



SYNTHESIS REVIEW SERIES: PAPER #10

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE: STRENGTHENING A LEGAL AND POLICY ENVIRONMENT TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Lessons on prevention from civil society organizations funded
by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women



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Cover photo description and credit: Participants of the national survivor workshop and gathering hold thematic group discussions and prepare for presentations. Credit: Marcos Saldana V. Branco / Acbit (Timor-Leste)



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 grantmaking 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 \$198 million to 609 initiatives in 140 countries and territories. In 2021, the UN Trust Fund managed a grants portfolio of 157 projects aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women and girls in 68 countries and territories across five regions, with grants totalling \$74.7 million. Grant recipients are primarily civil society organizations (CSOs). Since 2018 (cycle 20), the UN Trust Fund has been funding only CSO projects. In 2021, the majority (59 per cent) of these CSOs were women's rights organizations.

About the Prevention Series of Reviews

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 cocreate 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. Survivor-centred, multisectoral service provision
10. Strengthening a legal and policy environment

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Women survivors and children of war performing the theater play "Pirilampu". Credit: Ryan Ardyansah / Acbit (Timor-Leste)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Law and policy reforms and their implementation to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG) is receiving increased attention around the world as a core component of strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention. Some promising progress is being made within many societies thanks to international laws, political commitments, and women's rights activism. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted concerns that sudden shifts in legal and policy systems can create ripple effects that may result in "shadow pandemics" such as the increase in VAWG seen during the crisis. New legal and policy restrictions or overburdened formal systems can put some women and girls at greater risk of VAWG than others. Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals' focus on "leaving no one behind" requires the elimination of gender-discriminatory laws, and the creation of a comprehensive framework of laws and policies that can effectively reach all women and girls. But good laws and policies alone are not enough. Challenges in the effective implementation of these laws and policies, the continued power of informal systems and social norms, and a range of practical barriers for women and girls to accessing justice also require attention. In other words, the whole system needs to change if the goals of these laws and policies are to become realities in people's lives.

This synthesis review addresses a gap identified in the current literature, namely research theorizing about and aiming to better understand **how** civil society organizations (CSOs) contribute in different contexts to legal and policy systems change and **why** these roles are critical to strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention. The review brings together the voices of key CSO practitioners and their practice-based knowledge, focusing on 10 diverse projects funded by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. The projects deployed various approaches to working with legal and political systems for VAWG prevention in different countries,

engaging with a range of actors and using multiple strategies. They highlight the diversity of the work taking place worldwide, emphasizing that a "one size fits all" approach to engaging legal and political systems for VAWG prevention does not exist. A process of inductive analysis brought to light knowledge about **how** and **why** CSOs in the sample went about this in their specific contexts. Key monitoring and evaluation reports from each project were analysed. These were complemented by a brief literature review and focus group discussions with representatives invited to take part from nine CSOs implementing 10 projects. This review synthesizes these practice-based insights and showcases illustrative examples from the 10 different projects.

Key themes emerging from practice

Five key themes emerged from practitioner learning and were used to synthesize the data for and structure this synthesis review.

- 1. Advocating and evidence-building for law and policy reforms.** Strong laws and government policies for VAWG prevention that offer a comprehensive framework, harmonize civil and criminal laws, and are proactive and binding on policy actors and statutory duty bearers are essential. CSOs play important roles in advocacy and evidence-building that are community driven. They often involve CSOs partnering for a shared advocacy agenda that centralizes the voices and participation of women.
- 2. Building the capacity of judicial, law enforcement and government institutions.** Formal duty bearers such as the police and judicial and government ministry personnel need to be equipped to effectively implement new laws and policies around VAWG prevention. CSOs play important roles in building the capacity and shifting the mindsets of these institutions to address VAWG in a less reactive and more proactive, preventative way, including through multisectoral partnerships with civil society.

3. Bridging gaps between formal laws/policies and informal systems at community level.

Informal and customary systems often play roles in adjudicating legal and policy issues at community level and reinforcing social norms, both positive and negative, in ways that shape many women's lives. CSOs play important roles in making these systems more women centred and survivor friendly, reshaping the community-level understanding of women's and girls' rights and bridging gaps with formal systems, enabling more women to participate in informal and formal systems.

4. Improving access to justice for VAWG survivors and mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable.

Women face both individual and structural barriers to accessing justice, and this creates a risk of further VAWG. Systems-level VAWG prevention seeks to address patterns that result in continual cycles of

VAWG in the lives of women and societies. CSOs play important roles in supporting survivors to access justice and in strengthening systems to hold perpetrators accountable, especially in transitional justice or conflict-affected settings.

5. Reforming and implementing laws and policies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic created many new challenges in relation to preventing VAWG. New legal and policy restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic, overloaded legal and government systems, and the shifting of resources from VAWG prevention to other areas all helped to create the shadow pandemic of VAWG. CSOs working with these systems play a role in ensuring that laws and policies take into account VAWG prevention and integrate it into wider national COVID-19 responses and plans.



Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions highlight the important roles that the different types of CSOs in the sample play in engaging with formal and informal legal and policy systems for VAWG prevention. These organizations seek to navigate the complexities of engaging with these systems for VAWG prevention in different ways. Their projects demonstrate that CSOs play diverse roles in (1) the processes of law and policy reforms, by building an evidence base for reforms, reviewing existing laws and policies to identify loopholes that may leave some women behind, and advocating for legal and policy changes; (2) collaboration on capacity development with institutionalized forms of justice and protection for women through formal statutory systems of law and policy implementation; (3) bridging gaps between formal laws and policies and informal mechanisms of justice and social norms at community level; and (4) supporting access to justice for women and strengthening systems that hold perpetrators accountable, helping to disrupt entrenched cycles of VAWG, especially in fragile contexts where formal state and legal systems may struggle to function. These CSOs also support a holistic understanding of justice that goes beyond a punitive response to centre survivors' needs and their healing from trauma, which can help to disrupt cycles of VAWG for the next generation. In doing so, CSO practitioners highlight an expansive understanding of gender justice in relation to addressing VAWG that spans the prevention–response continuum to promote societal changes and accountability systems. One overarching insight was the need for CSOs' to be involved in developing effective multisectoral partnerships to strengthen and integrate existing systems (e.g. the police, health, justice and social services), rather than creating parallel systems.

A set of recommendations, based on lessons from the sample of CSOs in this review, at the end of this review suggest that CSO practitioners should (1) consider their positioning in the wider policy and legal landscape carefully, (2) avoid politicization, (3) capacitate and collaborate with formal duty bearers, (4) bridge gaps between formal legal and policy systems and informal legal and policy systems and social norms, (5) disrupt

cycles of VAWG and (6) be a systems-level resource in times of widespread crisis. **Recommendations also suggest that donors and policymakers should** (1) provide long-term, flexible funding that can support collaborative platforms, (2) support CSOs to navigate the complex power relations within formal legal and political systems sensitively and (3) develop creative, flexible ways to measure the catalysing and contributory impact of CSOs on government and legal systems. **Finally, recommendations for researchers in the field of ending VAWG suggest that they should** (1) take an intersectional approach to researching law and policy reforms and their implementation, (2) collaborate to build sector-wide and multisectoral patterns of evidence, (3) document longer-term patterns of change in legal and policy systems (4) use more creative and participatory research methods and (5) consider specific policymaking audiences and generate more tailored research outputs.



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ABBREVIATIONS

ACbit	Associaaon Chega Ba Ita
ACP	Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz
AJ	authorized justice
CF	community facilitator
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	civil society organization
FGD	focus group discussion
LCDZ	Leonard Cheshire Disability Zimbabwe
ORMUSA	Organización de Mujeres Salvadoreñas por la Paz
PBK	practice-based knowledge
RRRT	Regional Rights Resource Team
RSAT	Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand
SEK	Socio empowerment kiosk
UN Trust Fund	United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women
VAWG	violence against women and girls
WCLAC	Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling
WIGJ	Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice
WRO	women’s rights organization

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Why law and policy reforms and their implementation matter for VAWG prevention

Law and policy reforms and their implementation for the prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG) relate to a raft of international, national and local legislation as well as official government policies that vary significantly between contexts.

The results of such reforms include laws and policies that explicitly define, prohibit and criminalize all forms of VAWG in both public and private spaces, as well as enforceable mechanisms for holding individual and institutional perpetrators to account (Htun and Jensenius, 2020; WHO, 2019). Law and policy reforms also include the repeal of gender-discriminatory laws and policies (Dalton et al., 2020; Fawcett Society, 2018), and critical engagement with wider legislation and policies that have an impact on women's risk of experiencing violence, their marginalization, or the normalization of gender inequality patterns that may place women and girls at increased risk. For example women's legal standing under customary laws or their ability to participate in shaping public policy (Htun and Jensenius, 2020) and beyond, laws and policies relating to the economy, housing, labour, disaster risk reduction, social protection, or environmental laws/policies can also have an impact on risk and protective factors.

Effective implementation emphasizes the duty-bearing roles of formal institutions for government policymaking and lawmaking and the enforcement of laws and policies, for example the police, judiciary and government ministries, as well as their connections to informal mechanisms and social norms often found within community systems that shape many women's realities. These also need to be adequately capacitated to prevent and respond to VAWG in women-centred and trauma-informed ways (United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, 2018). Finally, the area of law and policy reforms and their implementation

includes considering the practical barriers that may prevent women and girl survivors of VAWG from accessing justice and the need for strong systems that hold perpetrators accountable (United Nations, 2018). These barriers may be particularly acute in conflict-affected settings or fragile States where systems of law and governance may begin to partly break down (Swaine et al., 2019). **Across these different contexts, there is a need to view and equip women and girls as legal and policy rights holders who have rights to live lives free of violence and to participate in the processes of lawmaking and policymaking that affect their lives** (United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, 2018).

Laws and policies that address VAWG, as well as those that promote gender equality and women's access to employment, have been identified as key components of the enabling environment needed for VAWG prevention to be effective, as is laid out in the "RESPECT Women: Preventing violence against women" framework. The framework highlights that laws that promote gender equality and address violence against women and policies that empower women and respect their rights can reduce underlying risk factors for VAWG and create supporting factors that protect against VAWG in ways that are essential for a long-term approach to VAWG prevention (WHO, 2019). However, national laws and policies may be lacking or remain insufficiently implemented in many contexts. Despite this, promising law and policy reforms around VAWG prevention are taking place, and discriminatory laws and their effects on the lives of women and girls are being addressed across the world. For example, as of 2020, 153 countries had passed laws on domestic violence, 106 had passed laws on sexual harassment and 45 had passed laws on marital rape (**United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020**). Work at the level of legal and policy systems has been identified as crucial for creating and **sustaining an enabling environment for VAWG prevention; without this, other VAWG programmes**

working in this environment may also face challenges to their implementation. For example, programmes supporting VAWG survivors to access justice are highly limited in countries where VAWG is not prohibited in practice by formal legal systems. However, the best laws and policies can be ineffective if systemic barriers and male bias within systems of policy implementation and law enforcement, or harmful social norms, prevent the women and girls who need them most from being aware of or accessing these systems of protection.

The task of preventing VAWG has long been recognized as having societal and institutional dimensions as well as individual, family and community-level aspects, and these dimensions all affect each other (Heise and Manji, 2016). Literature shows that effective, sustainable VAWG prevention is always shaped by wider laws and policies, and their implementation infrastructures at societal level. These sociostructural realities contribute to both public understanding of and practical responses to VAWG and its prevention (Ellsberg et al., 2015; Htun and Jensenius, 2020; Michau et al. 2015). The importance of strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention is also receiving increased attention from global organizations, researchers, policymakers and practitioners, signifying an expansion from a historical focus only on reactive systems for securing access to justice after VAWG has taken place. This involves proactively building political commitment and putting laws in place as part of State responsibilities (WHO, 2019). **Remarkable strides have been documented in recent decades in transforming many legal and government policies around VAWG and its prevention.** This has led to advances in the recognition of all forms of VAWG as matters for public investment and intervention, including forms of VAWG in the private sphere (Htun and Jensenius, 2020; Michau et al., 2015). **Feminist civil society activism has played a significant role in catalysing government action around laws and policies on VAWG** across multiple countries in the long term (Htun and Jensenius, 2020; Karim, 2022; Michau et al., 2015). This highlights the importance of ongoing engagement with and by civil society organizations (CSOs), including women's rights organizations (WROs):

Even as dysfunctional beliefs persist, feminist activists, often allied with women politicians and human rights movements, have compelled states to take action to combat violence. Progressive VAW [violence against women] laws, especially when adopted by authoritarian and otherwise conservative regimes, are subject to criticism as parchment institutions intended to look good abroad and placate critics at home. Still, even when not fully enforced or implemented, VAW laws uphold aspirational rights that signal consensus and state commitment. By codifying a plan for aggressive state action, the laws lend support and legitimacy to feminist efforts to change social norms and empower women (Htun and Jensenius, 2020, p. 147).

Although many countries have brought in some VAWG prevention legislation, some still have no substantive protective legal mechanisms in place, including parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Htun and Jensenius, 2020). Even when laws exist, they are not always compliant with international standards and the recommendations are not necessarily being implemented and enforced (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). Most countries still retain some elements of historical discriminatory legal and policy frameworks with gaps and loopholes that may leave some women and girls behind and/or stigmatize them. These remain an ongoing concern (IDLO, 2017; UN Women, 2012a).

Literature suggests that many low- and middle-income countries have followed approaches that have focused on accessing legal justice but that the implementation of violence prevention legislation and budgetary allocation by the State often remain lacking in these contexts (Ellsberg et al., 2015). This may, however, be a homogenization of more complex and diverse realities across a range of different contexts, which this review may help delineate more clearly. The importance of taking an intersectional approach to gender equality systems for VAWG prevention has also been receiving more attention in the past decade (Palm and Le Roux, 2021; UN Women, 2019; Walby et al., 2012).

1.2. The important roles of civil society organizations in law and policy reforms and their implementation

CSOs, including women's organizations and WROs, are identified in literature as playing important roles in working towards law and policy reforms and their implementation for VAWG prevention (Htun and Jensenius, 2020; Lowndes and Gains, 2018). Working together as CSOs to develop multisectoral collaboration around law and policy reforms and their implementation was identified as a promising trend in a review of nine United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) grantees' work (Le Roux and Palm, 2020). Important law and policy reforms such as those described above are identified as partly driven by WROs in particular, and as reflecting an important drive towards feminist institutionalization (Lowndes and Gains, 2018). Feminist institutionalization prioritizes both the lobbying role of local women's organizations that collaborate to put pressure on national or regional governments, and the work towards women's leadership and political participation in roles of executive power within formal legal and governmental systems. CSOs can offer avenues and entry points for women's and girls' participation in law reform processes and can help to strengthen the legitimacy and accuracy of advocacy for law and policy reforms by ensuring their relevance to women's realities and experiences.

The purpose of this synthesis review is to capture insights from a diverse sample of CSO practitioners around their important contributions and to enable the deeper analysis and improved documentation of how they are doing this work and why it matters. CSOs' specific contributions to this area can often go undocumented or even unrecognized if there is a focus on formal government and legal stakeholders. A recent global shared agenda around research priorities on this area (Sexual Violence Research Initiative and Equality Institute, 2021) notes the need for more insights from those that are implementing prevention programming. CSOs' roles often involve years of "behind the scenes" work to influence more

powerful statutory partners. **Because CSOs are rarely lead actors in these formal systems of government, the practice-based knowledge (PBK) in this review shows that they often have to find creative ways to influence and advocate within legal and government policy systems and institutions for improved laws and policies,** and for more inclusive participatory approaches to the formation of laws and policies that involve the voices of women and girls, and wider civil society, in these processes more regularly. CSOs often carry out this work within politically charged contexts where tackling gender issues remains highly challenging. Systems-level changes in laws and policy frameworks are complex and highly politicized (as they are embedded in wider party politics contexts) and can often take decades to achieve. The PBK in this review shows the diverse ways in which CSOs in the sample are working both within and outside their spheres of influence through developing strategic partnerships and multisectoral collaboration.

The strength of autonomous women's movements in particular has been identified as a strong predictor of the robustness of government policies on VAWG prevention and response (Htun and Jensenius, 2020). Evidence also suggests that many CSOs play important **catalysing** roles in wider systems change at institutional level. This can have a significant cumulative long-term preventative impact for all women beyond a single CSO's programme life cycle (Ellsberg et al., 2015). CSOs' roles in law and policy reforms and their implementation need to be better documented and shared to ensure that their impact in this area can be adequately captured and better understood.

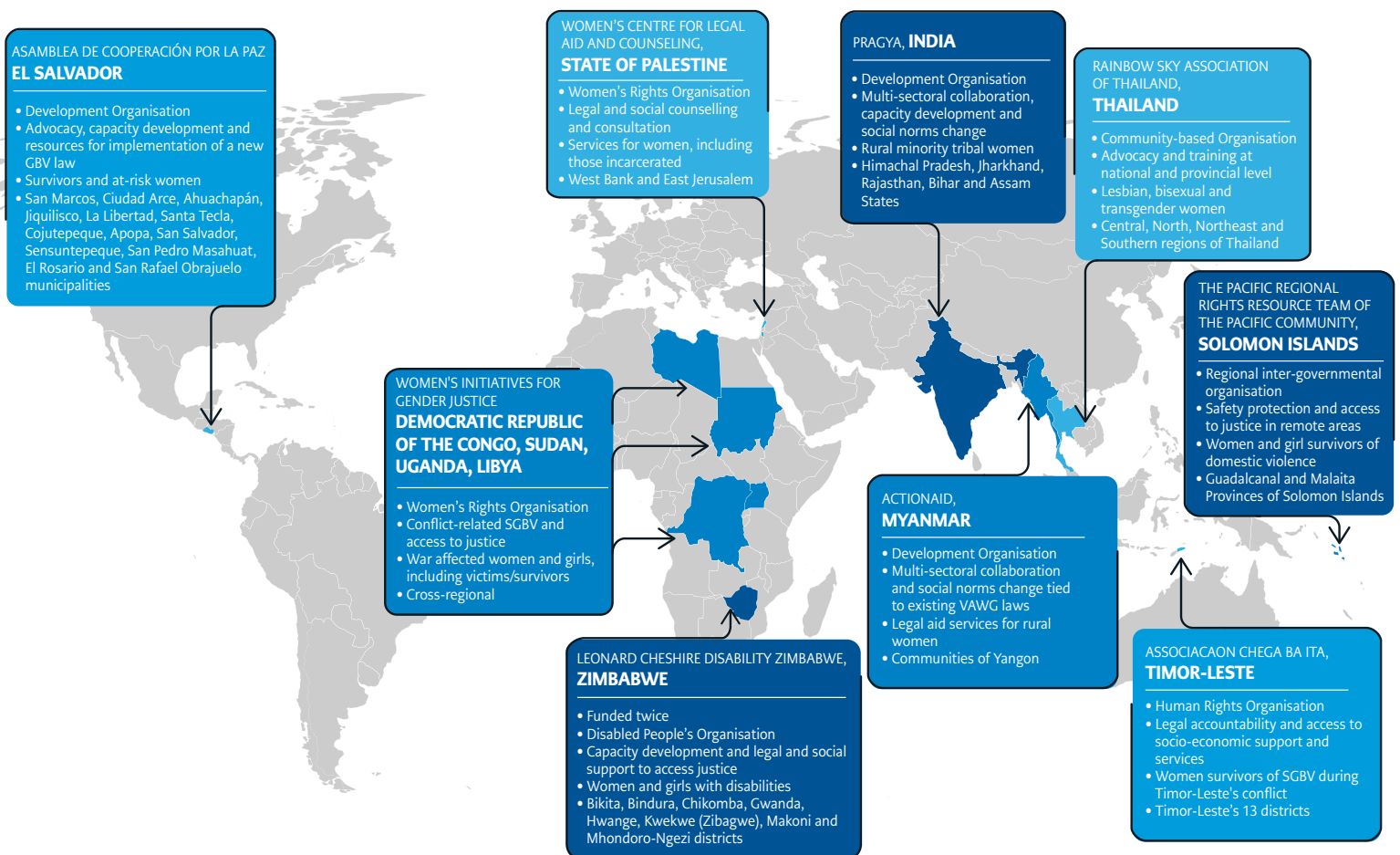
Once formal laws and policies to prevent VAWG are put in place, implementing them effectively remains an essential task. Many of the contexts that CSOs work in already have some laws and policies in place around preventing VAWG. Paying close attention to what already exists and seeking to improve it through partnerships rather than developing parallel systems that are often unsustainable in the long term is essential. Navigating these messy legal and policy spaces is a reality for most CSOs, and many elements of these are beyond their control. **However, in certain**

contexts, the entire framing of the national legal system may remain at odds with international commitments to prevent VAWG. In some places, no overarching family protection law exists (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020), and cultural and religious systems may have a

strong impact on current laws and policies, creating strong conservative backlash against efforts by women's legal organizations to bring about change. A difficult legal and policy environment for VAWG prevention creates a challenging context for all other programmatic work.

1.3. Centring practitioner insights

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



At the heart of this review are practitioner insights from nine CSOs, implementing ten projects to prevent VAWG, to understand how law and policy reforms and their implementation are being done in practice. Some of these CSOs played active roles in

advocating with other stakeholders for changes in laws and policies, often by providing a data-driven evidence base from below through collaborating to form centralized information databases on VAWG in their contexts, as, for example, Asamblea de

Cooperación por la Paz (ACP) did in El Salvador, or ensuring that no women and girls were left behind in VAWG-related laws and policies, as was the focus for Leonard Cheshire Disability Zimbabwe (LCDZ). More specifically, LCDZ made sure that girls and women with disabilities in rural areas were not left behind. In other countries, a lack of national legislation on VAWG prevention was a significant challenge, as the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) in the State of Palestine discovered. As a result, informal systems, including **customary and faith-based legal actors** such as Sharia lawyers, were engaged. Many CSOs in the sample emphasized the need to **bridge the gaps** between existing formal laws and policies (especially if these were new) and social norms and informal systems that shape women's lived realities.

A significant area of learning emerged around the roles of CSOs in **developing the capacity of** various duty bearers of formal systems of justice implementation including, the judiciary, the police and health professionals within state systems. For example, Pragma in India developed inter-agency task teams around VAWG prevention and response across different remote districts where many indigenous women lived. Many CSOs/WROs in the sample adopted strategies of **providing community-level legal support and human rights education** through informal women-centred systems, such as women community paralegals or human rights defenders. These strategies were used in Solomon Islands by the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT) and in Myanmar by ActionAid. **CSOs in the sample also varied in terms of the levels at which they worked around legal and policy engagement.** Some worked at national level for the more effective implementation of VAWG and gender legislation, such as the Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand (RSAT), or at regional and international levels, such as Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice (WIGJ) across the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, the Sudan and Uganda. Others worked across multiple levels of formal legal and policy systems for VAWG prevention, such as ACP in El Salvador. Some of the CSOs in the sample focused their attention mainly on the village and/or municipal levels, which was identified as a gap in the literature.

Some CSOs in the sample focused on **transitional justice settings and post-conflict State processes to make women's voices, experiences and needs heard** and to hold perpetrators accountable, as a key part of disrupting long-term cycles of VAWG. A few CSOs promoted **survivor-centred processes** at national level to prevent ongoing VAWG in post-conflict settings. For example, Associação Chega Ba Ita (ACbit) in Timor-Leste was established to promote the recommendations of the country's post-conflict Truth Commission, and WIGJ **worked with women's human rights organizations** across four African countries under review by the International Criminal Court for conflict-related sexual violence crimes. **Effective accountability systems were identified as critical** to prevent repeat perpetration and show the close connection between preventing and responding to VAWG. LCDZ in Zimbabwe received two consecutive project grants from the UN Trust Fund, both of which are part of this review. This enabled its engagement with legal and policy systems to be deepened in the second grant period.

In 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic emerged as a factor that has affected the VAWG prevention work of many projects in this synthesis review. This synthesis review will therefore explore how the new challenges that COVID-19 has brought have had unexpected impacts on law and policy reforms and their implementation for VAWG prevention and how partners have adapted to cope with these.

While the nine CSOs all worked around law and policy reforms and/or their implementation for VAWG prevention in their contexts, they also differed in many ways. The selection criteria for this review prioritized diversity in the geographical location, the type of CSO, the type of VAWG focused on, and the size and length of the UN Trust Fund grant awarded. The nine CSOs (and 10 projects) were also selected because their annual project and final evaluation reports (submitted to the UN Trust Fund over the 2015–2020 strategic plan period) contained specific insights from their practical experiences of using law and policy reforms and their implementation to prevent VAWG. The nine CSOs are geographically

diverse, working across four regions: (1) Latin America and the Caribbean (2), Africa (3), Asia and the Pacific and (4) the Arab states. They specifically focus on low- and middle-income countries and demonstrate different types of engagement with legal and/or policy systems. Placing this diverse collection of CSOs into conversation with each other creates a rich synthesized reflection on lessons learned from strengthening legal and policy environments in practice for VAWG prevention. More details on the goals, approaches and results of these projects can be found in the Appendix (separate document available on the UN Trust Fund's website).

1.4. Inductive methodology

This review contributes to addressing a number of research gaps identified in the current evidence base by providing specific insights from selected CSOs around strengthening legal and policy systems for VAWG prevention. Drawing on PBK from a sample of nine diverse CSOs allows a deeper understanding of existing VAWG evidence on how and why CSOs can engage in law and policy reforms and their implementation to strengthen an enabling environment for VAWG prevention.

The review focuses on practitioners' insights and lessons learned from projects carried out by nine CSOs around the world that were funded by the UN Trust Fund. **All of them are working to strengthen an enabling environment around law and policy reforms and/or implementation for VAWG prevention at international, regional, national and/or local levels.** The synthesis review identified, analysed and synthesized practice-based insights around their engagement as CSOs around law and policy reforms and their implementation for VAWG prevention. Using routine monitoring and evaluation reports from 10 grantee projects that received funds from the UN Trust Fund, the review deployed an inductive approach to explore why and how they engaged in VAWG prevention through law and policy reforms and their implementation. 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 (ATLAS.ti 8) and Excel. The primary objective was to extract

PBK. Data analysis was complemented by a brief literature review and several focus group discussions (FGDs) with representatives invited to take part from the nine CSOs. The synthesis review was then examined internally and externally. The process was participatory, with the grantees, reviewers and UN Trust Fund offering support, comments and input into the recommendations.

An overarching question guided the whole process: **“What lessons can be learned from CSOs about how working together (with other stakeholders) on law and policy reforms and their implementation can contribute to the prevention of VAWG?”**. The review process allowed practitioners' reflections and priorities to be centred inductively. While further guiding questions were developed as the process evolved and for focus group consultations, the themes explored and insights emerging were first determined by the PBK contained in the project reports. For more on the full methodological approach and the FGD guides, see the Appendix (available as a separate document on the UN Trust Fund website).

1.5. Conceptual framework

A framework is offered in figure 2 to illustrate how CSOs in the sample play a range of roles in strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention through engaging with law and policy reforms and their implementation at several stages. It was developed with insights from the literature and then finalized after the inductive research process. It is also shaped by the PBK that emerged from the nine CSOs. It depicts a four-faceted wheel that shows how the nine CSOs worked on different elements of law and policy reforms and their implementation, to contribute to VAWG prevention. Some CSOs may focus their attention on only one or two aspects, but this specific body of evidence suggests that CSOs can make important contributions across all four facets, as all of them are required to be in place at systems level for VAWG prevention to be effective. Strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention also forms part of feminist institutionalization, offering an approach that includes law and policy reforms and their implementation, and that typically requires

multisectoral partnerships between CSOs and other institutions. This draws attention to the wider goal of gender justice, not only in terms of a legal or punitive response to VAWG after it takes place but also in terms of States' obligations to take proactive systemic measures to ensure gender-just, evidence-based laws and policies that adequately prevent VAWG and protect women, as well as tackling institutionalized forms of gender inequality that lie beneath many forms of VAWG.

A number of UN Trust Fund grantees situated their work around strengthening an enabling legal and

policy environment for VAWG prevention, depending on their specific context, organizational mandate and partners. Many entered this systems space in response to issues that emerged from their direct work as CSOs with women and girls. The framework in figure 1 shows a way of grouping CSOs' activities and the insights and lessons learned that emerged from this sample. Strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention requires attention to all parts of the wheel and not to one facet alone, often requiring CSOs to work together.

FIGURE 2:
Strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention – entry points for civil society engagement



Source: Developed by the author, informed by the 2019 RESPECT framework

- 1. Carrying out advocacy and evidence-building to reform laws and/or government policies:** Several CSOs in this review played roles in advocating for the creation, reform or repeal of laws and government policies related to VAWG prevention. As CSOs more broadly rarely hold the legislative or executive power to make laws or statutory policy, their roles often revolve around data-centred evidence-building, campaigning to involve women in legislative systems, and advocating for participatory, community-informed policymaking and gender-responsive budgeting.
- 2. Developing the capacity of judicial, law enforcement and government institutions:** Once laws and policies are in place, the formal institutions responsible for implementing them still have to be equipped to deliver them and to work together effectively to ensure that they are implemented consistently. CSOs in this review were seen as delivering a range of capacity-building activities for judicial, security and government institutions and systems around VAWG prevention and response. They often played important convening and collaborative roles in multisectoral partnerships with these formal stakeholders.
- 3. Bridging gaps between formal legal and policy systems and informal systems at community level:** Even when formal laws and policies exist and are implemented by formal duty bearers, many gaps exist between the formal law and policy implementation systems and the informal systems, social norms and practices at community level that need innovative approaches to bring change to the lives of women. CSOs in this review were seen as playing trusted, creative roles in bridging gaps between formal and informal systems for VAWG prevention.
- 4. Improving access to justice for VAWG survivors and mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable:** Prevention is seen by the CSOs in this review as cyclical. As a result, the work that many CSOs do to support VAWG survivors to access justice is connected to preventing repeat violence and mitigating the consequences of violence. CSOs also play important roles in putting pressure on systems to hold perpetrators accountable as part of disrupting the wider cycle of VAWG, especially in transitional justice contexts, where the fourth facet leads back into the first stage of the cycle, by leading into new forms of advocacy for law and policy reforms.



Participants at the leadership training for women with disabilities and their carers discussing existing legislation that protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Credit: Sut Htu/Action Aid (Myanmar)

2. KEY THEMATIC LESSONS EMERGING FROM PRACTICE

This section showcases **lessons from CSO practitioners who engaged with law and policy reforms and/or implementation for VAWG prevention** in diverse geographical contexts. The conceptual framework guides the reader through the four main elements (sections 2.1–2.4) identified in the literature and from lessons learned and insights from CSOs in strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention. A fifth section (2.5) describes the cross-cutting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the four elements, as common to all the CSOs in this review. Each section briefly describes literature relevant to the element to set the scene for PBK emerging from the nine CSOs.

2.1. Advocacy and evidence-building for law and policy reforms

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is growing evidence that law and policy reforms are essential for VAWG prevention in many places. Under international laws, VAWG is framed as a human rights violation, requiring states to view it as a criminal act, for example as is laid out in *General Recommendation 28 on the Core Obligations of State Parties under Article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (Dalton et al., 2020). As such, it is viewed as an area relevant to both VAWG prevention legislation and legal reforms around gender equality (WHO, 2019). However, VAWG prevention also requires a proactive response from the government in terms of policymaking across multiple ministries (e.g. health, education and social development) as part of a coordinated prevention

strategy (Michau et al., 2015). Model frameworks for States' responses to VAWG have pointed out that it is not enough for States to criminalize certain forms of VAWG; all forms, for example marital rape and child marriage, must be addressed. Governments must also provide comprehensive legal and policy frameworks to prevent and respond to VAWG and address its root causes, including by harmonizing civil and criminal laws (United Nations, 2014; UN Women, 2012a). In VAWG prevention literature, **Advocacy** has been identified as a primary strategy deployed by many CSOs aiming to change existing discriminatory laws and policies that fail to protect women, give women agency or prevent VAWG, and to support a proactive legal and policy infrastructure (and the statutory allocation of financial resources) that ensures an adequate national response by States to VAWG that takes VAWG in all its forms seriously (Michau et al., 2015; UN Women, 2012b).

Societal-level prevention requires both advocacy to make, reform and repeal laws and policies, and advocacy around evidence-based monitoring of the effects of these laws and policies and the availability of health and other government policies on VAWG. CSOs can play an important role in this by tracking and publicizing new laws and policies, assessing their impact on the lives of women and girls, and highlighting law or policy loopholes that still exist, or groups that are left behind in current legislation or policies. For example, CSOs play a key role in submitting Shadow Reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The CEDAW shadow reports produced by CSOs are important to assess member states'

realization of their commitments. In countries that have ratified the treaty, CEDAW has proved invaluable in opposing the effects of discrimination, which include violence, poverty, and lack of legal protections, along with the denial of inheritance, property rights, and access to credit.

State-led strategies for VAWG prevention are identified as highly under-resourced (Michau et al., 2015), and lobbying for gender-responsive budgets as part of policy changes is a critical role that CSOs often play, especially when practical issues of legal enforceability and the allocation of state resources are a concern (Htun and Jensenius, 2020).

The importance of advocating for reforms of justice systems to make them more inclusive has received more attention in recent years, with WROs in particular seen as contributing (ActionAid, 2012; Htun and Jensenius, 2020). Networks of women's organizations form effective pressure groups from below for improving VAWG-related legislation, and more needs to be understood about how this takes place (Karim, 2022). Women's formal executive participation in male-dominated political and legal decision-making systems is also critical for transforming the legal and policy landscapes (ActionAid, 2012; Karim, 2022). A "triangle of empowerment" sees a unique role for CSOs alongside political representatives and bureaucratic actors that maintain the balance between a policy inclusion model where women participate in existing frameworks and a feminist framing of policy problems (Lowndes and Gains, 2018). However, so far there has been a limited focus on local-level policies/laws and informal systems and a stronger emphasis on national and international levels and formal justice systems (Lowndes and Gains, 2018). The 10 selected projects offer insights into the processes of law and policy reforms and the various strategies used by CSOs to influence them.

Reports from all nine CSOs included in this review emphasized ways in which the wider context of VAWG prevention laws and policies within which they work is an important factor in their programming. However, only some worked specifically to reform laws and government policies in their contexts. This

decision was based on the wider political context and whether the CSO felt it was well positioned to influence laws or policies outside its own organization. As most CSOs in the sample had limited power to **make** laws or government policies on their own, their strategies mainly focused on advocating for, contributing to and monitoring **reforms** or **repeals** of VAWG prevention laws and policies negatively affecting their work and the lives of women. None of the CSOs worked exclusively on law or policy reform, but their contributions to the VAWG prevention reforms emerged from their other work with women and girls at risk of violence. They also helped women to participate in decision-making processes and engage with institutions that shape their rights. Evidence-based advocacy in the legal and political realms could also be opportunistic, with CSOs working together to leverage wider processes under way in their countries or regions, often owing to external political or legal circumstances that were far beyond the control of one CSO.

This section focuses on four advocacy-related strategies that emerged from the sample of CSOs in relation to law and/or policy reforms: (1) community-driven advocacy; (2) advocacy around resourcing; (3) advocacy around leaving no one behind; and (4) advocacy through building an evidence base. However, most CSOs used a combination of these strategies. Some key challenges are also mentioned at the end of this section.

2.1.1. Community-driven advocacy

Many of the nine CSOs in the sample played a unique role in enabling community-driven advocacy for law and policy reforms, especially with regard to current law or policy gaps or loopholes around VAWG prevention, as experienced by women and girls in the various areas they work in. For example, ActionAid in Myanmar describes its people-led, community-centred approach to advocacy, which combines raising awareness of existing laws and policies with assisting communities to identify gaps in laws and policies and make recommendations to inform its evidence-based advocacy for wider law and policy reforms:

In designing our strategy when we try to do this legal reform or policy advocacy, it is very much a people-led or community-centred approach. That means we first try to make the community aware of the existing policies and laws to understand [them] and then once people understand, it's much easier to find what the gaps are and what should be next (FGD, 22 November 2021).

Several CSOs in the sample developing strategies for law and policy reforms at national level noted their increasing attention to the differences between communities in one country in terms of the diverse legal and policy systems and structures in different locations, and the ways that informal systems, including, for example, customary laws, may influence some geographical areas more than others. For example, ActionAid in Myanmar shifted its work into rural areas, where it saw that the participation of communities in national law and government policy was far poorer. It noted that it needed to take time to understand what was already going on in its context before it designed its advocacy programmes to identify the VAWG prevention issues of most concern:

Don't reinvent the wheel. It's very important to see first where the people, the community, [are], the systems and structures are quite varied and diverse by location, [by] customary practices or by their national slow legal enforcement. The issue[s] could be different, so first we try to see and understand clearly what exactly going on, before we dive into designing [the programmes] (FGD, 22 November 2021).

CSOs in the sample identified the value of convening multiple diverse stakeholders for a shared advocacy approach. This reduced the risk of CSOs being seen by communities as merely an arm of the government and being mistrusted. CSOs emphasized the importance of these convening roles using a women's rights lens to connect VAWG prevention and response in the long term in national policies:

We were critically developing a national action plan on the advancements of woman in Myanmar, and the start

of the commitment to it by the national government [was] grounded in our earlier [pre-UN Trust Fund] work from 2000. The [UN Trust Fund] project really supported the actors engaged in that policy formulating the national action plans here. These included legal organizations, women's rights and community-based organizations, labour rights organizations in the industrial zones, and the national gender equality advocacy network ... These are the actors that we were able to work with as being very instrumental in that policy, ... we [have] learned a lot and continued the design since then ... we have come up with a common strategy or response programme for women[']s rights for both prevention and response together. So the aim is prevention in the long run (FGD, 22 November 2021).

Similar insights were shared by Pragya in India, which worked with rural women using what it called a "people-State" approach to law and policy reforms by first engaging in capacity-building activities with women at local level. Its objective over time was to mobilize women's political power to demand reforms in its areas from the national government, to support indigenous rural women to become formal political representatives at village level and to work together to effect policy changes at local level. Successes were seen in practice by Pragya in tackling underlying drivers of VAWG at local level by, for example, banning illegal alcohol taverns and addressing accountability issues around the behaviour of the local police, including ignoring domestic violence reports from women:

Once we started engaging with the females, they realized the power of these [political] tools, meetings, budgets [and] gender-responsive planning and many more females came forward and ran for election and got elected and they had huge support, and sometimes where they had female leaders in the village councils, they were able to do a lot (FGD, 22 November 2021).

2.1.2. Advocacy through evidence-building and data collection

CSOs play a role in evidence-building and data collection to inform advocacy for law and policy

reforms and hold lawmaking and policymaking institutions to account. This advocacy role of CSOs in calling for changes to laws and policies often required collaboration between CSOs to develop a shared agenda. One of the most significant roles that CSOs played, often in collaboration with women's rights groups, was gathering reliable data on VAWG in their particular contexts to build a case for evidence-based laws, policies and gender-responsive budgeting. To do this, several CSOs in the sample set up VAWG observatories (central points where reliable data on VAWG were collected and published by a shared network of CSOs). These were developed, for example, by both Pragya in India and ACP in El Salvador. These CSOs noted that the observatories played a particularly valuable role when a country previously had no reliable mechanisms for collecting VAWG-related data specific to their context. The observatories improved access to evidence-based information on VAWG and as a result, put pressure on formal legal and policy systems to respond to VAWG in a more proactive, systemic way. CSO practitioners from India and El Salvador noted that VAWG observatories created important ongoing roles for CSOs in both informing the initial case for law and policy reforms and in reviewing and monitoring accountability for State policies and budget reforms in line with the new laws. In India, data were collected on the incidence, source and nature of VAWG as well as grass-roots and formal responses quarterly, which helped track changes over time and was shared at district and national levels.

In El Salvador, ACP's years of lobbying for legal changes in formal collaboration with women's network Organización de Mujeres Salvadoreñas por la Paz (ORMUSA) contributed to a comprehensive national review of new VAWG prevention and response legislation being passed in 2015. This included changes to the criminal penal code and the procedures code and the establishment of specialist courts for violence against women, as well as the creation of specific laws designed to allow women to live a life free of violence and discrimination. These legislative developments offered an opportunity for ACP and ORMUSA to help to appropriate and institutionalize this new regulatory framework at policy level. They identified evidence-building through credible data collection around VAWG

as essential to consolidate their work with governments at national and municipal levels and to hold them accountable, and established a collaborative public, violence against women observatory to gather, provide and analyse centralized virtual and physical data on VAWG in El Salvador. The observatory involved eight State institutions and provided a shared resource for many other CSOs. It has been recognized as a reliable, high-quality, objective evidentiary source by and for governments and other stakeholders. It has enabled CSOs to put sustained pressure on governments for evidence-based policy reform and repeal, as well as playing a monitoring and reviewing role around policy compliance, institutionalization, and feasibility in the light of the new laws. This reliable combination of quantitative and qualitative data on VAWG prevalence and type and current policy responses is also informed by the evidence CSOs have collected from women in these contexts on a province-by-province basis and makes them more visible to lawmakers and policymakers.

A key insight from some of the CSOs working in the area of law and policy reforms was the importance of transforming the collective public's mindset around VAWG. As a result, the media was also identified as an important stakeholder by several of the nine CSOs in advocating for law and policy reforms. CSOs were able to liaise with the media to disseminate and popularise the evidence they collected in visible ways to build awareness of the need in, and pressure from, wider civil society for changes to laws and policies. For example, WIGJ identified its media engagement as a key factor in its work to reform wider harmful rape laws in the Sudan.

2.1.3. Advocacy for resourcing

CSOs are advocating for statutory resource allocation for VAWG prevention to ensure that laws and policies can be effectively implemented by formal duty bearers. CSO practitioners in the sample identified their important roles in putting pressure on various government ministries for gender-responsive budgeting, including for VAWG prevention. This was identified by CSOs in the sample as a frequent gap between VAWG prevention laws on paper and the ability of formal duty bearers to enact these laws and policies in the absence of allocated financial resources.

High-level political will was required to ensure that new laws were actualized. Sustained advocacy from CSOs working together in a range of contexts helped to encourage governments to move from taking a reactive stance to VAWG that focused only on criminal justice aspects, to taking a more proactive stance around VAWG prevention and allocate funds accordingly. For example, in El Salvador ACP's close working relationship with WROs convened under ORMUSA was formalized in an official funded partnership. This alliance played important roles around law and policy reforms by equipping women participating as parliamentarians to better understand and act on VAWG prevention issues. As a result, the alliance was identified as critical in securing gender-responsive national budgeting in El Salvador in 2018. This CSO's approach was also complemented by its work with other local women's groups to use collective action to hold politicians to account and to position the issue of VAWG in institutional agendas through participatory policymaking by women. This combined pressure led to a change in the structure of local councils, opening up space for citizen-led political power for VAWG prevention. ACP identified its collaborative work at this regulatory level as making its other VAWG-related work sustainable, with national budgets allocated to continue it.

2.1.4. Advocacy for marginalized groups left out of laws and policies

Some CSOs in the sample played key roles in advocating for the rights of specific groups of women who were excluded from laws and policies related to VAWG prevention. In this case, law and policy reforms were not tied to VAWG-specific legislation only. Other legal and policy issues also shaped many women's and girls' lives who were at heightened risk of and affected differently by VAWG, for example girls with disabilities excluded by school policies. The advocacy approaches taken to tackle this were diverse and included campaigning for changes to family laws, disability legislation, education policies, employment laws, marriage laws and the legal agency and citizenship standing of different groups of women and girls. For example, CSOs in India, Myanmar, the State of Palestine and Zimbabwe all raised questions

around the legal identity of certain groups of women as a core concern at the level of law and policy reforms, especially for indigenous women, girls and women with disabilities, and women living in remote locations. Without government identity documents (or even birth certificates), these women remained at greater risk of violence and were also often unable to access any government or legal services. **This insight shows how CSOs are drawing attention to gaps within a wider range of legislative and policy issues that shape the realities of VAWG both directly and indirectly in their specific contexts.** For example, women's organization WCLAC noted that Palestinian women from the Occupied Territories who are married to Israeli men risk losing their Israeli citizenship if they get divorced, creating new layers of vulnerability for these women if they become trapped in violent marriages.

The experiences of LCDZ in Zimbabwe serve as another good example of how effective work towards law and policy reforms can emerge from the specific focus of a particular CSO. LCDZ identified its decision to work at multiple levels of systems in its context for law and policy reforms as effective owing to its targeted intersectional approach focusing on girls and women with disabilities at risk of sexual violence. As a large disability organization, it was able to contribute credibly to national government plans to ensure that this group was not left behind in VAWG prevention approaches. At the same time, it worked to advocate for and influence the incorporation of VAWG prevention in new forms of legislation and policies specifically around disability and mental health. As a result of its advocacy in these spaces, VAWG prevention was moved up the political and legal agendas indirectly through increasing the awareness of international disability commitments among multiple actors within the State, the judiciary and the police. A second grant from UN Trust Fund deepened LCDZ's engagement with specific processes and protocols within formal law courts, and statutory reporting processes. This meant that LCDZ could built on the trust it had developed with these various actors to work collaboratively and enabled some significant concrete steps to be made around necessary legal reforms:

In terms of legal reforms, we had two issues that we've tried to reform. The first was the protocol on the management of sexual violence ... We used group advocacy where we combined different disability organizations pushing for one agenda. So the [new] editions now include survivors with disabilities [and] how to handle them [when they face abuse]. So that was a plus for us. And then there was also another issue for VAWG survivors with mental impairment – when they go for court session, they need to have a psychiatric assessment report (to decide if a woman with mental impairment had the capacity to consent to sex). During the project we noted that the service was mainly centralized ... So it also prevented them from accessing justice. So we tried to lobby for the decentralization and standardization of the psychiatric assessment report and what we managed to do was create a standardization which has been adopted by the Ministry of Health and Child Care in Zimbabwe ... So those are major legal reforms that we tried to do (FGD, 22 November 2021).

This approach also shows the intrinsic connection made by many CSOs around working on access to justice for VAWG survivors and VAWG prevention, especially with regard to law and policy reforms, where these two issues are often held together. For LCDZ, those seen as incapable of accessing justice easily, such as girls and women with mental disabilities and who are unable to communicate with legal authorities directly, are often targets for and at increased risk of violence.

2.1.5. Challenges for civil society organizations around legal and/or policy reforms

CSOs noted that advocacy in its various forms to influence and catalyse law and policy reforms is a challenging task. Four cross-cutting challenges faced by CSOs in the sample are briefly shared below.

First, the issue of politicization emerged for several CSOs in the sample, where their agenda was at risk of being seen by the communities they served, or even by government actors, as affiliated with a

particular political party. As a result, their ability to represent all people and VAWG issues across different political parties and beyond the limited political office term of one government party could be jeopardized. CSOs learned the importance of carefully positioning themselves in the wider policy and legal landscape to ensure they had sufficient political “access” to advocate for changes to laws and policies while also remaining politically neutral and therefore credible in their communities. CSOs insisted that their close collaboration with governments to advocate for legal and policymaking must not jeopardize their status as organizations within civil society that are independent from the government. If they, or their agenda, appear to identify too strongly with one particular political party or political transition, they may experience backlash if that political party is overturned and has to leave power, as they may then be seen as part of the political opposition by the new government. Likewise, their credibility at community level may be threatened if they are merely seen as an arm of the State, and VAWG then becomes politicized. For example, fragile post-conflict Myanmar had a highly supportive prime minister in power who advanced many policies and laws in relation to VAWG prevention at national level. However, by the end of the project this political party was no longer in power, which raised the threat of reversals of political gains in VAWG prevention by the new government. In FGDs, CSOs in the sample noted that they had taken steps to mitigate these risks and avoid the duplication of efforts by coalition-building and by forming shared advocacy agendas with other CSOs. Managing the tensions of working politically with governments without becoming associated with party politics and empty promises was identified as important by CSOs in the sample to be seen as independent from, yet still able to have trusted collaboration with, government structures and events.

Second, CSOs noted that different government departments and political levels (local, provincial, national and regional) often disagreed with each other and that they needed to be careful to not get caught up in those political power plays. CSOs in the sample were often in vulnerable positions in relation to these larger powerful systems where their ability to operate as CSOs was also shaped by government

legislation. If CSOs are too critical of governments in their advocacy their own VAWG programming may be threatened, as was noted by CSOs in both Zimbabwe and India. CSOs' involvement in policymaking around VAWG prevention can create perceived conflicts of interest that may limit the domestic funding available to CSOs that contribute their expertise in policymaking spaces. For example, RSAT in Thailand faced this dilemma in its work with women of minority sexual orientations and gender identities. If RSAT's staff were invited to be elected to government policy boards on gender, a step with significant positive implications for its policy influence, it could potentially cause funding challenges in other parts of its work.

Third, seemingly positive government policy shifts were identified by some CSOs in the sample as having unexpected negative outcomes for women at community level. For example, Pragma experienced a challenge in assisting rural women to secure formal political power at village level where a new government directive required quotas of women to be represented in all State structures. In practice, an absence of local CSO engagement led to the increased use of women "proxies" in rural villages, where their fathers, husbands or brothers still controlled the power behind the scenes:

Now India has a law where a percentage of seats are reserved for female candidates ... but usually they remain proxy candidates, their husband or a male family member would be the decision maker and the female would just be there on paper or when there's a meeting (FGD, 22 November 2021).

Fourth, advocating for government policy and legal reforms typically takes a long time to bear fruit. While CSOs have clearly influenced successful law and policy reforms in several places, their own insights show that many of these reforms took decades of work by multiple collaborating CSOs. As a result, typical programmatic markers of causality, impact and success in reaching a specific target group often deployed by funders and external evaluators may not apply so well in this area and need more engagement. Changes in advocacy, evidence-building and influencing systems at policy and legal levels rarely form a linear pathway

or take place over a 3-year funding cycle. CSOs face dilemmas in judging when their contributions may be most likely to make a difference. **Overall, collaborative multisectoral approaches were identified by the CSOs in the sample as most effective at placing sustained, credible pressure on legal and government institutions to secure long-term policy goals**, which, while slow, can be game changers with sustainable implications for new generations of women and girls. A shrinking space for civil society was, however, identified by CSOs in a number of specific political contexts. This can lead to pragmatic decision-making by some CSOs to not focus on legal reforms but work primarily with existing laws to improve their implementation. Some CSOs decide not to engage in the area of law and policy reforms owing to challenges in measuring the impact of reforms in just three years:

In our country context, the space for civil society, for journalism, this is shrinking and advocacy [or] getting things moving at a national level, or policy stage it is very difficult and takes a lot of effort. We won't be able to see much of a benefit on our target groups of women within that small time frame [3 years] so we decided to work mainly with the existing laws and strengthen [the] implementation of them (FGD, 22 November 2021).

2.1.6. Key take-aways

- CSOs are seen as well placed to facilitate **community-driven approaches** to advocacy and evidence collection for VAWG prevention. These shape law and policy reforms through spreading local awareness of gaps and loopholes in these systems. Links between village, municipal and national levels are made, and can support women to become involved in concrete policymaking.
- CSOs with direct connections to women and girls are working together to build a **collective voice for government action, participatory processes and accountability as well as developing a credible evidence base** to shape advocacy for VAWG prevention and hold governments to account, especially as women's networks both inside and outside the systems.

- CSOs note that they face complex challenges in engaging at this level, including in **navigating the fine balance between political engagement to influence policymaking and becoming overly politicized**. Becoming caught up in cross-party or cross-department politics can even damage their VAWG prevention agenda. This type of work also takes time and requires long-term funding investments and creative monitoring approaches that can recognize and assess collaborative engagement.

2.2. Developing the capacity of judicial, law enforcement and government institutions

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evidence shows that despite the importance of law and policy reforms for VAWG prevention, they are, on their own, insufficient as both prevention and response mechanisms (Brickell, 2013; Michau et al., 2015). The implementation and enforcement of VAWG prevention laws and policies is also identified as a serious problem (Ellsberg et al., 2015; Htun and Jensenius, 2020). First, many domestic violence laws are not accompanied by statutory budget allocations, making effective implementation by formal duty-bearing agencies impossible. Second, there is often resistance to these new laws from male-dominated judiciaries and police forces, which needs to be addressed (Ellsberg et al., 2015). Focusing attention on capacity-building is seen as important, as State-related duty bearers can be held institutionally accountable. This is especially important when duty bearers, such as the police, may be seen as complicit in perpetrating some forms of VAWG and are also often front-line responders to VAWG incidents (Lowndes and Gains, 2018; United Nations, 2014). Limited capacities in the justice sector have also been identified as a core concern for VAWG prevention and response (IDLO, 2017). Many of these public institutions remain unresponsive to some forms of VAWG, treating it as a household or private matter. Feminist scholars note that risks come with using male-dominated legal and State power to address VAWG. Without

care, they may be counterproductive, revictimizing some women or denying their legal agency (Htun and Jensenius, 2020; Kumar, 2018; United Nations, 2014).

The importance of developing sustained capacities in formal institutions (e.g. the judiciary, the police, and health and social services) that are involved in VAWG prevention has received attention in recent years. Capacity-building helps them to work more effectively together and to coordinate across multiple sectors and has been identified in literature as essential for both preventing and responding to VAWG (WHO, 2019). The health sector in particular is seen as having a substantial part to play as well as the justice sector (Ellsberg et al., 2015; Michau et al., 2015; UN Women, 2012a). A multisectoral approach to VAWG prevention requires close collaboration between the justice department, other ministries and other areas of society (United Nations, 2014). CSOs can play important roles in **convening** multiple institutional stakeholders for a more coordinated VAWG prevention strategy (ActionAid, 2012; Michau et al., 2015). However, CSOs may need to invest more in long-term programming with these partners to shift institutional practices and enable multisectoral collaboration (Michau et al., 2015). Improving system-wide formal enforcement mechanisms has been identified as enabling improved VAWG legislation to reduce violence at individual and community levels. Collaborative multisectoral programmes that include CSOs alongside other stakeholders can help to transform deeply entrenched attitudes and behaviours within these systems and address underlying risk factors for VAWG (Ellsberg et al., 2015). Capacitating women within these formal institutions can help to challenge attitudes that create a culture of unresponsiveness, and CSOs can play roles in this (Karim, 2022; UN Women, 2012b).

CSOs are identified as playing various roles in developing the capacity of the formal justice system around VAWG. CSOs focus on the duty bearers who are responsible for delivering justice, and not only the rights holders needing protection (ActionAid, 2012). Working to change entrenched attitudes held by duty bearers, including the judiciary, the police, policy officials and informal justice actors

can lead to improved action and reduced impunity. A coordinated response in this respect is critical, with capacity-strengthening of all stakeholders also building political will (ActionAid, 2012; United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, 2018). Fostering collaboration between women's organizations and these stakeholders can also improve interactions (ActionAid, 2012; Karim, 2022). Partnerships reduce the replication of work, enable coordinated approaches and referrals and develop local networks and ownership in ways that do not place CSOs at the centre of the process. Local executive actors and institutions are an important focus, and finding out how VAWG prevention laws and policies are interpreted locally is key (Lowndes and Gains, 2018). Strengthening the institutions and capacities of the health, education, law enforcement and social services sectors is identified by global health institutions as part of effective prevention (WHO, 2019) and as requiring a coordinated community response across sectors, agencies and CSOs (UN Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls, 2018). The 10 projects offer more detail on the specific roles that CSOs play in these capacity development tasks in relation to formal duty bearers around addressing VAWG.

A key theme emerging from many of the CSOs in the sample was the roles they played in developing the capacities of judicial, law enforcement and government institutions. CSOs identified their roles in delivering a range of capacity-building activities for judicial, security and government institutions and systems around VAWG prevention and response, and often played important convening and collaborating

roles in multisectoral partnerships with these formal stakeholders.

Several approaches were noted by CSOs as promising. However, regardless of the approach all CSOs in the sample consistently highlighted **the underlying importance of multisectoral collaboration as the indisputable basis for work by CSOs around more effective implementation of laws and policies for VAWG prevention.** This included collaborative working with multiple government departments, not just the criminal justice division. It also meant collaborating with different sectors of society to bring government and non-government actors together and taking note of and convening influential social actors such as the media and business. Working in silos was to be avoided. CSOs identified themselves as being effective behind-the-scenes conveners and facilitators of interinstitutional networks, ensuring that everyone has a role for which they are held accountable.

Many of the nine CSOs in the sample played these convening, capacitating and collaborating roles in relation to larger formal government, judicial and law enforcement institutions. In this way, they were able to punch above their weight by capacitating “up” within these larger institutional systems. These systems can be sustainable in the long term. CSOs are helping to equip these formal duty bearers to take their existing statutory responsibilities for protection, prevention and justice seriously, and not merely outsource VAWG prevention to the third sector or to already overstretched community volunteers. This collaborative model was identified as important even when the particular government did not appear to be human rights- or gender justice-friendly:



[A] willingness to work with different stakeholders at different levels in different countries prepares the ground for effective activities ... when working in the field of gender justice, it is important to engage with moderate representatives of different government entities, including criminal justice actors, even if the main government's strategy seems to contradict the main tenets of gender justice and human rights ... to ensure that programmes and strategies continue to be meaningful, [be] relevant and generate greater local ownership, including with local government stakeholders (WIG), final evaluation, p. 78).

Within this multisectoral approach, three strategies for VAWG prevention and response emerged across the sample of CSOs in relation to developing the capacities of judicial, law enforcement and government institutions: (1) positive collaboration with government ministries; (2) capacitating law enforcement personnel; and (3) strengthening the formal judicial system. Some overall challenges were also highlighted by these CSOs.

2.2.1. Positive collaboration with governments

Some CSOs deepened their collaboration with different government ministries on preventing and responding to VAWG by using what CSO practitioners in FGDs termed a “benefits-based approach”, described as a response to governments asking “what’s in it for us?” CSOs in this sample noted the value of positioning themselves as offering a positive contribution that the specific government ministries wanted or needed as an incentive for collaboration. CSOs working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, India, Myanmar, the State of Palestine, Thailand, Uganda and Zimbabwe all collaborated in positive ways with a range of different government ministries as a core strategy for their VAWG prevention work. They offered their expertise as CSOs in ways that fitted with existing government priorities. Multisectoral partnerships formed a significant component of most of these strategies, with the intention of mainstreaming the issue of concern to the CSO into government institutions and developing their capacity as a result. This included convening work by CSOs to

help different government departments to collaborate to take up their different roles as well as enabling wider holistic collaboration around VAWG prevention with other sectors:

Whether we are working on VAWG prevention or providing VAWG services, the multi-sector, multi-pronged approach works best because even for [the] government there are lots of departments, including health, police, education [and] livelihoods. So every department is involved in some way, and everyone has different roles [and] different budgets available. So we need to see how they converge and work with everyone – a holistic intervention (FGD, 22 November 2021).

For example, Pragya in India adopted a **holistic development** approach in its work with the government and with rural communities. It mainstreamed VAWG prevention issues into a cluster of other development issues, including nutrition, sanitation, health and development, to offer what it described in FGDs as a benefits-based approach to working with various government ministries. Pragya’s regular meetings with the government always discussed multiple development issues in the community and how these issues related to gender-based violence. It was also careful when highlighting possible gaps in implementation not to lay blame on one department or create a negative framing. Pragya would bring members of its women’s groups to these discussions so that the government could hear from and engage with them directly. As a result of this approach, entry points emerged that allowed Pragya to work on transformative shifts in attitudes to gender and build a stronger response to VAWG from formal institutions both in tribal areas and nationally. Pragya identified a weak focus on prevention in many legal and government systems and that a reactive approach to VAWG prevention predominated. By taking the lead to set up inter-agency task forces including government and law enforcement agencies in each of the 10 project districts (280 members in total), Pragya played a critical facilitating role behind the scenes. Co-leadership of this forum was rotated and was always split between government and non-government agencies to ensure shared ownership of the platform. This became a place

where shared action plans were developed between government and civil society actors, where joint responsibilities were allocated and multi-pronged, multi-partner strategies were designed. It also became a regular forum where data on VAWG from the women's groups that Pragma was working with directly were presented to formal duty bearers:

We focused on working with the government and legal law enforcement agencies at the grass roots and connecting women and local mentors with them and bringing all of them together through a platform where they could discuss and prioritize issues and work together ... for the last 25 years we [have been] working in remote areas and we have been [accepted] because we also work in many other connected themes like health, livelihoods [and] climate change, so with different [government] departments. We have also built a good rapport through this work with [the] local government that we could leverage (FGD, 22 November 2021).

Pragma were well positioned to play a convening role, bringing together these different agencies for joint action, partly because of its long-term presence in rural areas and credibility working on other issues. It identified its pre-existing rapport with local government structures as critical to its success. Pragma learned many lessons through this process, including how to motivate the government to engage more proactively, how to ensure women's groups were present at the meetings, and how to help government ministries to identify and use their existing financial budgets for VAWG prevention.

Many of the CSOs in the sample entered into formal memorandums of understanding with particular government ministries and/or State entities. The organizations highlighted that this formality was helpful in terms of documenting and clarifying their role in advance to allow them to work well with government systems. This was seen as requiring significant time at the start of the project to ensure clarity, as once activities are built into formal government plans they can be hard to change owing to the nature of government bureaucracy. Memorandums of understanding can limit CSOs' ability to adapt

programming, but can also provide a map for referral pathways both from CSOs to government services and from State entities to CSOs:

The agreement that we had with the police that they will refer cases of girls and municipalities who might be in need of our services, it also helped us to reach to the girls and women with disabilities. So I think in terms of the referral pathway [it needs to be] across all the partners that we worked with. We also learned that the multisectoral approach strengthened the referral system (FGD, 23 November 2021).

2.2.2. Developing the capacity of law enforcement personnel

The second approach involved CSOs that were directly capacitating law enforcement personnel around improving VAWG prevention and response.

Several CSOs in the sample identified capacitating law enforcement personnel such as the police force as key to their engagement. Doing capacity-building work at this level was often most effective when it was targeted towards tackling specific structural and/or cultural barriers that CSOs in the sample had identified from their other work directly with women and girls on VAWG. This could include addressing stigmatizing and discriminatory mindsets within the police with regard to particularly marginalized groups, such as migrants, sex workers, women in conflict with the law or women with disabilities. In Zimbabwe, for example, LCDZ prioritized training selected members of the police force in the use of sign language. This broke down a significant barrier for the police to communicating directly with VAWG survivors with hearing and speech impairments. Previously, the police relied on caregivers to be translators, who might have been the perpetrators. This targeted capacity-building in one area also built trust between CSOs and the quite closed police systems. This enabled LCDZ to deepen its engagement with the police in its second grant period and carry out a more in-depth review of police systems to determine how a lack of standardization of the protocols required, for example psychological assessments of capacity to consent to sex, prevented

the police from protecting women and girls with mental disabilities in practice. This can also be applied to other contexts, for example where women may not be fluent in the languages used by the police or may have other mental or physical disabilities that the police may not be equipped to recognize.

Engagement with the police was identified as important in places such as El Salvador, where ACP worked with the Ministry of Justice and Public Security to draw on a security framework as the recognized State department for engaging with all issues of violence, including VAWG prevention. By recognizing that police officers themselves were often traumatized by the violence they witnessed, its training of over 350 male and female police officers helped to reconceptualize their role as defenders of women's rights and to institutionalize their role despite the challenge of high staff turnover:

On a day-to-day basis, these trained personnel often have to attend to other demands such as regulating the traffic of vehicles or reinforcing some police intervention, which would not always guarantee that they are available when a possible VAWG case comes in. One of the strategies implemented that has been identified would consist of promoting joint work by pairs of agents with and without training, favouring a multiplier effect of the knowledge acquired. ... It is also important to highlight the high level of stress that PNC [National Civilian Police] personnel must face in the context of social violence that plagues the country (ACP, monitoring report, p. 52).

ACP's work at institutional law enforcement level was also able to influence interinstitutional networks that included the police and generate shared accountability. The work led to the development of internal regulations on police misconduct around VAWG as well as offering survivor-centred approaches to using their enforcement powers in ways that align with new VAWG prevention laws.

Working to transform law enforcement was often essential for other aspects of VAWG programming. For example, in Solomon Islands, RRRT's work with rural traditional justices around issuing interim protection

orders for women at risk helped it to realize that the police were a weak link in its original model, as they were not willing to serve and enforce these protection orders. As a result, it shifted its programming at the midway point to incorporate training for this group. However, RRRT realized by the end of the pilot programme that deeper engagement was needed at this institutional level, as the authority of lay justices (a pivotal assumption of its entire programme) was often not recognized by the police. Similarly, in the State of Palestine, WCLAC worked to equip the police to take a more gender-sensitive approach but faced tensions with law enforcement officials around custody and visitation rights. Some expected the VAWG shelters that WCLAC was running to act as informal "holding cells" for women who were perceived to be in conflict with the law.

2.2.3. Developing the capacity of the formal judicial system

The third approach focused on CSOs' roles in strengthening the formal judicial system. A strong judicial system that holds perpetrators accountable was seen as important for the long-term sustainability of all VAWG programming, creating an enabling environment for women to seek justice. Some of the selected CSOs positioned themselves in ways that made it possible for their work to directly strengthen the formal judicial system, often by working with key institutional actors such as qualified lawyers, magistrates and court structures around VAWG prevention and response. One strategy adapted by some CSOs in the sample was training existing lawyers in VAWG and then assisting them to offer legal aid within their formal practices. For example, WCLAC in the State of Palestine worked with young, newly trained women Sharia lawyers to train them in VAWG prevention to provide legal aid to women in this area. Similarly, ActionAid in Myanmar worked with existing youth legal clinics to train young people in VAWG prevention and response and to assist them in arguing their cases more effectively to ensure that VAWG perpetrators are held accountable. By working with existing legal organizations and with government departments, it sensitized women about their legal rights and helped VAWG survivors to access legal aid

support through these clinics, disrupting cycles of violence and developing the capacity of these system differently by identifying gaps in their formal training in these areas and by standardizing this awareness among legal and policy officials:

[We do] capacity-building of legal organizations in Myanmar. We use youth legal clinics in a professional setup where we are able to invest and build so that they become a stronger organization [so we are enabling] more of these lawyers to be trained with GBV [gender-based violence] and it doesn't come with a legal lecture in school, so this is what we have invested in ... [we also work with] government department officials ... sensitizing them [and] making them aware and convinced before they hear the gaps that people are identifying that they might take negatively [and this] has helped a lot in terms of legal and policy formulations. ... We work within those legal organizations to [build] capacity from [a] GBV perspective [and] with the government officials in standardizing awareness (FGD, 22 November 2021).

Other CSOs worked with court systems and structures to make them more VAWG survivor-centred and to ensure that no women are left behind. This can be particularly effective when new specialist courts and judicial roles are instituted as a result of changes in VAWG prevention legislation, which is what happened in El Salvador. However, it can also emerge as a result of ongoing multisectoral partnerships that build trust in CSOs, allowing them to engage more deeply with existing courts for transformation in ways often inaccessible to other CSOs. This was experienced by LCDZ in Zimbabwe, which worked to strengthen the judicial system around VAWG to be more inclusive of girls and women with disabilities. It noted in earlier projects that smaller systems, for example local magistrates' courts within the judicial system, were not disability-friendly for girls and women. Therefore, for example, it provided training in sign language in these systems and in this way also built relationships that allowed it to engage further:

A multi-sector approach strengthened our partnerships and helped us get into government ministries, especially the judicial system, as they are very closed, they don't want people to penetrate their space. So the partnership we had was able to capacitate different judiciary staff members on how to handle girls and women disability survivors – but they don't easily accept other organizations' need to come in and train them (FGD, 23 November 2021).

2.2.4. Challenges for civil society organizations in developing the capacity of judicial, law enforcement and government institutions

Lessons from practice from the CSOs in the sample indicate that engaging governments around capacity development for more effective implementation of laws and policies is a promising approach. However, several challenges were raised by the CSOs around developing capacity in government institutions, engaging formal systems and multisectoral partnerships.

First, CSOs noted in FGDs that some statutory duty bearers do not want to publicize services they are supposed to be providing to address VAWG prevention for fear that it may create work that is beyond their human or financial resources or their knowledge capacity. Referral service mapping by the CSOs in the sample was identified as a way to hold them accountable and to reduce fragmentation and create collaboration between the different actors in the justice sector (e.g. prosecutors, magistrates and the police) so that one group of duty bearers alone do not feel overwhelmed:

We also do referral service mapping ... identifying what other services are available in each [of the] different communities so violence against women cases, where do they go to? So that's quite useful at different levels. But there are multiple actors that the communities and the partners became aware of – the services are there, they just do not know it, people do not claim it or the service providers keep it silent so that they have less

work or have a limited infrastructural support, without national funding or some other mechanisms, it's very hard for them to be there, so [it's also about] holding them accountable (FGD, 22 November 2021).

Second, partnerships between CSOs and governments were identified by CSOs in the sample as often including complex power dynamics that have to be carefully negotiated.

For example, some CSO partners highlighted in FGDs having to deal with particularly challenging government ministries in their contexts; they were expected to inform the ministry offices in detail of what they were doing and could not deviate from this, or they would be forced to cease all implementation in that rural area or even risk losing their licence to operate as a CSO. Some district government officials expected to accompany CSOs to observe field activities, which could politicize CSO visits. However, this was also an opportunity to connect duty bearers with their community, as government personnel rarely have the budget to travel to their constituencies. Developing a mutual understanding between the CSO and the relevant ministry was essential. In some places, CSOs noted they could only enter communities with a supervising government ministry and reports had to be made to other ministries at regular meetings. Especially in the lead up to political elections, CSOs noted that some governments may become nervous about CSOs entering communities and may insist on seeing formal memorandums of understanding. Foreign contribution control acts also give governments significant power to shape which CSOs get funds from overseas. In addition, governments may become extremely nervous about the use of human rights language on CSOs' websites or in their reports (which can be at odds with donors' expectations) or any perceived criticism of the government. CSOs often focus on a dialogues approach tied to looking at data and generating solutions together. On some issues, such as child marriage, a regional approach to working with governments was seen as a way to raise issues but not directly allocate blame.

Third, the high transfer rate and turnover of officials in both governments and law enforcement was

identified by CSOs in the sample as a challenge to sustaining gains in capacity development. CSOs in the sample noted that senior officials can often be sent to any part of the country and may be unfamiliar with the VAWG issues in that context. Pragma noted in its work with the government and police systems that while junior officials are usually from the local area, senior officials within the national police and civil service systems are recruited country-wide and can be posted anywhere in India. This means these official decision makers may be unfamiliar with local cultures and the specific forms of VAWG that exist in their areas of implementation and may also look down on the communities they are serving. CSOs need intensive support to capacitate officials quickly, as within a few years they will be transferred again, and the process will have to start again. The value of the Pragma-initiated inter-agency task force was that it helped to train new officials in VAWG issues in their area and enabled frequent contact by Pragma with new recruits to prevent the loss of gains and offered a platform for it to hear from those in the community who felt disengaged from policy implementation.

Finally, CSOs in the sample noted that their own data collection processes show that only a small fraction of VAWG incidents are reported to formal justice systems, which are often viewed by women survivors as bureaucratic, slow and costly. In areas where customary laws dominate, even fewer women are seen to report to formal systems, which are viewed as patriarchal, dominated by men and unfriendly spaces for women. Many forms of VAWG remain socially normalized and are not seen as crimes at community level. Even for the forms that are seen as crimes, many women do not want family members placed in jail, as this creates new challenges. While capacitating formal justice and law enforcement systems is still seen as important, CSOs pointed out in FGDs that the reality remains that these systems only recognize a fraction of VAWG and that informal systems, networks and social norms still play a significant role.

2.2.5. Key take-aways

- CSOs play important positive roles in developing the **institutional capacities of** formal duty bearers in

the government, law enforcement and the judiciary for VAWG prevention, protection and justice for the sustainable, effective implementation of laws and policies.

- CSOs consistently emphasize **the importance of multisectoral partnerships** for legal and policy implementation both for systematic institutionalization and the allocation of specific roles to enable multi-agency engagement for a collaborative systems approach. Some CSOs are seen as well placed to play influential roles in **convening** these different institutions for dialogue and action.
- CSOs that seek to shift formal duty bearers' stance on VAWG prevention from **reactive to proactive** encounter challenges and power dynamics often on account of their mindsets and the organizational culture within these formal institutions. Developing shared accountability, even with less proactive governments, requires finding common ground and resisting allocating blame.

2.3. Bridging gaps between formal laws/policies and informal systems at community level

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many gaps exist between formal duty-bearing government and justice systems and informal systems at community level that often prevent women from accessing formal systems (ActionAid, 2012; Brickell, 2013). This is particularly true in the case of VAWG, which is often still viewed at community level as a family and community matter rather than a criminal issue, with the two systems operating in parallel rather than intersecting (United Nations, 2014). The importance of engaging with informal legal and policy systems and actors, such as faith-based and traditional leaders, that conventional legal implementation structures, such as discriminatory customary laws that subordinate women to male guardians, may ignore has been raised (Jewkes, 2015; Kumar, 2018; WHO, 2019). These informal systems are often shaped by gendered social norms, for example

around divorce and women in the workplace. This also need to be addressed and can be in contravention of international human rights standards (Htun and Jensenius, 2020). These approaches can empower women to be less dependent on abusive men and support gender-responsive institutional frameworks across formal and informal systems (IDLO, 2017). Aligning citizens' behaviour with laws on VAWG prevention is identified as a key challenge facing VAWG prevention activists today, where the letter of the law is more progressive in many places than social norms and individual attitudes (Htun and Jensenius, 2020). This can require engaging with customary or religious beliefs that can underpin gender structures, and informal systems, policies and social norms that subordinate women and girls (Cislaghi and Heise, 2016; Palm et al., 2019).

Equipping women and girls at community level to better understand and demand their human and legal rights from both informal and formal systems has been identified as a role for CSOs (ActionAid, 2012). Only a very small proportion of women who experience VAWG currently report it to formal authorities. A range of reasons are suggested for this: the cost of reporting, the high attrition rates, the low number of successfully prosecuted cases and women being pressured to drop charges (ActionAid, 2012; United Nations, 2012). As a result, many CSOs are well positioned to help bridge gaps between formal and informal systems in ways that are survivor centred by focusing on capacitating women and girls to articulate their rights, wants and needs around VAWG prevention and to claim their rights. Participatory methodologies used by CSOs involve women in law and policy implementation and work with women's groups at community level to build collective momentum (ActionAid, 2012; Karim, 2022). CSOs are also identified as playing roles in developing legal literacy materials tailored to the needs of various groups (United Nations, 2014).

Community-based mechanisms within the informal justice system are often seen as more accessible than formal justice systems by many disadvantaged women, and can be viewed by them as providing speedy, affordable, and meaningful redress. They

address a range of issues and decision-making can be based on informal consultation rather than codified laws. These mechanisms often fall under the authority of predominantly male local, traditional, or religious leaders, and verdicts can be subjective and biased against women. However, working across the formal and informal justice systems is strongly recommended (ActionAid, 2012; United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, 2018). CSOs can help increase understanding of women's rights in this informal justice system and are well placed to recognize when informal justice is a preferred option for women, particularly in remote areas. They can help develop the system's capacity to deliver justice for women (United Nations, 2012). Addressing entrenched cultural and religious norms that shape these systems is often a long-term task (Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017).

In addition, there is an increasing focus on the impact of building the capacity of local women to be facilitators between formal and informal justice processes by training them in judicial processes and women's rights and/or setting up community-based legal clinics to build trust and increase women's willingness to report rights violations, receive counselling, be referred and seek redress. They provide legal advice, raise awareness on referral pathways and counsel survivors, and can provide a more trusted space than male-dominated formal systems (ActionAid, 2012; Kumar, 2018). Empowering women through increasing their bargaining power may be seen as more effective than the State arm of criminal justice at times at deterring perpetrators and generating new norms (Htun and Jensenius, 2020; Kumar, 2018). Addressing cultural logics, tackling root causes of VAWG and involving women in local settings are alternative approaches (Brickell, 2013; Kumar, 2018). However, more evidence is needed on utilizing these community mechanisms for VAWG prevention and not only for response.

This section focuses on four interrelated ways in which CSOs in the sample are bridging gaps at community level around accessing laws and policies related to VAWG prevention and response. They are doing this by

(1) providing community-based legal services directly to women; (2) training community-based volunteer paralegals or rights mentors; (3) working to capacitate informal justice systems or actors to be more survivor centred; and (4) carrying out community-level awareness campaigns on rights. The section concludes with a few of the challenges that they encountered.

2.3.1. Providing community-based legal services to women

One way in which CSOs in the sample bridged these gaps was by setting up and providing community-based legal aid services directly tailored to their context to recognize and refer women to available formal services. This was often part of a larger package of informal and often volunteer-led support provided to VAWG survivors (and differs from the strategies focused on capacitating legal aid services within formal legal organizations for VAWG mentioned in section 2.2). For example, in India Pragya set up socio-empowerment kiosks (SEKs) in communities, which were staffed by community volunteers who had been trained and equipped by the organization with a range of basic legal information and advice. They were available to assist both men and women on a range of issues and connect them to relevant government services and court processes. CSOs with good multisectoral relationships with governments received referrals to these services. One of their key roles was around VAWG but they also provided other services. This reduced the stigma around women approaching them and gathered wider support for their presence. Each of these SEKs hosted a free helpline for women and a mentor-related referral network of 150 agencies, including shelters, counsellors, and women's organizations. The increase in VAWG reporting due to this community innovation was significant. However, questions around the financial and human resources required for these programme-funded SEKs remained and ongoing government funding for the SEKs was identified as an urgent need. In the State of Palestine, WCLAC also provided free legal aid services and social counselling to women survivors of VAWG. As it had a formal partnership with the government Ministry of Social Development, its community kiosks also worked from the start in close cooperation with official

service providers and young Sharia women lawyers and followed national referral system protocols.

2.3.2. Training volunteer community paralegals and women’s rights mentors

A second way that several of the CSOs in the sample bridged gaps between communities and formal legal and policy systems was through training and equipping mobile community-based volunteer female paralegals. However, this model was tailored by each CSO to its specific context in terms of who was involved and what they were called. For example, ActionAid in Myanmar had a good track record in piloting this female community paralegal model in urban areas and decided to roll it out in rural areas. In its specific context it decided to deploy female community paralegal volunteers alongside male role models to provide a two-pronged combination of support for VAWG prevention. The women volunteers were often the first point of contact and provided trusted support to women, but the male volunteers often had more power to influence informal justice systems:

[I]n terms of bridging [the gap], we acknowledge the role of volunteers as paralegals. Volunteers ... also male role models ... are a very important investment that we have made. That’s become a best supportive mechanism in the communities because they become advocates and we use the males to influence the system, so that that’s also helped a lot, and we notice the paralegals they become the first contact person that the [women] feel comfortable with, and they feel supported that somebody is going along with them and understanding (FGD, 22 November 2021).

ActionAid’s project reports also highlight the value of this “carrot and stick” approach to perpetrator accountability, where the presence of female community paralegals acts as a visible deterrent to male perpetration of VAWG. A number of successfully prosecuted cases of VAWG that were supported by these paralegals made men more scared to perpetrate VAWG, as they had done so with impunity in the past. However, ActionAid noted that this can place female paralegals at risk in their communities and that they need careful support. The presence of supportive

male role models also helps. It notes that men now feel more aware of the potential risks of punishment and legal consequences of VAWG but are also being offered an alternative identity through the male role models. CSOs note that this women’s increased access to justice deters men from perpetrating, especially if they are also offered a role in VAWG prevention.

Female community paralegals also formed part of a multidimensional approach to changing entrenched patterns in traditional settlements around VAWG (especially sexual violence) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, and Uganda. Insights gathered from these paralegals regarding who women in the community approached for initial assistance made visible the important role that faith-based and traditional actors still play in the lives of many women, especially those in remote rural communities or in fragile States, and the need to engage with these actors.

2.3.3. Working to capacitate informal justice systems and actors

A third way that CSOs bridged the gaps was by working directly with existing informal systems of justice around law and policies to improve them alongside formal systems rather than to polarize them. This need to engage directly with existing informal justice systems was something that RRRT in Solomon Islands insisted on from the start, with a two-level pilot project that trained existing authorized justices (AJs). AJs were predominantly male local court lay justices based in remote rural areas. The new Family Protection Act in 2016 provided the basis for this model. In light of new laws around VAWG protection, these AJs had been given new powers to deliver interim protection orders to protect women at risk of domestic violence. While this was only temporary and required further consolidation at magistrate level, it could be a vital interim shortcut to preventing VAWG if enforced. The decision by RRRT to support and train these existing AJs was tied to the fact that their role was enshrined in national legislation, with some expected legitimacy and support from the government as a result as well as a degree of systems oversight and accountability. The final external evaluation of this pilot project noted that the decision to work with an existing informal institution rather than create a separate parallel system was important, especially in a

context where community-level systems were key. This AJ role was also associated with training (and giving stipends to) 40 female community facilitators, who played a similar role to those in Myanmar. Alongside the AJs, this provided a two-tier interconnected system. However, both of these tiers were not functioning in all areas, and at times AJs were also involved in selecting community facilitators. Therefore, there was a risk of conflicts of interest arising. This form of engagement proved to be complex and resulted in some challenges within the project's short time frame, but RRRT's commitment to working with the existing informal legal systems aimed to also influence wider processes of women's representation and recruitment slowly within traditional systems.

This need to engage with existing informal systems was also noted by ActionAid in Myanmar, where a key lesson learned during the project grant period was the ongoing power of these informal systems for most women and the importance of CSOs working more deeply with these systems to make them more survivor centred and rights based, rather than focusing on access to formal systems alone:

We were able to showcase this gap between formal and informal system[s]. It's not necessarily [that in the] informal system all is bad, but definitely usually those are not survivor centred or not very much in the interests of the women. The informal system often just gives [informal monetary] compensation [to the women survivor who experiences violence from someone] – 50,000 chats (which is the equivalent of \$10) ... so our research shows that only 10 per cent out of the reported cases go to formal [system] ... this is not something we can ignore, ... the informal system could be more rights based or survivor sensitive. In that sector a lot needs to be done, but there is a clear showcasing of the need. Like if they [women] can't bear it any more, they go for [the formal system]. But then the court procedures have killed them in terms of not able to continue (FGD, 22 November 2021).

The issue of whether formal or informal justice systems should preside over VAWG cases was raised by CSOs as one they had to work on in collaboration with community leaders but also in partnership with formal law enforcement personnel to agree on what the process should be depending on the type of case. This approach was identified as effective by LCDZ in Zimbabwe, which carried out awareness-raising at community level in collaboration with formal legal actors:



A mentor in Rajasthan conducting awareness sessions with men and boys, village council members, village elders and others.
Credit: Gaurav Singh / Pragma (India)

So awareness-raising [for community leaders], we're doing it in partnership with law enforcers, maybe sensitizing them [to the fact] that it is unlawful for you [as a community leader] to preside over cases like this (e.g. rape), this one must go to the police, to report them to the police and the police will take over the case ... maybe a girl with a disability, for their caregiver to report their case to the police and not to their village chief (FGD, 22 November 2021).

CSOs note, however, that these informal systems do engage with the issue of economic compensation, often relevant to women, while formal systems focus less on this and may even incur costs for victims.

2.3.4. Carrying out community-level awareness-raising campaigns on rights

Finally, many CSOs in the sample carried out community-level awareness-raising campaigns by teaching women and girls their rights, and equipping them to better understand new laws or policies around VAWG and to address harmful social norms.

For example, WCLAC in the State of Palestine used awareness campaigns to engage critically around the intersections between culture and women's rights by starting community-level discussions on topics previously considered taboo. These topics included harmful gender stereotypes concerning the traditional roles of women in society that undermine their social and educational opportunities. The campaigns also involved engaging with offline media and online social media around sexist hate speech. Pragya in India trained local women peer leaders to use board games, street plays and radio to raise awareness of the rights of women and girls specifically in relation to issues of domestic violence, dowries, witch hunting and trafficking. It used these techniques to stimulate community-level discussions about existing laws and mechanisms and make helpline numbers more visible. Pragya also used both male and female agents of change to address violence-supporting attitudes.

These community campaigns and the solidarity they often created among women was identified by CSOs

in the sample as acting as a deterrent to men around perpetrating VAWG by empowering women and girls to report incidents but also encouraging communities to respond swiftly and proactively to reports of incidents. They also sensitized men on the risks of perpetrating these forms of violence in the light of new laws. Some developed carefully tailored behaviour change materials in collaboration with the women in those local contexts around cultural appropriateness that were intended to change harmful attitudes, social norms and practices, which were often very specific to particular regions. These provided another contribution to raising local demand for VAWG prevention and response and for sensitizing newly posted government officials to the area. The campaigns also helped to demystify laws for ordinary people so they could be understood and applied in communities. This was particularly important when VAWG prevention laws focused on addressing customary practices or beliefs, where the law may be ignored by communities and resistance will result if entrenched social norms are threatened. CSOs had important roles to play here in taking a bottom-up approach to tackling harmful practices, often by working alongside faith-based and traditional actors:

A multisectoral approach is very critical and a bottom-up approach to involve communities themselves because if we are coming to say that your customary practices are harmful, you need a strategy in how you can involve them in trying to move them away from what they've practised over years. It needs to be coming from the bottom up not like you're just coming from town ... involve them gradually until you change their mindsets (FGD, 22 November 2021).

This approach also encouraged community leaders to make commitments around VAWG prevention, and to commit to refusing to administer VAWG prevention or response in ways that may lead to further forms of VAWG. This type of collaboration on VAWG prevention needs to be recognized as an potentially important aspect of local systems, as was seen by LCDZ in Zimbabwe:

We engaged community leaders so that they would also make commitments on how they can also prevent violence against girls and women with disabilities within their communities. ... they vowed that they will not preside over cases involving girls and disabilities, because we noticed that the community leaders tended to preside over cases of girls and women with disabilities, and in the end they will marry them off to the person who abused or raped them because in some cases the families would be saying, “Who will marry this girl with a disability?” So if someone abuses them, instead of taking formal redress they will use informal redress to address the issue and marry off the girl to that perpetrator (FGD, 22 November 2021).

2.3.5. Challenges for civil society organizations in bridging gaps between formal and informal systems

CSOs in the sample that worked to bridge the gaps between formal and informal systems and between women in communities and systems to address VAWG encountered various challenges.

First, several CSOs in the sample insist that while more work is needed within informal systems, working within these typically patriarchal systems is not easy. Some CSOs in the sample working with these systems experienced forms of backlash and resistance from these custom- or religion-infused informal systems against the planned changes in formal VAWG prevention laws, for example in the State of Palestine, where gender equality is seen by some as contradicting religious doctrines. However, women’s organizations at community level are also transforming this informal landscape by teaching women about their rights and setting up new informal systems that are more survivor centred. Informal systems also reflect the ongoing power of patriarchal social norms, which have to be engaged with and transformed if legal and policy changes are to become a reality for women and girls.

Second, some of these informal systems may limit the approaches that women’s organizations can take. When CSOs in the sample engaged with existing systems, they could often only operate within the rules

of these informal systems, which may, for example, only allow men to hold certain positions, or prevent women from speaking publicly. For example, RRRT faced this challenge in Solomon Islands when working with informal local justices. These local justices were primarily older males (only 2 out of the 46 it worked with were women) who were also traditional chiefs. Some were illiterate or in poor health, and they are primarily used only to resolve traditional land disputes. While RRRT made recommendations for alternative “prescribed persons” that involved more women candidates, at the time the project was carried out, this role was not recognized within the system. RRRT faced some tensions between donors’ expectations around involving women as AJs and the reality that they were part of an informal system that is not under the control of CSOs, as its final report noted:

A consequence of supporting the Local Justice role has been that the project had no say as to who becomes one. This is because the project does not make decisions around who becomes a Local Court Justice, there being an appointment process involving several stakeholders at provincial and national levels. While this aligns with local ownership and working through national systems, the project cannot control the gender/age balance beyond making recommendations to the National Local Court Coordinator (RRRT, final evaluation report, p. 44).

Finally, CSOs in FGDs insisted that a good understanding of both informal systems and their connection to formal systems was essential before beginning a project. They pointed to disconnections between the two systems where formal actors such as the police may refuse to recognize the authority of informal legal actors to deliver protection orders, leaving them unenforced. This happened in Solomon Islands. Informal roles, while holding credibility locally, may not hold official status in formal settings. This may put programmes that invest heavily in these systems at risk in the long term. For some of the CSOs in the sample, these issues only emerged during programme delivery. However, they could have put their whole investment in danger, and considerable planning time had to be factored in at the start of the project to map out informal and formal systems in their contexts.

2.3.6. Key take-aways

- CSOs highlight the importance of **working with both formal and informal systems and actors** around VAWG prevention and response in ways that connect the two. These approaches help to create sustainable results around system responses but can be slow to develop initially.
- CSOs are often in strong positions to **help women to access VAWG prevention and response services**, as they are embedded in local communities. WROs especially may develop creative legal approaches to bridging the gaps between informal and formal laws and policies, usually by involving organized women as companions and by educating communities about women's rights and legal processes.
- Bridging these gaps comes with a range of challenges. CSOs in this review aimed to **influence entrenched social processes** over which they do not have direct programmatic control and to participate in reshaping informal legal and policy systems to make them more accessible and participatory and challenge forms of male bias that hamper their use by women.

2.4. Access to justice for survivors and mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable

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Many women face multiple barriers to accessing justice for VAWG. Their heavy productive and reproductive roles may limit their time to pursue legal cases, and they may lack the financial resources for or encounter social disapproval in pursuing justice, particularly for domestic or sexual violence (Htun and Jensenius, 2020). The limited representation of women in formal and informal justice systems means that their needs and opinions are often overlooked (ActionAid, 2012). Addressing concrete barriers to VAWG survivors accessing justice is essential. If they are not addressed, many will remain trapped in repeating or intergenerational cycles of violence, with perpetrators unaccountable (IDLO, 2017; United

Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, 2018).

At the same time, in many conflict-affected countries, access to justice for VAWG is inhibited at structural levels by war-devastated government infrastructure and increased violence. Judicial institutions can lack sensitivity about the experiences of women during or after conflicts and may treat violations of women's rights as a low priority compared with other crimes (ActionAid, 2012; Swaine et al., 2019). Some places where there have been years of armed conflict have seen large-scale conflict-related VAWG, not only in conflict-affected areas but also in areas where there is relative peace. Ongoing instability and a culture of impunity often permeate the army, rebel groups and communities, and present a challenging context for women's rights (ActionAid, 2012; Maddison, 2017).

Justice and social systems may also break down in times of conflict, leaving women more likely to experience violent crimes and less likely to receive justice or support. The formal legal system is often incapable of managing a series of violations so systematic that they challenge the underlying legal system as a whole, such as the use of rape as a weapon of war (Swaine et al., 2019). Trust in public institutions in times of crisis may be low (United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, 2018). As countries emerge from conflict, justice processes precede formal institutional redevelopment. In this transitional period, a gender-responsive process seeks to address impunity with the participation of female survivors and their advocates (Myrtilinen et al., 2014). This affirms institutional obligations, puts pressure on states to use a gender lens and provides women's rights activists with a foothold to advocate for inclusion, participation and oversight. Many survivors of VAWG may remain silent about the harms they endured, fearing that revealing the truth may leave them worse off. They need to receive services without being forced to tell their stories publicly (Maddison, 2017). Approaches need to provide psychosocial support for healing beyond legal recourse alone (Bubenzer and Tankink, 2015; Le Roux and Palm, 2018). Avoiding State slippage into

impunity around VAWG is essential in transitional justice contexts. Shifts of public violence into the private sphere may accompany transitions to “peace”, as war-traumatized men may project their aggression onto women in domestic settings (Le Roux and Palm, 2018; Scanlon, 2016). As transitional justice efforts seek to remedy prior harms, CSOs can help to ensure that women’s rights are upheld and provide support to national justice systems to ensure that VAWG is addressed. Reparations for VAWG survivors form part of gendered peacebuilding (Myrtilinen et al., 2014), but funds are needed for this to be made concrete (Scanlon, 2016). WROs in particular have played crucial roles in transitional periods in linking past and present violence and showing cyclical connections between access to justice, accountability systems and VAWG prevention (Reinke, 2016).

International human rights instruments can help CSOs to anchor national-level policy work and address gender-specific concerns around new peace and security policies (Reinke, 2016; Scanlon, 2016). This includes advocacy around national plans as well as platforms for listening to women’s experiences of armed conflict and identifying actions to enhance women’s protection, participation and agency in these spaces (ActionAid, 2012; Le Roux and Palm, 2019). Although States are requested to involve women at all levels of policymaking, in practice they remain under-represented, including in roles administering justice (Reinke, 2016). More needs to be understood about how CSOs can contribute while remembering that States are ultimately responsible for removing barriers to accessing justice (ActionAid, 2012; United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, 2015).

Several lessons emerged from some of the nine CSOs in the sample that had focused a significant element of their programming on access to justice, especially those in conflict-affected or transitional justice settings. Some of these CSOs initially described their access to justice and prevention programming in separate silos in terms of initial programme design. However, insights from their project reports and focus group discussions show that in practice these two components intersect. This was particularly true in

post-conflict settings, which formed a focus for lessons learned in this section, where acknowledgement and reparations for past VAWG by governments was often tied to developing new gender-related laws and policies. Insights came from CSOs that focused on cases of sexual violence against women where “conflict” was used as an excuse for impunity around VAWG. CSOs in the sample insisted that if amnesty was given for past VAWG, or stories of VAWG were systematically suppressed and not discussed as part of transitional justice processes, this would translate into patterns of future impunity around VAWG.

This section explores some of the roles taken up by CSOs in the sample that worked in transitional justice spaces and some of the wider barriers encountered at individual, social and structural levels by VAWG survivors in accessing justice. CSOs played important roles here in (1) addressing individual (as opposed to structural) barriers for women by connecting VAWG prevention and access to justice as a cycle; (2) working at structural levels for legal and policy accountability around access to justice for VAWG, especially in transitional justice spaces; and (3) helping to shape a more holistic understanding of justice among key stakeholders. Insights from CSOs in the sample around these three roles are explored in the following sections. A final section is included on some challenges that these CSOs identified.

2.4.1. Civil society organizations are helping to tackle individuals’ barriers to accessing justice

A number of CSOs in the sample, partly due to their close connections with individual survivors, noted various practical barriers that were encountered in practice by individual VAWG survivors seeking to access justice. These included issues of transport, language, limited time off from work and access to childcare, among others. Failure to tackle these concrete barriers for individuals could prevent VAWG prevention laws and their formal implementation (as discussed in previous sections) from actually benefiting the women and girls in need. As a result, a cycle of repeated violence would continue in their lives. The need to prevent continuing violence in the

lives of women and girls at a particularly high risk was identified by CSOs in the sample as an important part of the wider VAWG prevention agenda. For example, in Zimbabwe LCDZ identified its own lessons learned around the programmatic risks of positioning their access to justice (as primarily reactive) and prevention (as primarily proactive) in separate silos, as it had initially done at its design stage:

The project had two pillars. The response and the prevention part. So the response mainly focused on access to justice, trying to ensure that survivors [could] access justice when they faced abuse. But we also noted that just responding to the cases is not enough, there is also need for prevention ... So [there were] two strategies – the punitive and the prevention sides (FGD, 22 November 2021).

Despite initially framing their work around two pillars, lessons learned by LCDZ and others in practice showed that complex intersections emerged between the two in terms of engaging with laws and government policies. CSO practitioners noted that prevention is not only about stopping violence before it begins but also about disrupting continued violence by enabling women to access justice. FGDs with CSOs in the sample highlighted that a key role that some play is in equipping women and girls to understand their human and legal rights and to identify that the ongoing violence they experience is unacceptable. In the light of this realization, CSOs insisted that women need immediate support to take action to access justice as a way of preventing future violence. In this way, CSOs learned that prevention and response strategies around VAWG are strongly linked.

One lesson that emerged for some CSOs in the sample was the risk of women and girls seeking access to justice informally where this may have negative consequences for them and even risk further VAWG. For example, in Zimbabwe LCDZ noted that girls with disabilities telling their families that they have been sexually violated could lead to some families seeking to marry them off to their attackers to save family honour and to remove the visibility of possible shameful consequences of the assault such as

unwanted pregnancies. Many CSOs in the sample had to confront complexities where women seeking justice could unwittingly lead to further forms of injustice and even new forms of violence (by States, or law enforcement or peacekeeping personnel) rather than preventing future violence.

A second lesson from some CSOs in the sample was the difficult reality of balancing the individual needs of VAWG survivors (psychosocial support, compensation and safety) with the systems-level value of their role as effective agents advocating for wider legal and policy changes for future generations.

For example, RSAT in Thailand planned to equip lesbian, bisexual and trans women as advocates for wider systems-level change around human rights at national level. However, in practice it realized that some of these women were reluctant to take on this advocacy role and wanted to focus on concrete issues more relevant to their own lives, such as family-level stigma. At the same time, the stories of survivors were often powerful catalysts for stimulating policy change. This highlights the need to think carefully about which agents are involved at which levels. Conflicts of interest can cause disconnections between dimensions of a programme that have different agendas, especially when mobilizing women is seen as a successful strategy for policy change for VAWG prevention. CSOs point out that the needs of individual survivors can conflict with strategies for future systems change.

A third lesson from CSOs in the sample was that VAWG can form a vicious cycle in the lives of individual women. Past exposure to VAWG can often be a risk factor for survivors' continued vulnerability to new forms of violence, for example owing to shame or trauma. CSOs noted that without legal consequences through accountability mechanisms and the provision of psychosocial support for healing, the cycle of VAWG will continue. For example, ACbit in Timor-Leste saw that entrenched cycles of VAWG in conflict-affected settings could be passed on through intergenerational trauma within families to affect generations of women and girls who were not even part of the conflict. This was particularly noted among children of survivors of sexual violence and requires a holistic approach to justice that may span the generations.

2.4.2. Civil society organizations are helping to engage structural barriers to accessing justice

Some CSOs in the sample noted that wider legal and government systems were not being held accountable for their failures around VAWG prevention and saw this as potentially having long-term impacts on future generations. This was seen as particularly prominent in highly fragile or conflict-affected states and transitional justice contexts, where CSOs noted that endemic patterns of VAWG in the past have the potential to shape present realities. Military men, for example, may not receive effective demobilization support for trauma and may therefore become violent perpetrators at family level. Some CSOs in the sample also identified the need to involve women more formally in taking a gendered approach towards peacebuilding to help set better legal and policy frameworks for the post-conflict future. Looking into the past to capture stories of what women had to experience for societies to say “never again” was a task that some CSOs, especially WROs, were assisting with and tying to legal and policy commitments for VAWG prevention. This important role played by CSOs can help to transform entrenched structural patterns around VAWG in certain countries by requiring it to be explicitly addressed as a crucial part of transitional justice.

For example, in the fragile post-conflict context of Timor-Leste, WRO ACbit worked with survivors of conflict-related VAWG to advocate to the highest levels of international legal and government systems around survivors’ needs for justice, including reparation and support. Using participatory action research techniques locally, it collected and publicized the stories of hundreds of women survivors of VAWG through a national survivors’ database and worked collaboratively with the media to put pressure on the government to publicly recognize and respond to VAWG. By ensuring that these stories reached the wider population, the invisibilization of VAWG in the conflict was challenged and the government was pressed to acknowledge its accountability for restitution. One of ACbit’s key demands was for a national victims’ fund. When this demand was approved at the start of the programme, it pivoted its programming to focus more

on the implementation of laws and policies for VAWG prevention. A formal memorandum was signed with the newly established national State fund, enabling the voices of women survivors to play an ongoing important role in shaping new transitional justice systems. These stories also gave ACbit important insights into the realities of women survivors and highlighted the valuable information-gathering role that CSOs can play, with these findings disseminated in a policy paper. ACbit was then able to play a prominent role in equipping other CSOs around gendered peacebuilding within transitional justice systems. ACbit staff were also able to contribute to the emerging national action plan for women. However, in doing so several of them moved into government positions. This migration of personnel from CSOs into government roles at times of political transition was seen as helping to facilitate collaborative models but also put the CSOs at risk of losing their perceived political neutrality. In delivering this programme, ACbit learned that securing justice for VAWG also forms the basis for a multifaceted set of demands for the ongoing prevention of VAWG. These include the need for healing from trauma, the importance of government mental health services and the long-term consequences of sexual violence, for example children born as a result of rape, as well as the cyclical realities of VAWG and how past violence can shape present forms of violence, especially if impunity or amnesty is granted for past violations. ACbit’s reports also highlighted that conflict-related violence can be an entry point into a wider discussion on other forms of VAWG and can build solidarity between different groups of women:

Survivors of current and past violations now mutually regard themselves as women who have been victims of gender-based violence. This is critical for not only for CSOs but for Timor-Leste, as we acknowledge that the understanding of past experiences is a necessary preventative measure to eradicating future acts of mass injustice (ACbit, monitoring report, year 1).

These insights from CSO practitioners in Timor-Leste help to demonstrate why embedding access to justice for women in the structural levels of society is also crucial for long-term VAWG prevention. Disrupting

wider cycles of violence and the concerning lack of accountability of many governments and lawmaking duty bearers is critical for a social vision where VAWG is no longer seen as an inevitable part of the social fabric. Some CSOs in the sample had links to regional and international networks and human rights frameworks that helped them to hold their national governments and legal systems to account. CSOs that engaged around this kind of government accountability offered a concrete reminder of the need for systems that hold perpetrators accountable, make their acts visible and reduce their impunity. **A number of CSOs in the sample highlight the importance of governments holding historical perpetrators of VAWG to account publicly within political transitions and not granting amnesty for these types of crimes.** Conflict-affected settings that are transitioning into peace also need to pay attention to risk factors for continued perpetration to prevent conflict-related violence against women from continuing in the new dispensation. Some CSOs noted the current risk of intergenerational trauma cycles for both survivors and perpetrators:

Due to the lack of institutional support at national level and the restricted number of facilities providing counselling in the country, the community-based psychosocial support offered by ACbit's trauma-healing activities fills a huge gap in health service delivery and is much needed by the country's traumatized population, especially victims of sexual abuse, as if uncared for, [this] can lead to intergenerational cycles of trauma affecting future generations (ACbit, final report, p. 42).

2.4.3. Civil society organizations are shaping how access to justice is understood

Several CSOs in the sample, especially those that worked in transitional justice contexts, raise the wider question of what justice looks like in relation to VAWG. They refuse to see justice as something that women and girls can only access after they are violated, or as a punitive response for individual perpetrators. For many CSOs across the sample, but not always for the those in the formal systems with which they are engaging, access to justice is holistic and involves

psychosocial, economic and medical dimensions and a focus on preventative justice, where violations are not allowed to continue. **As a result, a number of CSO practitioners in the cycle identified the need to look beyond a criminal justice perspective alone to see justice from a restorative and reparative perspective, and to collaborate with and involve multiple diverse statutory stakeholders in the process of justice-seeking.** For example, training run by CSOs in the sample with women alongside other stakeholders in local, national, regional and international contexts helped key institutions to understand justice holistically and to hold more stakeholders accountable for the consequences of VAWG and in supporting gender justice, as was noted by WIGJ in its work across the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, the Sudan and Uganda (which all have pending cases with the International Criminal Court around sexual VAWG):

In our experience, targeting decision makers as well as key institutions produces results at the multiple levels required to progress and produce tangible gender justice outcomes ... combining an international gender justice actor and a diverse range of local women's rights and peace advocates creates the ability to influence developments in a timely manner, in multiple locations, with a high level of implementation and impact: building on long-term, strategic relationships; employing diverse, well-honed, timely advocacy strategies; targeting decision makers and key allies; and the critical advantage of working at multiple levels – internationally, regionally, nationally and locally (WIGJ, final report, p. 52).

WIGJ's multi-country work also offers insights into how individual and systems level work can intersect to shape how justice is being conceptualized. For example, one story of a VAWG survivor can go all the way to the International Criminal Court and create legal precedent by changing case law internationally in ways that help to prevent future violence against women. This shows the power of stories in reshaping how justice is conceptualized for many more women. WIGJ's collaborative approach of pairing an international CSO with local, national and regional WROs showed the collective power of a CSO-driven

gender movement that also exerts pressure on formal systems and builds solidarity. In this example, local WROs supported each other to build bottom-up movements of accountability and documentation to enable the international prosecution of perpetrators. WIGJ prioritized relationships with these local women's rights and justice organizations and networks, as well as victims/survivors in armed conflict-affected countries. These organizations played a key role in holding these objectives together, remaining connected to survivors to form a bridge between individual stories and the wider complex justice system and to identify points of leverage both locally and internationally. This shows ways in which CSOs can reshape the face of justice through CSO collaborations that hold their governments accountable from above for war crimes. Wider gendered peacebuilding policies were also identified as critical, including gender-just provisions in peace settlements, preventing amnesty and invisibility for conflict-related sexual violence, and the promotion of women involved in political leadership. At the same time, the multilevel nature of this work kept sight of current support for survivors to navigate these legal processes.

WIGJ, like many other CSOs in this sample, also engaged and provided technical support to key policymakers, decision makers and stakeholders, including at cross-regional levels, not only to support the better implementation of legislation and services for sexual violence survivors but also to improve gender justice and perpetrator accountability systems in term of laws and policies at domestic and international levels and in post-conflict countries. Holding perpetrators to account for criminal offences internationally was an activity used by local women's networks as a spur to reform national laws to become more gender just. This stimulated wider collaboration around gender justice through multisectoral partnerships, which often included other stakeholders such as the media and faith-based and traditional actors. These were seen as even more important where post-conflict State systems of law and policy were weak or in remote areas, such as was the reality for RRRT in Solomon Islands.

2.4.4. Challenges for CSOs in supporting survivors

Several specific challenges were highlighted by CSOs in the sample that play roles in holding governments accountable for past forms of VAWG and in providing reparations to survivors, as well as in shaping new policy and legal contexts in highly fragile situations such as conflict.

First, there is a risk that the individual short-term needs and expectations of VAWG survivors may be in tension with the need for long-term progress to be made at systems level. This requires balancing at multiple levels. For a number of CSOs in the sample, for example, it emerged that some VAWG survivors could feel exploited, as their individual stories were used to advance legal systems for change but they did not benefit as individuals. WIGJ found that maintaining a balance around these expectations worked best in CSO projects with a multipronged approach, where different interests could be met and where providing short-term assistance to victims/survivors was combined with wider advocacy and media events and accompanied by a strategy that details other actors' responsibilities and monitors their progress.

Second, several CSOs in the sample highlighted their awareness that patterns of mob justice, the presence of militias in conflict zones and the involvement of State organs in VAWG mean that governments, law enforcement personnel and peacekeepers can abuse their power as perpetrators of VAWG. As a result, CSOs also deal with the reality that these structures may not be safe places for women to access justice, especially in places where corruption or impunity for VAWG have become institutionalized.

2.4.5. Key take-aways

- CSOs have shown that VAWG survivors face a **range of individual barriers** to accessing justice that if not addressed can mean that all the good work of laws, policies and formal systems is lost. While CSOs can assist in this area, the responsibility for providing access to justice lies with the State.

- CSOs play important roles in helping to **dismantle structural barriers** to accessing justice around VAWG, especially in post-conflict and transitional societies, where State and legal systems intended to create accountability may have collapsed and need support to rebuild. Making VAWG survivors' stories heard can create political will for change, but it must support survivors too.
- CSOs are collaborating across prevention and response strategies, especially in transitional contexts, **to play a leveraging role in reconceptualizing VAWG-related justice** more holistically. Gendered peacebuilding approaches can be used by CSOs to ensure that new systems do not allow perpetrators to avoid consequences and do support VAWG prevention.

2.5. Law and policy reforms and their implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Evidence is swiftly emerging on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on VAWG prevention as seen from the perspective of CSOs (Majumdar and Wood, 2020; UN Women, 2020). This includes reflection on COVID-19 responses related to laws and government policies and their impact on access to protection and justice for many women, and their effect on other systems-level strategies (Lima, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenging contexts around formal justice systems for many women and has led to new public health laws and policies that create new risks for organizations working to address VAWG (Imkaan and UN Women, 2020; Lokot et al., 2020). However, much of the literature to date is focused on how these systems can respond to VAWG, including accessing justice after violence has taken place. More insights are needed from CSO practitioners around **how** the pandemic is affecting their VAWG prevention work at systems level and their long-term collaborations with government partners and judicial systems. Literature demonstrates that the pandemic has put added pressure on the health and police systems in particular, which are vital players in VAWG prevention. Literature also points to the

risk that governments may reallocate resources earmarked for VAWG prevention to address other health risks, despite the escalating risks of VAWG seen during the pandemic (Peterman, 2020).

Literature shows that COVID-19 intersects with VAWG prevention in various ways related to legal and policy frameworks and institutional capacity (Wenham et al., 2020). Increased, compounded risks of VAWG are seen where law or policy responses to tackle COVID-19 may unwittingly escalate VAWG risks (by contributing to social isolation, online abuse, school closures and stress) (Spiranovic et al., 2020). Reduced protection and delays in accessing formal services around VAWG have been seen, for example due to the overloading of the police, governments, social and health services, and the judiciary. These have created a culture of legal impunity and reduced access to justice, especially for those affected by the digital divide and the diversion of social service funds to the pandemic (United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, 2020). In addition, governments temporarily suspended CSOs' work providing vital VAWG prevention services owing to lockdown regulations. Furthermore, attention to larger power structures is recommended (Imkaan and UN Women, 2020; Lokot et al., 2020), and CSOs already working with legal and policy actors may be well placed to do this. The COVID-19 pandemic and VAWG prevention both require coalition-building, which is put at risk by social distancing regulations. Strong messages from the judiciary, the government and law enforcement that impunity for VAWG will not be tolerated are needed (UN Women, 2020).

However, the pandemic has also offered possibilities for innovation in VAWG prevention to fast-track new law and policy reforms and their implementation (Lokot et al., 2020; UN Women, 2020). Alternative pathways for accessing justice services are emerging as well as proactive policing initiatives to prevent the continued impunity of perpetrators of VAWG (Spiranovic et al., 2020). Some innovative shifts in legal and policy responses to VAWG during the COVID-19 pandemic are emerging (Lima, 2020). New ways are emerging for women to signal that they are at risk of violence using digital modalities (UN Women, 2020). These findings suggest that responses to COVID-19

offer possibilities for social innovation and new partnerships that still need to be documented. Some countries are embracing temporary virtual justice systems to keep systems open, and these approaches could benefit survivors in the long term (UN Women, 2020). In the development of governments' national COVID-19 response plans there is a need to institutionalize VAWG prevention. This requires sustained pressure from CSOs, including to keep the repeal of discriminatory laws on track. Behind this particular crisis lies the wider question of how resilient gender justice systems are to crises. Offering legal aid to women is one promising way for CSOs to continue to exert pressure on justice systems. In some regions, a new wave of VAWG during the COVID-19 pandemic led to multi-sector strategies and campaigns driven by CSOs alongside local government authorities and law enforcement (Lima, 2020). CSOs are also seen as providing (1) a nexus between survivors and governments; (2) an early warning system for governments as they incorporate VAWG prevention strategies into COVID-19 response planning; and (3) informal reporting in changing contexts where policy decisions, such as school closures, may affect the lives of girls (Majumdar and Wood, 2020).

Only a small number of the nine CSOs in the sample had VAWG prevention work that was funded by the UN Trust Fund under way in 2020. LCDZ received

significant funds through a second UN Trust Fund COVID-19-related grant, which enabled it to respond in important ways. However, some of the other CSOs in the sample reflected on how their VAWG prevention work had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and these insights are shared in the following sections across (1) challenges relating to government and legal systems; (2) challenges relating to programmes; and (3) new opportunities for CSOs as a result of the pandemic.

2.5.1. Challenges relating to government and legal systems during the COVID-19 pandemic

First, CSOs in the sample noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had made their work around law and policy reforms and their implementation far harder because legal and policy systems were overwhelmed with COVID-19-related requirements. During the COVID-19 crisis, government priorities were often elsewhere, with many personnel that CSOs had worked with on VAWG prevention unavailable or overwhelmed with new issues. Legal and court systems were often operating with an “urgent cases only” mandate, which in several countries did not include VAWG. CSOs noted that this overload at systems level risked reversing capacity and multisectoral collaboration gains made by CSOs for VAWG prevention, especially with formal groups such as the police and health workers:



Because managing COVID-19 called upon health workers and police as front-line workers, they were not able to cater to other needs of the community; they were completely engaged in that and didn't have capacity to deal with anything more (FGD, 22 November 2021).

CSOs highlighted that as a result of COVID-19 a number of their governments declared states of emergency, which sometimes led to political and legal upheaval in ways similar to in other emergencies such as conflicts or a food crisis. For example, in Solomon Islands RRRT saw that the declaration of a political state of emergency during the COVID-19 pandemic led to an already fragile post-conflict government system struggling further, with all government workers not seen as “essential” required to take compulsory leave. Many of these workers were from the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, which RRRT had partnered with. At one point there were only three people left in the entire women’s division, with limited operational funds. At the same time, the rapid migration of people from urban work settings back to their rural “home” provinces put extra pressure on RRRT projects, as the rural justice systems it was working with were overwhelmed by an increased need for their services. This highlighted the existing concern of RRRT around the need for socially distanced innovations in remote areas, such as allowing the issue of interim protection orders over the phone:

In March–April 2020, the government encouraged people to leave the urban capital and return to their home provinces. This impacted the work of authorized justices (AJs) and community facilitators who had to focus on changes in their communities such as increased stresses on food sources and increased crime, including domestic violence ... there is an increasing need for AJs to have the confidence to issue Interim Protection orders (IPOs) through applications made over the phone. Discussions continued on this with the Magistrates Court, which keeps a register of IPOs (RRRT, final external evaluation, p. 34).

The government states of emergency declared during the pandemic were also noted as potentially having

repressive implications for people-centred movements due to increased government powers. CSOs across two continents noted that COVID-19-related government regulations were misused to silence democratic protests by CSOs on issues such as women’s rights, police abuse and judicial corruption.

However, while CSOs’ collaboration with government and legal systems was often directly negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, CSOs’ pre-existing relationships with these stakeholders was invaluable in developing coping mechanisms and repositioning CSOs’ roles creatively. Organizations that had taken a holistic development approach and positioned VAWG prevention as only one of several community-related issues that they engaged were arguably better equipped to adapt and to continue to work with their multisectoral partners on other issues. This maintenance of relationships created opportunities for CSOs to be integrally involved in national and local COVID-19 responses. The CSOs were therefore able to raise issues related to VAWG prevention within their contexts.

2.5.2. Challenges to law- and policy-related engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic

A range of other programmatic challenges were highlighted. A number of CSOs noted the increased incidence of VAWG during the pandemic, even if country-level data had not yet been officially collected. Survivor support organizations such as WCLAC in the State of Palestine highlighted this concerning reality as well as noting escalating forms of social media-related VAWG, much without any systems of legal or government protection in place. CSOs also shared a range of mobility and service delivery challenges to their VAWG prevention work due to strict COVID-19 rules under which CSOs had to operate or else risk being shut down. This was the case in Zimbabwe, where LCDZ faced a range of challenges due to COVID-19 in its work with girls and women with disabilities around sexual and domestic violence. The implementation of its programme was initially suspended owing to strict lockdown measures and a state of national disaster declared, including the

closure of courts and hospitals except for emergency cases (which did not include gender-based violence at the start of the pandemic). This shows that when perpetrators can offend with impunity and support for survivors to access justice is taken away, rates of VAWG are likely to increase further. The question came to the fore in many countries of whether preventing VAWG during the COVID-19 pandemic was viewed by governments, courts and law enforcement as essential. This affected, for example, travel, court cases and the focus of the police, as was noted by Pragya in India, in the early days of lockdown:

In terms of our interaction with law enforcement agencies, from health workers to [the] police, they were providing essential response services. So they didn't have time for anything else, like for us. There was [also] no way to commute between different districts, so whoever was stuck in one place or in our city, we couldn't travel back and forth, and we needed passes from the government for travel, which they were not providing to civil society [organizations] because they didn't consider our workers essential (FGD, 23 November 2021).

Several CSOs in the sample noted that COVID-19-related lockdowns exposed many more girls and women to higher levels of domestic abuse at the same time as they were experiencing more limits to accessing formal assistance. In Zimbabwe, for example, government monopoly of transport systems made it very hard for survivors to travel inexpensively to reach courts. Some CSOs identified their important roles in contexts where VAWG prevention and response were not recognized by governments as “essential services” and where male bias within reduced judiciary systems reduced attention to it. The delays in and loss of these formal systems meant that CSOs in the sample saw that women were more likely to turn to informal legal systems, which are rarely survivor-centred and could even lead to new violent patterns, for example women being married off to their rapists. Some CSOs in the sample highlighted their contributory roles in successfully lobbying government systems to recognize VAWG prevention and response at policy level as an essential service during the pandemic.

Raising communities' awareness around the legal rights of particularly marginalized women and girls in rural areas, under tribal systems or with disabilities had already formed a key component of the VAWG prevention work of many CSOs in the sample working with informal legal systems, as explored in section 2.3. This specific aspect of their work was also affected by COVID-19 owing to limits around the number of people that could attend awareness-raising events. This often had a negative impact on CSO's ability to reach their originally targeted numbers, as presented in proposals to funders.

Finally, schools being closed as a policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic was identified in multiple regions as a particular issue for those working to end violence against girls. A number of CSOs identified this as a concrete example of a risk factor brought about by the pandemic for long-term school dropout (linked to risk factors for VAWG in later life) and for increased violence in the present, which was also exacerbated by the economic pressure on households due to the pandemic. This was noted by Pragya in India:

We saw a huge effect of COVID-19 and lockdown on our target groups and we know that gender-based violence went up. That is from our interaction with the groups. We haven't been able to pull up detailed data collection because of challenges, but we know from interactions that we have had [that] child marriage cases have gone up and we did expect that because for many families, food was a challenge for them (FGD, 23 November 2021).

Gender bias took on new forms during the COVID-19 pandemic, with families prioritizing boys' access to limited digital technology. Those with intersecting issues such as disabilities were left further behind in the light of formal policy decisions:

Because the schools were closed and there were no classes going on and later on some [classes] started online where girls couldn't join, and we fear that many of them won't go back to school again. Some families only had one phone through which the child could join, so the priority would go to the male child not the female [child] (FGD, 23 November 2021).

2.5.3. Civil society organizations' opportunities for legal and policy engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic

Despite many challenges, some CSO practitioners highlighted positive experiences that emerged for them in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. For example, LCDZ's earlier work to make the voices of women with disabilities a more accepted, active part of government policy discussions in Zimbabwe was used to good effect in this crisis. So did its prior development of positive relationships with the police, which enabled staff and VAWG survivors to access travel permits and support:

Where working with survivors you might need to provide disability access to survivors in the most remote areas. So with the police we asked them to give us letters so we could be identified as an essential service provider. So it helped us to be able to travel to different parts of the country and then we emphasized that police officers also needed to travel with the survivors when they are going to access services. So it is easier if it is a police officer who is crossing a roadblock, they would just indicate who the survivor is, of course this impacted the confidentiality of the survivors but with the situation we had on the ground, you had to see which tactics worked for the survivors to access different services (FGD, 23 November 2021).

The positive collaborative roles that several CSOs in the sample were able to play in developing the capacity of various government ministries to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic were identified as building systems-level relationships in the long term, with indirect benefits for advancing VAWG prevention. Increased national recognition of CSOs' partnerships with governments and shared advocacy and evidence-based strategies between CSOs on issues such as disability-aware COVID-19 responses or VAWG as an urgent judiciary concern were effective for LCDZ in Zimbabwe at policy level for recategorizing VAWG prevention services as essential and urgent. CSOs identified increases in VAWG from their interactions with women and girls, and were able, in advance of

official statistics, to lobby the government for a swift response to prevent further violence. This bottom-up approach to law and policy reforms (as detailed in section 2.1) is an important bridging role that CSOs play to bring immediate realities to the attention of government in a timely way. This enables adaptations to be made in practice by highlighting women and girls at increased risk of VAWG because, for example, they have to collect water in certain areas where they are at risk of violence or are isolated from support systems by COVID-19 restrictions. A holistic development lens, as was used by Pragma in India, also allowed CSOs to build rapport with government health services and psychosocial services by providing them with support during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the national disaster recovery effort.

A number of innovative adaptations and capacity-building of CSOs in the sample also emerged alongside COVID-19, which in some situations helped to fast-track social innovations being developed. This was particularly true for organizations that were able to access COVID-19-related funds:

Something positive happened – it [COVID-19] also strengthened our organization. COVID-19 hit us unexpectedly, and our organization did not have the capacity to handle a disaster or [know] how to continue implementing SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence] work during a disaster. Through funding from UNTF [the UN Trust Fund], we were able to review our disaster risk reduction plans so that they were all-encompassing – including how to end VAW during a disaster. So that was a positive. It's also changed the way we usually work because for us it was [before] more like community awareness in remote areas. But with COVID-19 coming, we're now using radio programmes. They reach more people and help do community awareness[-raising] in a particular area. So our numbers increased in terms of who can now access information about our services (FGD, 23 November 2021).

Other positive social innovations noted by CSOs in the sample as being fast-tracked by the COVID-19 crisis for VAWG prevention included toll-free hotlines to report VAWG and assist survivors, of particular

importance in countries where face-to-face formal infrastructure is failing and accessing services in person is a challenge, such as in remote rural areas. The development of digital architecture at systems levels and system-wide policies around this were also important to allow CSOs and their wider networks to stay connected and collaborate, something identified as at long-term risk under social distancing rules. Many CSOs had struggled previously to find funds for these organizational shifts, which could be important for creating new platforms to support women and enable VAWG prevention in virtual spaces in ways that could help CSOs to build back better in post-COVID-19 times.

CSOs noted that strengthening their own systems to adjust to COVID-19 realities will help to build their resilience to other disasters and emergencies that may confront them. For example, organizations pointed to donor assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic as enabling them to strengthen their

communication systems and to become more disaster resilient, moving towards new, hybrid ways of working that will continue after the pandemic. These ways of working will be important for remote populations in the long term:

[W]e had to deliver a lot of content through digital platforms and had limited capacity. But now communications is one of our major teams, because much of the work has shifted online and so we had to invest into this digital platforms ... because we work in very remote areas ... we have a hybrid approach where some people can join on the live sessions, where they have [a] network [connection] and otherwise we put those things down into smaller videos which volunteers go to the villages and have meetings with three to five people and show the video and have a discussion ... we had a very steep learning curve on this (FGD, 23 November 2021).



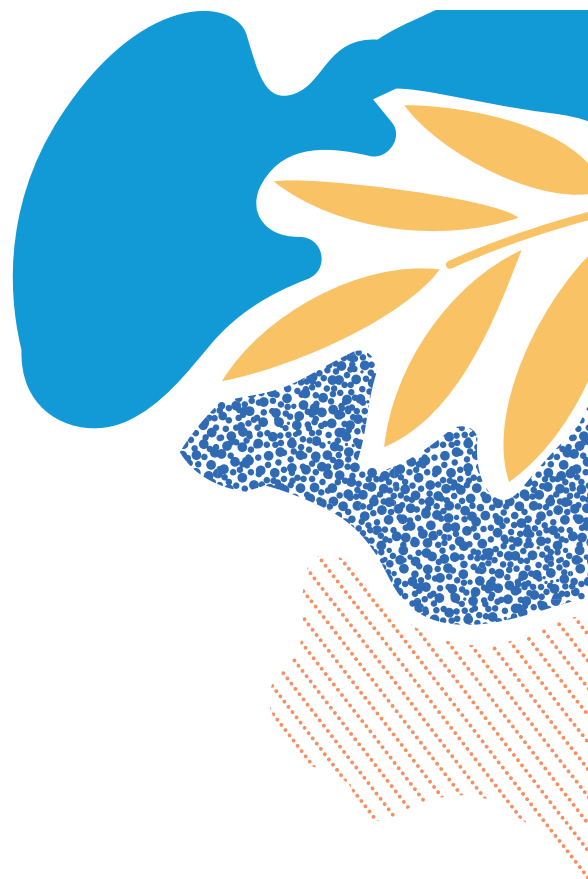
Project's beneficiaries on the 17 May, the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. Credit: Thipupsorn Sasitrukula / Rainbow Sky Association (Thailand)

Two important issues that emerged around VAWG prevention specifically in relation to digital platforms were safety and confidentiality, especially of people in lockdown with their abusers. The uncertainty about the security of digital platforms meant that some CSO partners avoided sensitive discussions related to VAWG that they might otherwise have had. Another legal concern raised was the identification documents needed to access government support, including COVID-19 and VAWG services. Not having these documents affects women's vulnerability to violence as well as their access to justice, as was noted by CSOs in several countries. This highlights the intersectional impact of COVID-19, which compounded existing vulnerabilities. For example, government support was often tied to digital ID accounts not available to some women, including undocumented migrants, who were also afraid to register VAWG charges for fear of deportation.

The important bridging roles that CSOs often play between formal government systems and ordinary citizens was seen as of new importance during the pandemic, in terms of not only identifying emerging issues related to VAWG and bringing them to the attention of governments, but also using established networks to facilitate the transfer of emergency relief to those who needed it most. As a result, CSO practitioners highlight that maintaining positive relationships with government and legal systems remains essential at all levels during this time. This may require working together on wider emergency issues to build trust and enable sustained system-wide gains in the form of proactive laws and policies to prevent VAWG to be consolidated and not reversed.

2.5.4. Key take-aways

- CSOs are better able to navigate the immediate challenges of COVID-19 to their work **if they have pre-existing collaborations with government and/or judicial systems** that can enable them to filter evidence-based VAWG prevention insights and experiences into ongoing policy contexts.
- CSOs are **developing shared agendas** to ensure that COVID-19 responses by government and legal systems that are under new pressures still take VAWG prevention into account and that long-term gains are not reversed. Some CSOs also highlight positive gains, especially around innovations, pre-existing multi-partner collaboration and having a say in COVID-19 policies.
- CSOs that take capacity-building approaches to working with governments can offer **ways to bridge the gaps** emerging between formal services and women's lived realities during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the use of COVID-19 regulations to underpin new government crackdowns on CSOs is a concern.



3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The nine CSOs included in this synthesis review showcased various roles that they play and insights that they have around strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention through law and policy reforms and their effective implementation.

The review has reflected on how these CSOs addressed the diverse settings in which they engaged in their programming with lawmakers and policymakers and those responsible for implementing laws and policies and with the women and girls in communities who need that systems-level support. It contributes to a deeper understanding of why work by CSOs specifically in relation to these systems is so valuable. It also highlights some of the challenges in working with the government and legal systems that shape the environments in which all VAWG prevention programming takes place and in which women and girls live. As a result, much has been learned about the complex and messy realities of engaging around law and policy reforms and their implementation through formal and informal systems, and about the many roles that CSOs play in practice at different points in reform and implementation processes. This conclusion does not repeat the practitioner-specific insights captured in the key take-aways in each section but focuses on common lessons from across the nine diverse CSOs.

Different types of CSO play important roles in catalysing law and policy reforms and/or implementation for VAWG prevention. The organizations that formed the basis of this review were very diverse, which shows that more than one type of organization can engage in this way. All nine are CSOs, but they varied considerably in their focus, size and reach. Often, their mandate to represent ordinary people and give a voice to marginalized groups in society enables them to make important rights-based contributions as WROs, human rights organizations or organizations engaged around a specific intersectionally marginalized group, such as women

with disabilities or of diverse sexual orientation. These different rights-based underpinnings position them well to act as key players in sustained advocacy for law and policy reforms at systems level and to engage directly with women and girls at community level. Larger CSOs typically partnered with smaller women's networks or groups at different levels. Some of the CSOs featured in this review were operating in conflict-affected or transitional justice settings. These settings offer unique challenges and potential opportunities for legal and policy change. CSOs in the sample drew on their particular strengths around grass-roots presence, the representation of certain groups and issues, and building legitimacy with governments to operate credibly at systems level to help strengthen wider legal and policy systems for VAWG prevention.

At the start of this synthesis review, a four-point conceptual framework was offered as a tool to deepen understanding of how CSOs make specific contributions at different points within legal and policy systems to strengthen an enabling environment for VAWG prevention. These can be seen as different possible entry points, but they are primarily ways of collating the insights that emerged. CSOs may also work across several of these areas. These four components all need to be in place in a specific context for an effective enabling environment, and CSOs emphasize the importance of understanding what the priorities are in their own context first, so that they can then assess where they can add most value for VAWG prevention. All of the projects included in this synthesis review in some way provided bridges between formal State-provided legal and policy systems and the women and girls in need of VAWG prevention. A number of CSOs based their work on access to justice, possibly because this need was raised by their women participants. However, insights from those CSOs showed that prevention is deeply entangled in a holistic understanding of access to

gender justice; at systems level, the tasks of ensuring access to justice and preventing VAWG are deeply connected. The work of WIGJ drew attention to the fact that enabling survivors to access international legal justice puts pressure on national governments to improve their systems of prevention. LCDZ's work with women and girls with disabilities to enable them to access justice by building the capacity of the police and court services emphasized the responsibilities of formal duty bearers to prevent the cycle of VAWG from repeating and to hold perpetrators to account, which is seen as essential for sustained prevention.

The first area of focus for CSOs was **advocacy and evidence-building for law and policy reforms**. CSOs positioned themselves in their contexts in ways that made these tasks feasible either directly or through partnership with other organizations for a shared advocacy approach. ACP in El Salvador worked closely with formal networks of organized women to create pressure both inside and outside systems of policymaking and lawmaking in relation to a raft of VAWG prevention legislation. At the same time, it was building an ongoing public evidence hub on VAWG for the long term, which all CSO and government partners would benefit from. LCDZ in Zimbabwe focused its specific attention on women and girls with disabilities who had been left behind by current legislation and on reforming the legislative and policy framework to include their needs, in collaboration with both women's organizations and disability organizations. This work comes with challenges. RSAT in Thailand had significant success in collaborating with the government at policymaking level, but this meant that it could not apply for government funds for its work. In different ways, CSOs working in this area emphasized the value of their role in amplifying the voices of people in communities and collecting evidence from below to put sustained pressure on systems to reform.

The second area was **building capacity and collaborating with formal duty bearers for legal and policy implementation**. Being specific about who they worked with and why as well as ensuring that collaboration was based on a mutually beneficial relationship was critical for CSOs in this area. For example, Pragya in India used a holistic development

lens to position VAWG prevention among many issues to mobilize many government departments and budgets and create wider multi-sector engagement between CSOs, WROs and governments in remote rural areas. LCDZ in Zimbabwe worked very specifically with the police force and judicial courts to capacitate them with skills to engage women with disabilities, and WCLAC in the State of Palestine provided legal aid within formal legal organizations by training women Sharia lawyers on VAWG. In different ways, all the CSOs working in this area highlighted the need to collaborate, bringing together and capacitating existing formal systems and processes, rather than setting up unsustainable parallel systems.

The third area was **bridging identified gaps between formal systems and informal systems and social norms at community level**. Variation was seen in the models used here, but they all involved empowering women and/or informal system actors and equipping them at community level with basic legal advice, and information on rights and support around VAWG. The focus here was to expand or improve informal systems to provide survivor-centred options for women, as Action Aid in Myanmar did by training female community paralegals alongside male role models. Collaborating with informal systems was challenging, as RRRT discovered in Solomon Islands, especially when bridging gaps to formal systems and dealing with patriarchal actors. However, this reflects the lived reality for the majority of women and girls, and CSOs insisted on the need to engage with and leverage this space for VAWG prevention in ways that can be sustainable and more survivor centred in the long term.

The fourth area was **supporting VAWG survivors to access justice and seeking to support systems for holding perpetrators accountable**. Some CSOs worked to address individual barriers encountered by women to reporting perpetrators or to accessing justice, for example transport or communication challenges. Other CSOs played roles in conflict-affected and transitional justice settings, where structural barriers may prevent women from accessing justice. Work at systems level, as carried out by ACbit in Timor-Leste and WIGJ across regional contexts, made the stories of survivors heard

not only to get justice for them as individuals but also to reshape the legal and policy context nationally as part of the transitional justice system. Lessons learned in this area show the contribution that CSOs can make to a societal understanding of justice in relation to VAWG.

At the heart of an enabling environment for VAWG prevention is a gender-just society with laws and policies that span the prevention–response continuum and address justice holistically and not through a reactive or criminal justice framework alone.

One overarching theme that emerged across the roles that CSOs in the sample played in strengthening an enabling environment for VAWG prevention was the **importance of multisectoral partnerships**. For CSOs to engage with legal and policy systems, they had to partner effectively with other sectors, usually government actors or formal or informal legal actors. CSOs work from a position of limited power to influence these systems. This leads to challenges related to managing politicized power relations and requires flexibility in the light of varied and sometimes conflicting stakeholder priorities. CSOs' engagement often revolves around collaboration to build capacity, bring people together and catalyse systems change. These processes need to be centred so that CSOs' contributions to them can be measured in creative ways.

One overarching challenge identified by CSOs in the sample is the **tensions they often have to manage** between their commitments to the needs of individual women and girls, including VAWG survivors, in the present, and the need to work at wider systems level for future VAWG prevention. There are risks and potential in reconciling these tasks, and CSOs point to the need for multidimensional programmes in which these commitments are not polarized, as was experienced by both RSAT and WIGJ.

One overarching insight was that CSOs in the sample use different framing and language to articulate what they do, as do governments, legal systems and donors. CSOs are finding ways to **translate their language into different terms to build on work that is already going on**, even when this involves challenges. This helps avoid parallel systems that bypass formal duty bearers. For example, while legal systems are often, but not always,

comfortable with human rights language and actors, many governments prefer to use the language of development or security. CSOs must navigate carefully between these different languages to collaborate with and leverage existing system priorities.

Fourteen recommendations are offered below that have emerged from CSOs' insights into engaging with legal and policy systems for VAWG prevention. These are informed not only by practitioner insights from the nine projects but also by the process of synthesizing these insights. The recommendations target three specific groups: (1) practitioners, (2) donors and policymakers, and (3) researchers in the field of ending VAWG.

3.1. Recommendations for practitioners

- 1. Careful positioning is critical.** Some CSOs may be well positioned to work credibly on legal and/or policy reforms or implementation for VAWG prevention alone and directly, while others may want to partner with other organizations for an indirect or collaborative approach. The specific points and levels in the systems of law and policy reforms and/or implementation where CSOs can make the most impact in their contexts must be determined. CSOs are ideally positioned to both familiarize themselves with international legal frameworks and be community driven, involving women as agents of change and equipping them as participatory rights holders in relation to these systems. At the same time, CSOs should position themselves carefully in relation to what is already happening in these systems to leverage existing developments and not work in parallel.
- 2. Avoid politicization.** CSOs working to reform laws or policies for VAWG prevention are inevitably involved in a political task. Treading the line carefully between recognizing this as a political task in civil society and becoming overly politicized through party politics in their specific contexts is a constant challenge. Working with other CSOs to build a shared advocacy agenda can help to prevent the over-exposure of one CSO or the risk of being labelled individually as critical of the government. Navigating this will be particularly

challenging when working with a government that is openly hostile to women's rights and/or criminalizes certain communities that the CSO is focused on.

3. Capacitate and collaborate with formal duty bearers.

CSOs can harness their expertise to develop the capacity of specific government and legal duty bearers as an important part of strengthening the formal system for VAWG prevention. Collaborating through wider multisectoral partnerships is essential here. Finding ways to contribute to existing priorities for those larger powerful players may affect the framing that CSOs choose to use – for example, development, security or violence. This is important to ensure that CSO contributions have an impact on existing statutory systems and hold them accountable, and to ensure that change is sustainable in the long term; however, it often involves complex power relations that can be difficult for CSOs to manage.

4. Bridge gaps between formal systems and informal systems and social norms.

Look for ways to bridge identified gaps between formal duty-bearing systems and informal systems and actors around law and policy at many levels. CSOs can play important roles in transforming social norms, which have a significant impact on VAWG and the effective implementation of laws and policies. The majority of survivors of VAWG or those at risk tend to approach informal systems such as religious or traditional leaders for redress, viewing formal legal and policy systems as too slow, bureaucratic and expensive. Engaging with informal legal and policy systems to make them more survivor and human rights centred and better connected to formal systems, as well as equipping women at community level to know, understand and fight for their rights, are roles that CSOs can play within the wider system.

5. Disrupt cycles of VAWG.

CSOs can assist women to access justice and to understand their legal and citizenship rights in relation to VAWG. This is integral to long-term prevention, as it creates demand among women and girls for access to legal services and holds formal systems, duty bearers and perpetrators to account. Access to justice and VAWG prevention are cyclical and intergenerational. When CSOs help VAWG survivors to access multidimensional justice,

including psychosocial support, this prevents worse consequences or repeat violence, and it makes perpetrators more accountable, especially in transitional justice settings, where systems intended to create accountability may have collapsed.

6. Be a systems-level resource in times of wider crisis.

Unexpected external factors (e.g. disasters, health emergencies, political coups, food crises and armed conflict) often have significant implications for laws and policies, including those related to VAWG prevention. They put heavy pressure on the capacities and priorities of legal and government systems and processes and can place them under threat. CSOs with pre-existing relationships with duty bearers in those systems can help them to adapt, to consider the implications for VAWG and to filter their expertise into new policies and laws to prevent VAWG from further escalating or being invisibilized in the light of new crises.

3.2. Recommendations for donors and policymakers

Practitioners highlighted several specific recommendations for donors and policymakers from their contexts.

1. Provide long-term, flexible funding.

The tasks of law and policy reforms and their implementation take time, require relationships of trust and therefore need long-term and flexible funding from donors. These tasks are also frequently affected by external factors outside CSOs' control, which may mean that gains are reversed. A lack of long-term funds was named as a reason why CSOs may choose not work at systems level, despite its potential long-term benefits. If service delivery programmes run by CSOs to provide access to services or justice for survivors of VAWG are funded, they can face a sustainability crisis when funding ends. If advocacy strategies begin but cannot continue, important momentum can be lost, and reversals in progress can be seen. Donors need to think differently about how to support this type of work and consider forming collaborative platforms with other donors to ensure a shared long-term agenda. Part of generating sustainable approaches at this level is building on what

already exists in the context, thus avoiding setting up merely parallel and disconnected systems.

- 2. Support CSOs to navigate complex power relations sensitively.** Working with stakeholders in formal and/or informal government and legal systems means that individual CSOs often have to navigate complex power relations that are highly politicized. This can make it harder to adapt programmes quickly or to use the framing or language desired by CSOs or donors. Foreign funding, especially at the systems level, is often viewed with suspicion as seeking to influence national priorities or narratives. Donors therefore may need to remain anonymous or cautious about the agenda that they represent – for example human rights – or the language that they use. Working at a different level – for example local or regional – can also at times be a more effective approach to tackling specific issues, enabling a number of local governments or villages to sign up to a framework while avoiding the appearance of targeting one country or community in particular. Work at this level is also about changing mindsets and behaviour in systems of power, especially in terms of moving from a response mindset to a prevention mindset.
- 3. Develop creative, flexible ways to measure systems-level impact.** Working towards law and policy reforms and their implementation requires donors to help CSOs to develop and use monitoring and evaluation systems that can capture their important work on influencing and catalysing change and their work on convening and capacitating other organizations and systems. Often CSOs work collaboratively or may be informal conveners of other larger power structures for long-term systems change. As a result, the typical programmatic markers of causality, impact and success in reaching a specific target group that are often deployed by funders and external evaluators may not be so useful. In this specific area, CSOs are identified as making contributions to and helping to catalyse wider changes within a complex system without directly causing them. The contribution of incremental gains – such as behaviour change in powerful institutions – towards long-term goals also needs to be identified and measured. Softer factors – such as social norms, cultural differences and high turnover within national systems – require careful consideration to ensure that programme impact is

sustainable in the long term, and sometimes these are outside the control of CSOs. Measuring impact at individual beneficiary level only at the time is unlikely to capture wider systems-level impact, or indeed the impact of laws and policies on generations to come.

3.3. Recommendations for researchers in the field of ending VAWG

Engaging in law and policy reforms and their implementation for VAWG prevention is a collaborative task in which CSOs play just one, but an important, part. The above recommendations may also apply to researchers who, often play an indirect role in both donors' and policymakers' decisions. However, the following five recommendations emerged from CSOs as particularly important if VAWG research is to better contribute to law and policy reforms and their implementation for VAWG prevention.

- 1. Take an intersectional approach to researching law and policy reforms and their implementation.** VAWG researchers need to focus more attention on exploring intersecting issues holistically and on doing research intersectionally to avoid working only on one issue. A tendency towards silos can lead to research that, without care, homogenizes the lived realities of complexity and diversity. An intersectional approach also pays attention to the needs of specific women and girls who may get lost or left behind in overall data patterns and ensures that data collection is disaggregated. It also considers how informal and formal legal and policy systems and actors may connect with other systems (e.g. cultural, media and economic) to prevent or perpetuate VAWG and how new issues (e.g. COVID-19 or climate change) shape the VAWG prevention landscape in new ways.
- 2. Collaborate as researchers to build sector-wide and multisectoral patterns of evidence.** VAWG researchers need to pay more attention to the importance of multisectoral approaches and multipronged relationships in this area. CSOs' sector-wide learning also needs to be captured, as do individual CSOs' achievements. This requires a holistic and often interdisciplinary approach to research that

engages with the underlying power relations within and between these various systems. Researchers can also assist VAWG prevention projects to better understand the wider civil society space that all CSOs operate in and pay attention to and document wider trends around what is happening in this space, as this influences what CSOs can do to prevent VAWG.

- 3. Document long-term patterns of legal and policy systems change.** Researchers are often in a unique position to be able to look more carefully and longitudinally at what works and does not work in the long term to influence these complex systems. As a result of this long-term lens, they can better document the indirect, catalysing roles that CSOs may play and offer contributions to the evidence base in this respect. This plays a very different role from capturing the impact over a short programming period, which is often the focus of individual practitioners.
- 4. Use more creative and participatory action research methodologies.** Creative research methodologies are needed to acknowledge the messy and political context of VAWG prevention work at systems level. Research approaches should not only focus on an ideal world in theory but also find ways to surface the messy dilemmas involved in changing and implementing policies and laws in various specific contexts. Participatory action research methodologies can help to showcase the lived realities of the women and girls affected and empower them as research subjects, not just research objects.
- 5. Consider specific policymaking audiences and generate tailored research outputs.** Researchers in the field of law and policy reforms and their implementation need to pay close attention to who their audiences should be and consider in advance how to make their work accessible and relevant, especially to governments, legal policymakers and donors. This often requires a range of tailored outputs that do not focus on the research or academic community, to increase uptake of findings. Practitioners' outputs should also use accessible formats and language, tailored to their realities and the dilemmas that they encounter. Opportunities for peer learning about how to engage with legal and policy systems are valuable to practitioners.



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