importance of the project areas by the chiefs, reassured communities and built ownership of the goals.

- **Finding the right discourse through which to engage traditional actors** in VAWG prevention can be critical to avoid resistance: public health discourse, legal discourse, faith-based discourse, human rights discourse, cultural discourse or a combination of these have been used by practitioners based on their own expertise, and each had their strengths and weaknesses. Some practitioners, for instance, emphasized the **potential value of a broader human rights approach to changing social norms by successfully connecting it to similar concepts already present in people's lived realities**, as Alafia found in Togo: *"In rural areas ... where the state is poorly represented, it is difficult to make people understand what is meant by human rights. On the other hand, there are concepts and practices very close to human rights in traditional standards ... These allow a better internalization by the populations because they come from their histories, beliefs and daily life"* (Alafia, final evaluation report (translated)).
- **Framing culture and tradition as a positive resource for prevention:** a positive framing (e.g. reclaiming core spiritual values, including justice) of prevention programming has been shown to encourage uptake and support by traditional actors. For example, in designing its support strategy for VAWG survivors in Colombia, Fundación Mundubat drew on indigenous and Afro-Colombian rituals by recalling and reclaiming ancestral practices. Women were encouraged to recall what their mothers and grandmothers had taught them about ways of healing the body and spirit. Water, rivers and medicinal plants were all integrated into **psychospiritual, culturally relevant support for VAWG survivors**. Drawing on these ancient, indigenous practices not only allowed the women to heal from the trauma of violence but also strengthened their cultural identity and sense of self.



## What are some challenges to engaging faith and tradition in VAWG prevention?

There can be considerable challenges for CSOs when it comes to implementing VAWG programmes with faith-based and traditional actors. Practitioners found that when CSOs were perceived to condemn specific VAWG practices such as child marriage or FGMC outright, it led to **practices going underground and becoming more harmful to women and girls**. Moreover, practitioners found that some traditional actors may appear to agree in public but still support harmful norms or practices in private, especially when livelihood or social status is at stake. For example, in Tanzania, despite public ceremonies of downing tools and alternative income-generation opportunities, some female cutters returned to the practice in secret, partly because of financial need. Another source of tension was when the discourse was seen as driven by outsiders, when it was likely to meet resistance at family level. For instance, in some communities in Nepal, using legal language (i.e. to reinforce that a harmful practice is illegal) led to **cultural or religious defensiveness and inter-household conflict**. In such situations, faith-based and traditional actors may actively oppose the VAWG prevention agenda.

VAWG prevention programming can pose challenges not only for women and girls but also for practitioners, especially women's rights organizations (WROs). WROs attested that their work is often **associated with issues that are seen as controversial or taboo** by faith-based and traditional actors. These issues include women's rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) issues; and sexual health and reproductive rights, which can drive these actors to refuse to engage with WROs for VAWG prevention. This has to be handled sensitively to avoid putting frontline activists at risk. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, CLiRA and traditional leaders working with them experienced backlash because they were accused of complicity with Western civilization to the detriment of local ancestral values. These complex realities did not prevent the CSO from working with faith-based and traditional actors, and the "do no harm" principle was upheld, but it did require careful consideration of how the relationships between these diverse actors might play out in practice to mitigate any risks.

### HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT THE WAYS IN WHICH CSOS ENGAGED WITH FAITH-BASED AND TRADITIONAL ACTORS?

**Most practitioners initially could not continue in-person project activities as planned. They initially responded by trying to address the immediate needs of women and girls, then eventually adapted to the lack of in-person meetings.**

Programming involving faith leaders and traditional actors often requires those involved to congregate in large groups. While this was difficult in the initial days of lockdowns, projects nonetheless **leveraged the community connections of these actors to reach out to women and girls** to meet their immediate needs, for example by distributing food and personal protective equipment during lockdowns – which, given the context and the evidence-based link between food insecurity and VAWG, was seen as a prevention activity in itself, especially in the initial days of the pandemic. Gradually, programmes adapted to the lack of in-person meetings. Some adapted by engaging church-owned radio stations to communicate VAWG prevention messages, while others maintained contact with faith-based and traditional actors, **continuing to offer training, mentoring and support by phones and through online platforms.**

## Lessons learned

Based on the experiences of the 10 UN Trust Fund-funded projects, the following lessons emerged as relevant for researchers, practitioners and donors investing in and implementing VAWG prevention programmes with a focus on engaging with faith-based and traditional actors.

- **Understanding how faith-based systems work in practice and their core values in relation to VAWG is a prerequisite for effective engagement.** Sustainable and systemic change is slow but possible, enabling deeply rooted beliefs about gender relations to be reinterpreted in collaboration with influential actors in those systems.
- **VAWG prevention requires a multisectoral approach, with faith-based and traditional actors treated as stakeholders among others in a wider system.** This integrates these actors into wider VAWG prevention work and creates accountability to their peers in other sectors. This

also decentralizes their authority by placing it alongside (not above) other types of social power. Partnering with other organizations and government services is also necessary.

- **Engaging faith-based and traditional actors in discussions about entrenched, harmful social norms, and not only condemning practices, is critical for long-term VAWG prevention.** A gradual process of accompaniment is often needed, with a willingness to adapt to changing circumstances. Changing social norms should not depend on the goodwill of individual actors; negative consequences of non-compliance must be built in.
- **A positive framing (e.g. reclaiming core spiritual values, including justice) has been shown to encourage uptake and support by these groups in some contexts.** In addition, identifying and agreeing shared principles early on between the various actors can facilitate a common understanding with respect to “do no harm”. It is important to ensure the accountability of faith-based and traditional actors at community level, ideally including women’s organizations. However, the exact nature of this accountability should be determined at local level and not imposed from outside.
- **In VAWG prevention, indigenous forms of religion need to be afforded the same recognition and respect as world religions.** Currently, indigenous religious beliefs are often dismissed as cultural only.
- **There is a tendency to focus on engaging faith-based actors in VAWG prevention, ignoring the influence of traditional actors.** More attention should be paid to the role of traditional actors in VAWG prevention.
- **More pre-implementation analysis is needed of the specific roles of traditional actors, particularly as custodians of customary laws, in relation to VAWG.** As this brief shows, this goes beyond leaders alone, to include a range of male and female informal traditional actors.
- **More attention must be paid to how different kinds of CSOs can most effectively engage with faith-based and traditional actors for VAWG prevention.** While this brief has showcased the approaches of faith-based organizations, women’s organizations, international non-governmental organizations and youth organizations, there remains a dearth of literature on this topic. This includes further research on how partnerships can be formed by CSOs seeking to position this type of engagement as part of multisectoral VAWG prevention, especially when these organizations are small.
- **Donors and funders should support and advocate for grant-making policies and funding for adaptive, long-term VAWG prevention programmes.** Funders must enable programming that builds in the time needed to work effectively with these actors, allowing for capacity-building of project staff, with flexibility to ensure that programming is context-appropriate from the start.
- **More research and investment in research is needed on the powerful role of rituals, practices and ceremonies, and how they can support VAWG prevention.**

## FURTHER INFORMATION

This brief is co-authored by E. Le Roux and S. Palm, 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](#).

[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](mailto:untf-evaw@unwomen.org).



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Alafia from Togo, Amref Health Africa in Tanzania, Children’s Life in Rural Areas (CLiRA) from Côte d’Ivoire, Episcopal Relief and Development in Liberia, Fundación Mundubat from Colombia, Psycho-social Counseling Center for Women from the State of Palestine, Restless Development from Nepal, Sindh Community Foundation from Pakistan, Trócaire in Kenya and the Women’s Support Center from Armenia.

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.



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