



4

From the Local to the Global Perspective

Insights from Women Working to End Gender-Based Violence

Each of the seven case studies in this book, like the other 82 projects reviewed from UNIFEM's Trust Fund, has a story to tell. The analyses are snapshots in the process of change, and the process itself is a continuum, constantly evolving and building on past efforts. This chapter is for future planning – a modest contribution to an existing body of knowledge from efforts to end violence against women around the world. But it is also a reminder to Trust Fund grantees and other organizations that whether they are mapping the landscape in Gaza and the West Bank or PAVEing new paths in Nigeria, they do not navigate their way alone.

Insights from the Trust Fund projects build on UNIFEM's work at all levels, from national programmes, to the UN Inter-Agency Regional Campaigns, to the Global Videoconference and Internet discussion groups. The Trust Fund projects provide examples of specific interventions and tools at the local level that can be adapted in various social, economic and political contexts, and at different points in time. Collectively, their experiences do not provide a paradigm or a blueprint for change, but they do create a kind of light to see by. Other organizations, donors, governments and UN agencies can draw on both the achievements and the failures of concentrated efforts and use them to inform future planning.

UNIFEM has seen general trends emerge from the Trust Fund in the last three years. Many of the projects begin with efforts to understand the problem of gender-based violence from the perspective of women. They combine women's voices and experiences with data on violence against women to generate awareness among governments and society at large. Knowing from experience that the empowerment of women is often met with resistance and backlash, Trust Fund grantees have used a range of innovative and cost-effective measures to minimize and prepare for the problem. At the same time, they work towards creating a sense of responsibility and accountability among communities by developing locally based solutions to protect women and girls. And through training and advocacy with judges, lawyers, police and government officials, they work to strengthen state services and promote gender-sensitive legislation.

The following insights are not an exhaustive list of strategies for intervention. They are based on commonalities among the seven case studies in the book, and mirrored in many of the Trust Fund projects and other efforts around the world. They lend credence to the notion that small efforts can collectively lead to monumental change. While the success of these strategies is contingent on a variety of actors from the state to the community level, many of the achievements

can be attributed to the project leaders, who press forward, at times relentlessly, with a vision of ending violence against women that they hope, believe and insist is attainable.

Documenting Reality from Women's Perspectives

While in recent decades the role and status of women has received more attention from governments and civil society than ever before, women around the world recognize that this is not enough. Whether they are negotiating for an end to the war in Northern Ireland, promoting legislation to broaden access to reproductive health care in Mexico, or rallying to protest growing women's poverty in the United States, women are refusing to stay silent and to have their realities defined for them. They are reframing the ways in which women's experiences are depicted and demanding that governments respond to the needs of women's lives.

As a result of these efforts, women have succeeded in altering the human rights landscape dramatically. The insistence that women's rights are human rights expresses the sentiment, at once simple and profound, that violations of those rights are no longer acceptable in any culture or society. This means that violence against women is no longer a "private affair," but a matter of state and community concern. As such it must be documented and presented in ways that demand attention from state and local authorities as well as the media and public.

Redrawing the human rights landscape requires both an accurate definition of the problems of violence against women and a societal commitment to ending it. This approach requires that organizations collect gender-specific data and information, presenting it in a way that documents the true nature and extent of violence against women. It also requires that they work with those in power, as well as members of the community, to find a way to eliminate it. All of the projects in this book – like most of the Trust Fund projects – seek to go beyond breaking the silence to develop community and institutional responses. Five of the case studies in this book seek to reframe the problem in terms that reflect women's experiences and needs and three of them use some form of research to document the problem, combining data with stories and insights from women.

Making the Case

Few countries have acknowledged that gender-based violence must be a national priority that requires modifications in their legal systems. Governments are gradually recognizing this. According to a recent UNICEF report, approximately 44 countries around the world have now passed legislation that prohibits domestic violence (UNICEF 2000). The general public and members of state institutions may not understand the extent of violence against women and the ways in which it affects their societies. Demonstrating that there is a problem and convincing power-holders to address it requires evidence.

Activists have long been using research to back their claims that gender-based violence jeopardizes human development and economic progress. In 1994, the Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women whose mandate includes seeking and receiving information on violence against women. The appointed official, Radhika Coomaraswamy, highlights research and data collection as one of six recommendations for gender-based violence prevention (UNIFEM 1995a). This call for research is reflected at the national level by organizations and advocates, many of whom use both quantitative and qualitative data to document the problem. They gather personal perspectives to breathe life into numbers, making women's experiences understandable for those who might not otherwise comprehend the problem. In addition, Trust Fund projects in Kenya, India, Ghana, Suriname and Malaysia are just some of the countries in which women advocates have utilized a combination of women's experiences and statistics to influence state institutions and the general public.

Experience shows that service providers are in a strong position to conduct research that reflects women's perspectives. Approximately 70 per cent of the Trust Fund projects that focus primarily on research are undertaken by service providers. They have established trusting relationships with survivors, and know first-hand the economic, physical and psychological problems women face when they are in need of refuge from a violent situation. In many countries they also have developed links to police departments and courts because they are often called upon to assist women through the legal process. In addition to using the results to advocate for legislation and resources, most of these organizations use their findings to improve their own services to survivors. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, Medica Zenica used results from their research on women during the war to expand their efforts from immediate medical services to long-range psychological and health care provision.

Organizations may also find that the research process itself is an effective means for advocacy. Projects from the Trust Fund formed partnerships with police, prosecutors, judges and government officials and used the information gathering process to open discussions about violence against women. In Bosnia, Medica Zenica used their interviews as an entry point to build relationships with local authorities. Similarly, in Gaza and the West Bank, the staff at WCLAC used interviews with government officials and police officers as an opportunity to intervene in cases of potential femicide.

Despite these advantages, service providers face other challenges. They may lack the political clout and expertise of NGOs that focus on advocacy. Moreover, limited time and resources may force them to face a trade-off between research and services. At a session on media documentation of violence against women during the Beijing +5 meeting, one activist from Bulgaria asked, "How can we think about analysing data when we can barely help all the women who come to us beaten and looking for shelter?" On the other hand, frustration with inadequate responses by police and the courts has prompted some service providers to expand their work to include research and advocacy.

This trade-off leads back to the call from women's activists for a better response from governments. States can forge partnerships with women's advocates and service providers to measure both quantitatively and qualitatively the problem of gender-based violence. In addition, they can provide resources for research and use the results to better meet the needs of survivors.

Language that Reflects Women's Realities

Reframing accepted definitions of violence against women is more than semantics; it is a means for activists to name a more precise reality that reflects the gendered nature of violence and affirms the rights of women. The name given to an act of violence can determine whether it is seen as culturally acceptable or as a crime punishable by law. Global debates around violence against women as a human rights issue or a human rights violation are filled with contention and have yet to be resolved.

This issue relates back to the way in which gender perspectives are defined in the context of human rights. A 1995 UNIFEM-sponsored a meeting of experts to establish guidelines for integrating gender perspectives into the human rights work of UN agencies referred to gender perspectives as "those which bring to conscious awareness how the roles, attitudes and relationships of women and men function to the detriment of women" (UNIFEM 1995b:8). While violence against women accurately describes the problem, the term "gender-based violence" emphasizes the power relationships between men and women that lead to violence. Reframing

the issue is a tool that can be used in a number of ways to highlight a particular practice or tradition as an act of violence, or dispel opposition to addressing it.

Emphasizing women's human rights was key to the UN Inter-Agency Regional Campaigns to eliminate violence against women. Spearheaded by UNIFEM in 1997 and 1998, the campaigns were named to reflect the entitlements of women, and send a message to governments and society alike: "A World Free of Gender-Based Violence. It's Our Right." Activities centred around the campaign, such as poster and essay competitions in schools, and television and radio programmes sent a positive message to women and girls about their human rights.

Highlighting the process of violence against women places isolated incidents into a broader context that uncovers the breadth and extent of the problem. One example is reflected in the work of women's human rights advocates. Since the advent of the International Criminal Court, women's human rights activists have lobbied the international community to recognize rape as crime against humanity. The prosecutor's office at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague has charged sexual violence as a war crime under "torture" and "willful suffering" as well as "enslavement." Efforts to reframe the problem to capture moral and legal imperatives are reflected in case studies throughout this book. The projects show how women's organizations advocate for the use of the term "female genital mutilation" as opposed to "female circumcision," and "femicide" as opposed to "honour killing." Similarly, a Trust Fund project in Turkey broadened the definition of violence against women to include an economic and political perspective, and renamed the issue to highlight "the cycle of violence."

Breaking down apathy and resistance to a specific project secures the participation of a wide audience. This approach is centred around an idea or phrase that appeals to a large homogeneous group, as illustrated by the case studies of projects that work with judges in India and communities in Honduras and Nigeria. In India, the use of the concept of equality highlighted gender bias in the legal system, while in Honduras and Nigeria organizations use the concept of peace to bring communities together and begin discussions on gender-based violence.

Activists can use a variety of approaches to reframe the issue of violence against women. Lobbying efforts on women's abortion rights are a case in point. Some activists choose an entry-point that takes a direct and forceful stance on pro-choice legislation. Others, seeking to circumvent the controversy and dispel resistance, frame the argument from the standpoint of the high mortality rates of women who resort to illegal abortions. There is no right answer in such cases, yet the angle chosen by activists can be a point of contention. In reference to using the term "female circumcision" versus "female genital mutilation," one Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization staff member in Kenya who advocates for the use of the term FGM says angrily, "let's call a spade a spade and say it like it is." Other activists argue for the need to start with culturally sensitive terminology like female circumcision and gradually advocate for new language, to avoid resistance and accusations that such efforts are generated by Western hegemony.

Collectively, women's voices from around the world are creating an open space for their perspectives and experiences to be heard. Research that documents women's experiences can be used to develop concepts that accurately reflect women's realities. Together, they are a powerful tool for advocacy at the national and international level. From small projects in Kenya, Nigeria, Honduras, Turkey and Gaza and the West Bank, to regional campaigns in Asia, Latin America and Africa, to global efforts to engender the International Criminal Court, documenting reality from women's perspectives is a tool that has proven effective in the process of change.

Creating a Safe Space for Women to Take Action

Studies from around the world suggest that some forms of violence against women occur in response to women becoming aware of their rights and challenging abusers in a variety of ways. They may seek legal recourse, access support services or create opportunities to gain economic independence. Contributions to UNIFEM's end-violence discussion list (an Internet working group on gender-based violence) as well as many of the case studies in this book show that some men become more violent and exhibit more authoritative behaviour when their wives, partners or daughters participate in training and receive information on their human rights.

Researchers and activists attribute this backlash primarily to male anger and fear of losing power, resulting in aggression and a stringent adherence to traditions and behaviours that subordinate women. This is true not only of initiatives that address gender-based violence, but of almost any effort to improve women's economic or social status. Resistance from men and others in positions of power is also a challenge that may arise. Although it is most commonly a response from men, resistance can also come from individuals whose livelihoods are contingent on practices that perpetuate violence, such as female circumcisers who perform FGM.

Backlash and resistance may be short-term consequences of information sharing, education and advocacy, but the danger each presents to women should not be underestimated. States and communities have a responsibility to reduce the risk of backlash, dispel resistance and create a safe space for women to assert their rights and seek the support they need to live free from gender-based violence. A study on the campaigns on violence against women in Peru, Kenya and India suggests that information and training should be linked to follow up initiatives that create a safe environment for women to take action (UNIFEM/SIPA 2000). Since the international women's movement started gaining momentum during the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985), women have demanded state accountability to uphold women's rights and address gender-based violence. This call to action has resonated in communities where women, and more recently men, have formed collectives to protect women and girls and have developed strategies to ensure their safety.

Community-Based Solutions

Local efforts can address backlash by providing women with information on available services and working with communities to create local solutions. Organizations find that if given the information and the opportunity, women will reach out for help. They also know that men need to be included in efforts to prevent and reduce gender-based violence and that the underlying issue of male power must be addressed.

Virtually all of the Trust Fund grantees that operate at the community level provide women with information on shelters, hotlines and legal and psychological counselling. But very often these services are not enough. In response, NGOs working at the community level often collaborate to meet the demand for services. Like those in Nigeria and Kenya, Trust Fund grantees in Ethiopia, Russia and Nepal, among many others, are part of national or regional networks of organizations that work together to address gender-based violence.

Recognizing that services alone will never be an adequate means of preventing violence and backlash, Trust Fund grantees and other organizations around the world have worked with communities to generate cost-effective and sustainable solutions. Many of these solutions involve men without taking away resources for women. They include zero-tolerance zones (also called zero-violence zones), community watchdog groups, community coalitions, support

groups and peer counselors. All of these solutions call on communities to take responsibility for gender-based violence, and often link communities to the police and state institutions.

These tools are frequently used by Trust Fund grantees working at the community level. As part of the Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre's work in Cambodia, community coalitions supported women and worked with violent men through education and counselling. In Honduras, community watchdog groups intervene and provide support to women and children in violent homes, while in Trinidad & Tobago men and women in rural communities have been trained as counsellors. And as part of a larger strategy to create a safe environment for women to negotiate for safer sex in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Network of Zimbabwean Positive Women established community support groups. In the Kenyan project, support groups were crucial for girls and their families who experienced antagonism from some community members for their decision not to undergo FGM.

These solutions require an initial process (usually from six months to one year) of direct training with community members, and oftentimes are followed up by organizations with periodic training sessions to ensure their longevity and address new problems that arise. The one trait the projects share is their reliance on groups as a means for protection and intervention. Groups can protect the safety of individual women by challenging individual men and by using social pressure to influence other community members.

In some cases, locally-based organizations are positioned to draw on cultural traditions and use them creatively to diminish backlash and resistance from men and other community members. Activists in Canada's Yukon Territory, for example, have developed Circle Sentencing, an updated version of the traditional sanctioning and healing practices of Canadian indigenous people. Sanctions include reparation, community service, imprisonment, and community healing rituals (Heise et al 1999). Similarly, the case study from Kenya describes the way in which two organizations created a community alternative rites of passage project that revived the seclusion period, a fading part of the FGM ritual, transforming it from a time of healing after the trauma of the circumcision to a training period on women's health and empowerment.

Most of these solutions focus on assisting women, but the root causes of violence against women need to be addressed to advance real change and diminish backlash. Some service providers work with male abusers in cases of domestic violence, and in some places counselling is mandatory for convicted offenders. Many community initiatives now involve men in awareness-raising workshops and strive to promote new conceptions of masculinity. In Trinidad & Tobago, for example, the Rape Crisis Centre held workshops on non-violent conflict resolution and masculinity, similar to those described in the case study from Honduras.

State Responsibility for Ensuring Women's Rights

NGOs, no matter how effective they are, cannot alone secure an environment where women are safe to organize and assert their rights. For the most part, service providers are not positioned and do not have the resources to provide services and support to women on a national scale. Nor can they develop or enforce legislation necessary to protect and ensure the safety of women. In the last few years, women's organizations have focused their efforts on state accountability by training policy-makers, judges and police, advocating for budget allocations for shelters and services, and lobbying for appropriate legislation. They also have used the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and regional agreements on gender-based violence to promote equal treatment in the legal system.

The Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, echoed the need for state and community cooperation in her reports to the Commission on Human Rights. The Rapporteur has repeatedly called upon states to forge partnerships with civil society to establish cooperative efforts for preventing gender-based violence. This approach is reflected in more than 40 of the Trust Fund projects that combine community efforts with advocacy and training, primarily with law enforcement officials and members of the judiciary, but also teachers and health-care workers.

Links between state and community efforts that create a safe environment for women to assert their rights are crucial to the process of change. The eradication of footbinding in China is a prime example of the importance of action and commitment at all levels. In the late 19th century, communities began forming anti-footbinding societies in which parents agreed that their sons would marry women who had not undergone the practice, ensuring that the women would not be ostracized from their communities (Mackie 1998), and by 1911 the state had outlawed the practice. The combination of efforts at the state and community levels made foot-binding obsolete within one generation.

Some governments have been cooperating with service providers to ensure that women have the support and resources they need. For example, one-stop crisis centres are being established from Malaysia to the United States in hospitals, in police stations and in communities to deal with cases of violence sensitively, help women access medical care and register crimes and provide subsequent legal and psychological counselling.

Despite the efforts of states and communities regarding violence against women, backlash remains a problem. Still, organizations fighting for women's human rights forge ahead with the belief that awareness and information are prerequisites for change. When possible, they try to anticipate and prepare for any backlash by providing information to women, pressing the state to create shelters and services, and working with men and women at the community level to establish locally-based interventions that protect women.

Making Violence Against Women Everyone's Problem

At the beginning of the UN Decade for Women in 1975, violence against women was considered a family matter. It was not until 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights, that the international community officially recognized violence against women as a human rights concern, underlining the responsibility of communities and the state for this issue. This shift in perspective resonates throughout the Trust Fund projects. Whether they are conducting peer training with men and boys at the community level in Nigeria and Honduras or influencing police and judges in India and Bosnia-Herzegovina, activists designed their projects with the goal of fostering a sense of collective responsibility. As one Trust Fund grantee from Malaysia said, "When I hear about a rape, I want everyone out protesting. As a society, we haven't built up a sense of our rights and of outrage when they are violated."

Creating a sense of responsibility and commitment among people who normally don't consider gender-based violence their concern requires a multitude of strategies, none of which are a sure-fire way to solve the problem. Nevertheless, advocates have found innovative approaches to take the burden of fighting gender-based violence away from women alone, and into the hands of states and communities.

A Starting Point: Individuals with Power

One of the tenets of community organizing is to share the process of change with people to whom community members look for guidance and leadership. Women's rights groups have

worked with village chiefs, religious authorities, trade union leaders and individuals responsible for maintaining traditional practices that are harmful to women and girls. Trust Fund projects in Somalia, Viet Nam and Mexico, to name a few, engaged community leaders in the planning stages, providing them with the opportunity to identify solutions to the problem. This strategy can be particularly useful for encouraging participation in training activities. Several of the case studies provide examples of ways in which organizations create peer training groups among boys and men, train respected village elders as trainers for young people in women's health and human rights, and work with village chiefs to recruit abusive men to attend workshops on gender-based violence prevention.

The same approach works with law enforcement, judicial and governmental institutions. Those at the top of the hierarchy carry the torch of organizational rules and have the power to change procedures. Leaders who can champion changes from inside institutions are in a prime position to challenge norms that condone gender biases. Institutional champions have visibility, authority and credibility, and are open to new ideas. This strategy is reflected in the Latin America and Caribbean Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, established in 1990. Consisting of representatives from 21 countries, the network made it a priority to work with key members of governmental institutions who could influence their peers and gain political support for gender-based violence prevention.

Trust Fund projects have been particularly strong in their efforts to influence police and judges in this way. In India, for example, Sakshi secured the participation of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He played a critical role in recruiting other judges to participate in the first regional meeting on gender-based violence. Judges from Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are now leading change in their own judicial systems. Another Trust Fund project in South Africa used a similar approach by working directly with the chief of police, meeting with him on a weekly basis. As a result, he became an asset to the project and facilitated training for other police officers on their duties in cases of violence against women.

Reaching a Larger Audience

Even with a great deal of influence, leaders in institutions and communities are more effective when larger constituencies recognize and understand the issue. Efforts that join people and reach the masses have proven a necessary part of education strategies and a prerequisite to widespread commitment to ending gender-based violence. Media campaigns, public service announcements, advertisements and education are tools used by women's rights advocates to reach the general public.

An innovative example of using multiple, new and traditional media was the UN Inter-Agency Global Videoconference in 1999, spearheaded by UNIFEM. The conference linked the United Nations General Assembly in New York with sites in Nairobi, Delhi, Mexico City and Brussels and featured testimonies from advocates, government officials, judges and law enforcement personnel, activists and women and children who experienced violence. In addition, educational institutions and television and radio stations worldwide tuned into the conference via satellite and the Internet, and learned about the event through media coverage. The call for collective action was never more poignant than when a girl from Kenya who managed to escape when guerrilla soldiers abducted a group of her school mates, looked into the camera and asked the thousands of viewers, "What can you do to help us?"

Women and girls have brought that same question to their communities through efforts that appeal to individuals who normally would not consider violence against women their

concern. Two methods by which NGOs have reached communities at large are through the use of sports and the arts and through media coverage.

Sports and the arts are commonly used tools to secure community participation and educate the public in a non-threatening and accessible forum. Several initiatives supported by UNIFEM, including the Inter-Agency Regional Campaigns in Asia, Africa and Latin America, have demonstrated the effectiveness of the arts for this purpose. Trust Fund projects in Burundi and the Caribbean are among numerous initiatives that trained a few community members and then leveraged this small effort to reach the larger community. In Honduras and Nigeria, Trust Fund grantees worked with groups in communities to organize football tournaments, theatre performances, school debates and poetry competitions to educate communities on violence against women. This strategy proved successful for two reasons: it attracted men and women of all ages through a medium they enjoy, and it dispelled some of the resistance that community members may have towards projects that address gender-based violence directly.

Accessing the media, including newspapers, magazines, television and radio, is a prominent strategy for educating the public, but time and again, NGOs have witnessed sensationalized reporting that misrepresents the scope and seriousness of gender-based violence. Trust Fund projects in Bolivia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Vietnam are training journalists and other media representatives on gender-based violence to prevent such problems and advocate for positive portrayals of women. Nevertheless, NGOs such as Medica Zenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina have had to work hard to ensure that the privacy of women survivors of violence is respected.

Securing a Commitment to Change

Influencing individuals with power and bringing the issue to the public or larger community, is only half the battle. Following the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, one of the three key challenges identified by women activists was the need to “put pressure on both the state and community to assume responsibility for eliminating gender-based violence and to hold them accountable if they do not” (Carrillo 1997:10). Post-Beijing dialogues initiated through regional sub-meetings and global Internet discussions have centred around the need for results. While there are many approaches to bringing about that sense of responsibility and commitment, two methods in particular stand out in Trust Fund projects.

The evocation of empathy can help individuals understand the problem and commit to change. In the late 1980s, U.S. correctional facilities developed rehabilitation programs for rapists and abusive men to prevent them from committing the crime repeatedly. Prisoners listened to tapes of women describing their experiences and the pain it has caused in their lives, enabling perpetrators to understand what it feels like to survive rape and other forms of violence. Four out of the seven case studies in this book highlight innovative ways in which Trust Fund projects use empathy to help individuals understand the perspective of women, and take action. In Bosnia-Herzegovina and India, grantees used role plays to give judges the perspective of female litigants who go through a legal process that works against them. In the West Bank and Gaza, the research team encourage police and other authorities to talk to women threatened by femicide to understand their perspective. And in Nigeria, activists showed videotapes of young girls writhing in pain after undergoing FGM to village leaders. In all of these cases, participants took action by organizing similar training sessions for their peers, forging partnerships with the women’s organizations who trained them, and by making group pacts to return to their communities and stop practices that are harmful to women and girls.

Written contracts can bind men to a commitment to refrain from violence, making both a public and a legal statement. Case studies on Cambodia and the West Bank and Gaza illustrate examples where men and family members signed contracts in front of witnesses, committing themselves to protect women and ensure that their lives were not in danger. In both cases, local officials also signed and agreed to enforce these contracts.

While there is no direct path for making violence against women the responsibility of all, the need for wider accountability and activism has been clearly set on the women's human rights agenda. Organizations around the world are using innovative interventions, and a step-by-step approach to involve men and those who hold power, reach the larger public, and find starting points to begin establishing a collective commitment to action.

Whether working with communities or with state institutions to eradicate gender-based violence, the efforts of activists remind us that progress often happens in small ways. The signs may be found in individual transformations as well as in institutional changes and collective responses at the community level. The experiences of activists who are leading the way in ending gender-based violence demonstrate that real change is possible, and their vision inspires others to speak out and to persevere towards a common end.

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