UNITED NATIONS TRUST FUND TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

UN WOMEN

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE:

ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

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

Produced by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

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Cover Photo: Beyond Borders staff support during COVID-19. Credit: Beyond Borders/ Depase Fwontyè yo.

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 grant-making mechanism dedicated to eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls. Managed by UN Women on behalf of the United Nations system since its establishment in 1996 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/166, the UN Trust Fund has awarded almost $183 million to 572 initiatives in 140 countries and territories. In 2020, the UN Trust Fund managed a grants portfolio of 150 projects aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women and girls in 71 countries and territories across five regions, with grants totalling $72.8 million. Grant recipients are primarily civil society organizations (CSOs). Since 2018 (cycle 20), the UN Trust Fund has been funding only CSO projects. In 2020, the majority (58 per cent) of these CSOs are women's rights organizations.

About the learning from practice series on prevention

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 co- create 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 brief is threefold: (i) practitioners (ii) donors and grant makers and (iii) researchers, all working in the area of EVAWG. The learning from practice series is intended to elevate practice-based insights from CSOs as highly valuable and important to planning, designing and funding interventions and research in EVAWG. Each longer synthesis review will be accompanied by a shorter, summary brief 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. Working together for a survivor-centered, multisectoral response
10. Working together for law and policy implementation and reform

Acknowledgements

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In particular, we would like to thank the staff from the 9 UN Trust Fund projects whose practice-based insights, reports and experience are at the heart of this synthesis review. These projects are – Physicians for Human Rights

WJI's Women's Rights Education Programme participants from the community of El Llano. Credit: Olivia Jacquet/Women's Justice Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Programming to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG) must regularly adapt owing to a range of factors, from the diverse needs and experiences of project beneficiaries and stakeholders to environmental and political factors, and health emergencies, such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Despite the complexity and challenges of VAWG prevention programming, there is limited documentation of **why** and **how** programmes are adapted to diverse contexts and the factors and processes that support the adaptive capacities of VAWG prevention programmes. Adaptive capacity refers to the ability to adjust characteristics or actions to moderate potential damage or take advantage of opportunities or cope with the consequences of shocks or stresses (Brooks, 2003; Jones et al., 2010). Adaptive capacity supports the resilience, endurance, and performance of programmes in responding to changing information and circumstances. Although there is a wealth of evidence regarding best practices for VAWG prevention programmes adapting evidence-based models to different contexts, there is less focus on the adaptive capacities of organizations working to prevent VAWG in response to changing circumstances. This synthesis review focuses on the latter, and in doing so seeks to contribute to filling this gap. The review synthesizes practice-based knowledge (PBK) from 10 diverse projects funded by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women that adapted their VAWG prevention programmes in response to challenges and unforeseen changes (e.g. environmental, organizational and political changes, or changes due to conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic).

Methodology

PBK from annual reports and external evaluations of the 10 projects across 12 countries was analysed thematically. This inductive analysis was complemented by a brief literature review and a series of interviews and focus group discussions with representatives of the 10 projects. Key themes emerging from practice were organized according to **why** and **how** VAWG prevention programmes adapt in response to internal and external changes and challenges. A predominant factor requiring VAWG prevention programmes to adapt was the COVID-19 pandemic, but other factors emerged, including climate-related challenges, political tensions and insecurity, resistance to programme content and the capacity needs of staff or stakeholders. The Local Adaptive Capacity framework developed by the Overseas Development Institute was drawn on to help unpack **how** projects adapted.

Key findings

The PBK revealed important insights in terms of factors that support practitioners to adapt VAWG prevention programming. These include the importance of robust and frequent monitoring, evaluation and learning systems in identifying challenges and changes, understanding the needs of participants and communities, and pivoting programming in response. Another factor identified was flexibility and capability to revise project budgets in response to internal or external changes. VAWG prevention programmes must often be flexible regarding the stakeholders and/or institutions they target and how they target them, which can require significant readjustments to organizational approaches or operational processes. Being open to opportunities for creativity was another important factor underlying adaptive programming. For many practitioners, despite the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic posed to programming, it allowed for innovations, including focusing on staff and participant self-care, adapting to digital initiatives, and helping community members mitigate their risk of catching the virus. Given the precariousness of VAWG prevention programming, forward-looking risk mitigation was another critical component of adaptive capacity identified.

Conclusions and recommendations

This synthesis review identifies many potential reasons for adapting VAWG prevention programmes, which

demonstrates the importance of the practitioner insights included in the review. Analysing the PBK using the Local Adaptive Capacity framework (Jones et al., 2010) sheds light on the enormous task of adaptive programming, and the importance of supporting the adaptive capacities of organizations working to prevent VAWG. The lessons learned can help VAWG prevention programmes anticipate why they may need to adapt, and how their adaptation efforts could be made more effective and meaningful.

Fourteen recommendations are provided for practitioners, donors, and researchers in the field of ending VAWG. For practitioners, the recommendations are as follows: (1) apply a risk mitigation approach to plan for potential disruptions; (2) assess and respond to ongoing capacity needs of staff and stakeholders and barriers to engagement for participants; (3) ensure regular feedback loops to review and respond to findings from monitoring, evaluation and learning processes, and that such knowledge is applied in action; (4) foster creativity, testing and innovation, which involve a degree of risk but also bring rewards; (5) ensure flexibility and openness to changing project priorities; and (6) strengthen institutional capacities for adaptation. For donors, the recommendations are as follows: (1) offer flexible and core funding to support adaptive programming; (2) women's rights organizations and civil society organizations are particularly well placed to apply adaptive programming, and donors should prioritize funding these actors; (3) adaptive programming involves risk and requires a relationship of trust between donors and grantees; (4) donors should encourage and fund significant and appropriate inception periods as a platform for adaptive programming; and (5) donors should allow time and provide safe spaces for grantees to share adaptation needs. For researchers in the field of ending VAWG, the recommendations are as follows: (1) carry out research to better understand why VAWG prevention programmes must adapt (2) assess the characteristics and factors underlying the adaptive capacities and resilience of VAWG prevention actors, and (3) conduct research on processes of adaptive programming in different geographies and in different sociocultural contexts.
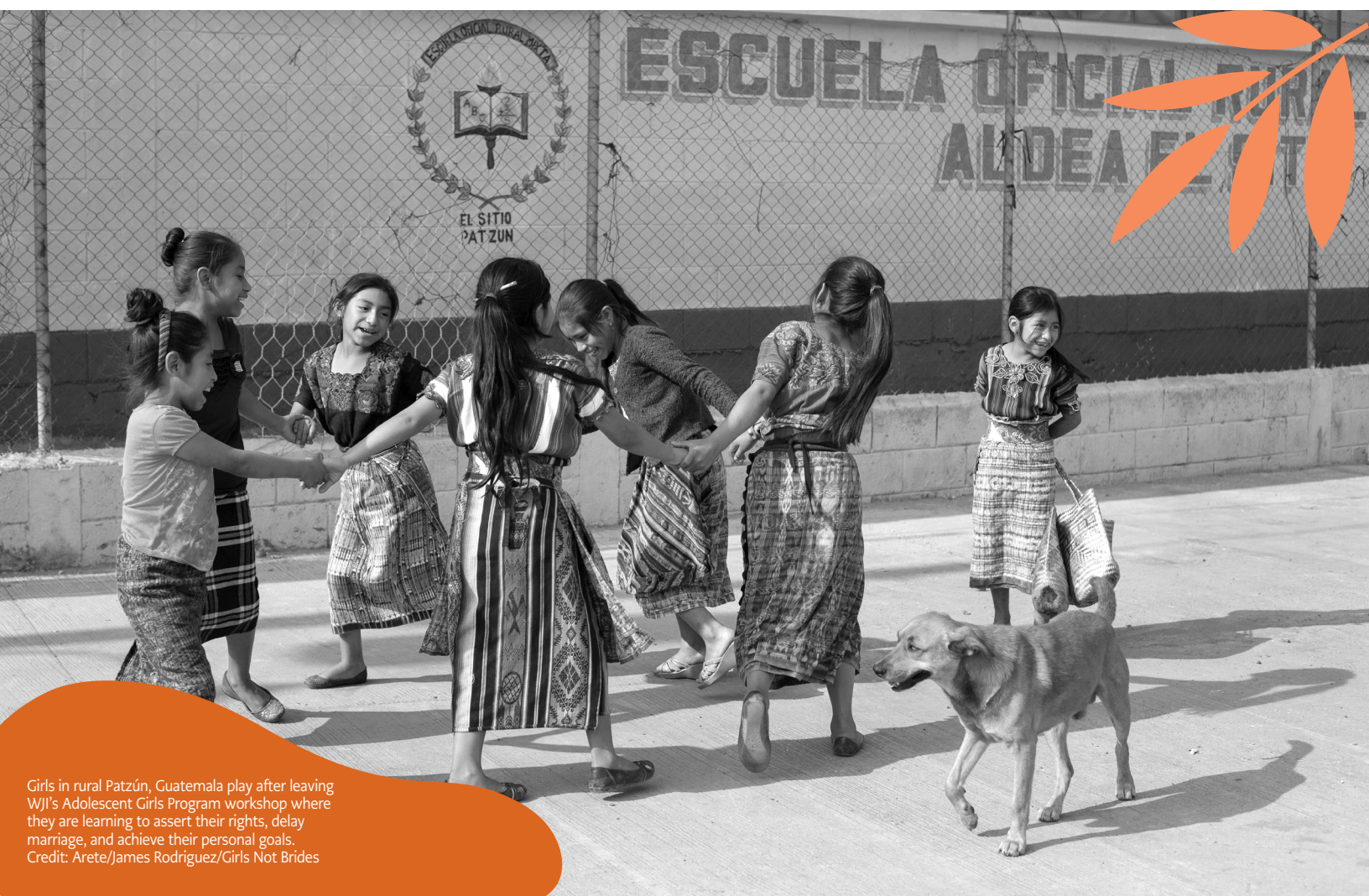
Girls in rural Patzún, Guatemala play after leaving WJI's Adolescent Girls Program workshop where they are learning to assert their rights, delay marriage, and achieve their personal goals.
Credit: Arete/James Rodriguez/Girls Not Brides

1. CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

AJ	associate justice
CDM	Centro de Derechos de Mujeres
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	civil society organization
FGD	focus group discussion
GBV	gender-based violence
IYWD	Institute for Young Women's Development
KRI	Kurdistan region of Iraq
MEAL	monitoring, evaluation and learning
NGO	non-governmental organization
PBK	practice-based knowledge
PHR	Physicians for Human Rights
RRRT	Regional Rights Resource Team of the Pacific Community
SIHA	Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa
UN Trust Fund	United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women
VAW	violence against women
VAWG	violence against women and girls
WfWI	Women for Women International
WJI	Women's Justice Initiative
WRO	women's rights organization

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Adaptive programming to prevent VAWG

Adaptation has been described in the implementation science literature as a process of deliberately altering the design or delivery of a programme, with the goal of improving its fit or effectiveness in a particular context (Stirman et al., 2019). Adaptation is a form of modification that encompasses any changes made to interventions, whether deliberately and proactively, or in reaction to unanticipated challenges that arise (Barerra et al., 2017; Stirman et al., 2019). Understanding what, how and when modifications occur is a vital aspect of programming implementation. Modifications may enhance outcomes if they align the intervention with specific population needs or contexts, while maintaining the overarching ethos and intervention goals (Card et al., 2011). Flexibility in programme implementation can increase local ownership, involvement, and sustainability (James Bell Associates, 2009). However, modifications that fail to align the intervention with needs or inadvertently remove key elements of an intervention may hinder programme effectiveness (Chambers et al., 2013; Stirman et al., 2019).

Civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly women's rights organizations (WROs), play a pivotal role in advancing gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) (AWID and Mama Cash, 2020; UN Trust Fund, 2020). The uncertain and context-specific nature of social and political change means that such actors must work in adaptive ways (O'Neil, 2016). Moreover, different communities have specific needs and priorities in relation to preventing VAWG, and adaptive programming helps ensure a flexible and tailored approach. WROs and CSOs are regularly confronted by changing environments, socio-political challenges, and work with multiple funders and partners who operate distinct bureaucracies (AWID and Mama Cash, 2020; UN Trust Fund, 2020). They often work with marginalized communities, who can be particularly threatened by natural disasters, disease, conflict, and economic shocks.

It is thus important to foster the resilience of WROs and CSOs – that is, their ability to handle stresses or recover from disturbances or shocks (Bapna et al., 2009). For example, resilience can be enhanced through strong leadership, actionable plans and solid risk management strategies to identify potential adverse events early on.

Adaptive capacity refers to the social and technical skills and strategies of individuals and groups in responding to environmental and socio-political changes. It refers to the extent to which a system can adjust, modify, or change its characteristics or actions to moderate potential damage, take advantage of opportunities, or cope with the consequences of shocks or stresses (Brooks, 2003; Jones et al., 2010). Adaptive capacity plays an important role in the resilience and performance of programmes when they must respond to new information and circumstances. More attention to the factors and conditions that build the resilience and adaptive capacities of organizations, especially CSOs and WROs, implementing VAWG prevention programming is warranted.

This review synthesizes learning from projects funded by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) that adapted in response to internal and external challenges and changes (e.g. environmental, organizational and political challenges, conflict and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic). In doing so, the synthesis review aims to identify strategies and best practices to foster the adaptive capacities and resilience of organizations working to prevent VAWG. It draws on practice-based knowledge (PBK) from across the projects, centring the cumulative knowledge and learning acquired by practitioners from designing and implementing diverse programmes in different contexts. PBK is well suited to unpacking complex causal systems such as VAWG and adaptive programming (Faris and Jayasekara, 2019; Palm and Clowes, 2019). **The synthesis review has a significant focus on adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic, given that this is currently at the forefront of practitioners' reflections on adapting to evolving contexts.** In addition, the compounded challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic

have affected the resilience of WROs and CSOs and the marginalized populations they serve and represent (UN Women, 2021). This synthesis review will contribute to an understanding of how and why WROs and CSOs have adapted their efforts to their contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could help fill the current gap in evidence regarding best practices for VAWG prevention and response amid the pandemic (Bourgault et al., 2021).

Adaptive programming includes how organizations adapt evidence-based models from other settings or populations to their own interventions. There is a wealth of knowledge around how programmes are revised in different contexts or populations, and the implications of this for fidelity to the original model (James Bell Associates, 2009; Stirman et al., 2019). This synthesis review focuses not on the adaptation of evidence-based models but, rather, on why and how VAWG prevention programmes adapt in response to changing contexts and circumstances. There is a particular gap in the VAWG prevention literature regarding this, and the PBK elicited for this synthesis review contributes increasing this limited documentation. The focus of this synthesis review also reflects the increasing interest in adaptive programming in the field of international development in response to the complexities of non-linear social change, including feminist efforts to transform entrenched patriarchal norms and practices (O'Neil, 2016).

The Local Adaptive Capacity (LAC) framework developed by the Overseas Development Institute aims to explain how adaptive capacity can be supported at local level (Jones et al., 2010). The framework identifies **five interrelated characteristics** of adaptive capacity that are common to most contexts.

- **Knowledge and information:** the ability implementers have to collect, analyse and disseminate knowledge and information in support of appropriate adaptation options;
- **Asset base:** the availability of key assets that allow implementers to respond to evolving circumstances, including financial and material resources and available expertise in the project team and partners;
- **Institutions and entitlements:** the existence of an appropriate and evolving institutional environment that allows fair access and entitlement to key assets and capitals
- **Innovation:** the creation of an enabling environment during the adaptation process to foster innovation, experimentation and the ability to explore solutions to take advantage of new opportunities;
- **Flexible and participatory governance and decision-making:** the ability of the implementers of the adaptation process to anticipate, incorporate and respond to changes regarding its governance structures and future planning.

Asset base

Flexible and forward-thinking decision-making and governance

Institutions and entitlements

Innovation

Knowledge and information
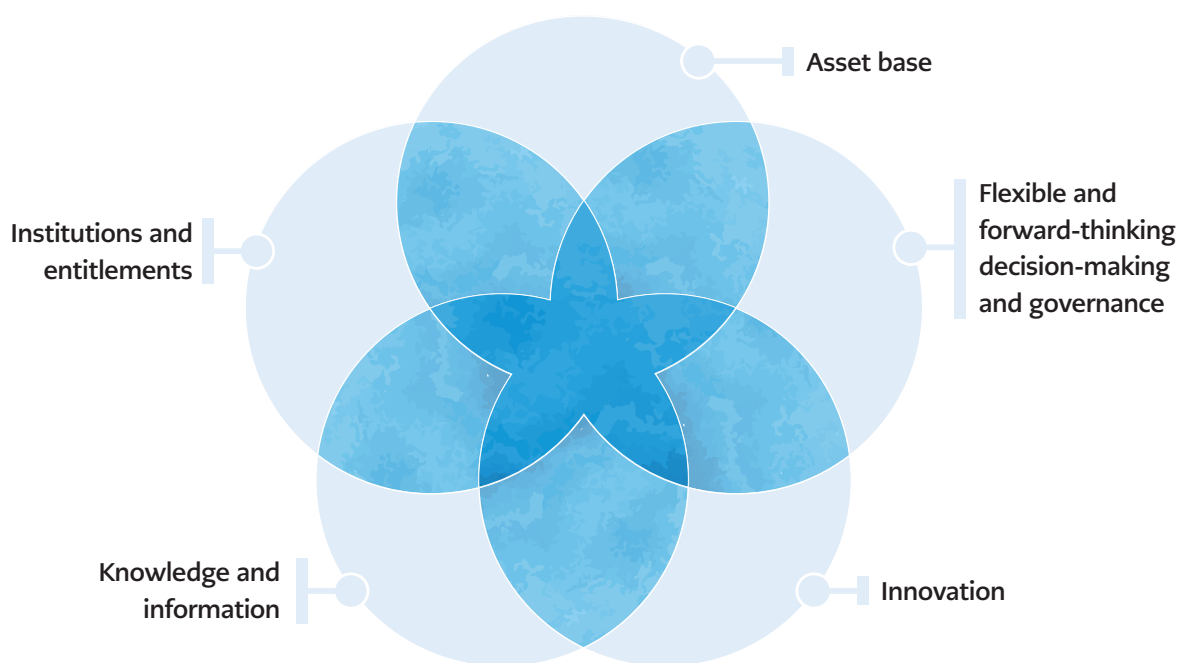
The LAC framework was chosen and applied to this synthesis review after analysing the PBK, as the data commonly identified characteristics and factors that allowed WROs and CSOs to adapt their programming, including key capacities and assets. The LAC framework was the most appropriate framework on the topic of adaptive capacity and was developed to appreciate the processes and functions of adaptive capacity, to shift the focus, traditionally on what a system **has** that enables it to adapt, to what a system **does** to enable it to adapt (Levine et al., 2011). Yet the LAC framework focuses more on institutions (rather than organizations), and on the capacities of systems (rather than more specific programmes). Indeed, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government staff have faced challenges in incorporating all five elements of the LAC framework into the delivery of interventions, given the wide scope of activities that fall under each (Jones et al., 2014). Moreover, the framework assumes a level of agency or autonomy that is not always feasible or realistic for many CSOs and WROs. Although, importantly, the framework emphasizes the contextual nature of local adaptation, many CSOs and WROs work at both local and regional/national levels and may have to pivot programming at both levels. The LAC framework is thus drawn on to organize the findings but is in some cases followed loosely. The lessons learned from examining how internal and external challenges and changes prompt adaptation, and the processes of adaptation, can support future efforts to build the organizational resilience and adaptive capacities of WROs and CSOs, and help in designing programmes that respond to inevitable shifts in the VAWG prevention landscape. These lessons provide funders such as the UN Trust Fund with recommendations to support practitioners to design and implement VAWG prevention programmes in a more adaptive manner.

1.2. Case study selection

At the heart of this synthesis review are practitioner insights from 9 CSOs and WROs working to prevent VAWG across 12 countries. Ten projects were selected because their annual project and/or evaluation reports (submitted to the UN Trust Fund over 2015–2020) contained insights from grantees that had significantly adapted their projects because of changing circumstances, such as political instability, the climate crisis and/or the COVID-19 pandemic. Further deliberation with the UN Trust Fund was conducted to finalize the projects to be included in this review. Care was taken during the selection process to make the final set of projects representative of the extensive portfolio of the UN Trust Fund. The broad scope of the projects represents the breadth of work in the field of VAWG prevention programming. More details on the projects can be found in appendix A.

The 10 projects worked across 12 countries, including 4 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 4 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 1 country in Western Asia and 1 country in the Pacific Islands. The projects represent a diverse range of NGOs, including local, regional, and international organizations. **The projects used a variety of strategies to prevent and respond to VAWG.** For example, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kenya promoted offender accountability by providing technical training to police and legal professionals on sexual violence investigations and promoted survivor-centred care in health systems. The project worked to improve medical documentation and sample collection to enhance the investigative services provided to survivors of sexual assault. Women for Women International (WfWI), in partnership with the Warvin Foundation for Women's Issues, supported Syrian refugee women in Iraq to become more economically self-reliant and worked to improve their access to satisfactory VAWG prevention services. The project led by the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) in South Sudan focused on collaborating with schools to establish a school-based curriculum to prevent VAWG and promote sexual and reproductive health and worked with girls' and boys' youth clubs outside schools.

Practitioners worked with a variety of populations, making purposeful efforts to leave no one behind. For example, in Haiti, Beyond Borders expanded the SASA! model to include modules on women and girls with disabilities and sensitize community members to their particular needs and vulnerabilities to violence. In Guatemala, Women's Justice Initiative (WJI) worked to improve legal resources for Mayan women in rural areas by delivering empowerment training to women on their rights and technical training to police and court actors on
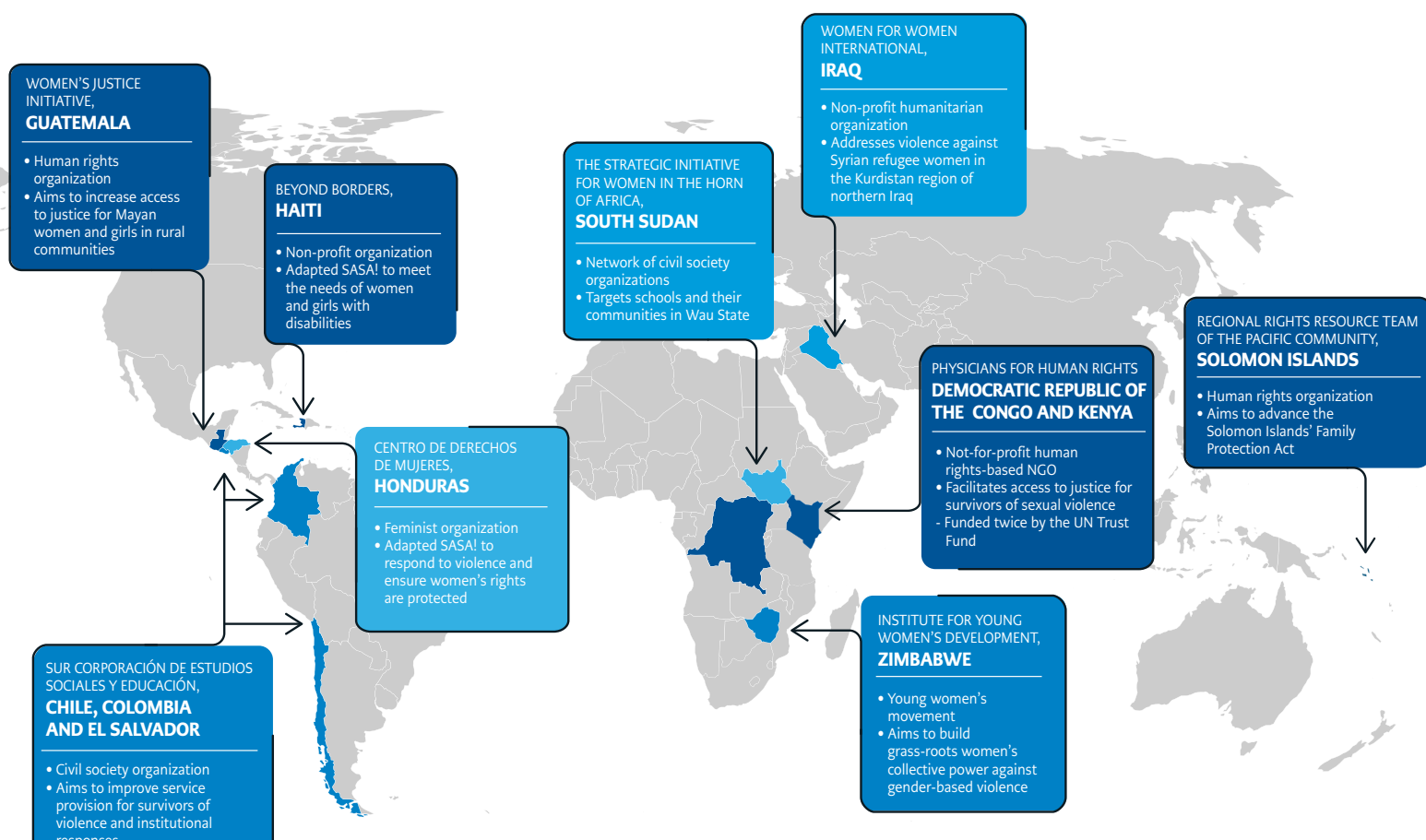
improving responses to survivors of violence. In Honduras, Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM) adapted the SASA! methodology and implemented educational workshops with grass-roots groups to reflect on the root causes of violence and to reaffirm the rights of indigenous rural women. The Institute for Young Women's Development (IYWD) in Zimbabwe held workshops with young women to strengthen their knowledge on and capacities to prevent VAWG and established cross-sector alliances to ensure women's safety and access to economic resources.

Many projects included in this synthesis review collaborated with multiple stakeholders, including police or state actors. The Regional Rights Resource Team of the Pacific Community (RRRT) in Solomon Islands sought to advance the implementation of family protection laws, to increase capacity for issuing protection orders, and to provide opportunities for community facilitators and associate justices to promote the rights of survivors of violence. Operating in Chile, Colombia and El Salvador, SUR Corporación de Estudios Sociales y Educación (SUR) conducted training and coordinated information-sharing and procedural improvement among police institutions and government and facilitated interactions between these actors and women's civil society groups.

to make the final set as representative as possible of the extensive portfolio of the UN Trust Fund. The final set included smaller and larger (in grant size) projects, as well as projects of shorter and longer durations. All the projects were funded by the UN Trust Fund for at least one cycle (a single cycle being two or three years in duration). One grantee organization from Turkey was funded twice (for two cycles). Care has also been taken to the extent possible to ensure global representation. Projects from Armenia, Jordan, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Serbia and Turkey are included in the review.

FIGURE 2:
The UN Trust Fund projects included in this brief

WOMEN FOR WOMEN INTERNATIONAL,
IRAQ
• Non-profit humanitarian organization
• Addresses violence against Syrian refugee women in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq

WOMEN'S JUSTICE INITIATIVE,
GUATEMALA
• Human rights organization
• Aims to increase access to justice for Mayan women and girls in rural communities

BEYOND BORDERS,
HAITI
• Non-profit organization
• Adapted SASA! to meet the needs of women and girls with disabilities

THE STRATEGIC INITIATIVE FOR WOMEN IN THE HORN OF AFRICA,
SOUTH SUDAN
• Network of civil society organizations
• Targets schools and their communities in Wau State

REGIONAL RIGHTS RESOURCE TEAM OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY,
SOLOMON ISLANDS
• Human rights organization
• Aims to advance the Solomon Islands' Family Protection Act

PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO AND KENYA
• Not-for-profit human rights-based NGO
• Facilitates access to justice for survivors of sexual violence
- Funded twice by the UN Trust Fund

CENTRO DE DERECHOS DE MUJERES,
HONDURAS
• Feminist organization
• Adapted SASA! to respond to violence and ensure women's rights are protected

SUR CORPORACIÓN DE ESTUDIOS SOCIALES Y EDUCACIÓN,
CHILE, COLOMBIA AND EL SALVADOR
• Civil society organization
• Aims to improve service provision for survivors of violence and institutional responses

INSTITUTE FOR YOUNG WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT,
ZIMBABWE
• Young women's movement
• Aims to build grass-roots women's collective power against gender-based violence

2. KEY THEMATIC LESSONS EMERGING FROM PRACTICE

The key findings are organized according to: (1) **why** VAWG prevention programmes adapt and (2) **how** VAWG prevention programmes adapt. The second section is structured according to the LAC framework and looks at the factors and characteristics that support the adaptive capacities and resilience of WROs and CSOs working to prevent VAWG.

2.1. Why VAWG prevention programmes adapt

LITERATURE REVIEW

VAWG prevention programmes typically face numerous external challenges and changes throughout their implementation. Given that VAWG prevention programmes often disrupt the status quo and promote social changes including redistribution of power, they are likely to face resistance and backlash (Flood et al., 2020), which can require adaptation to respond to and mitigate the risk of harm. For example, in response to backlash, organizations may have to redesign their interventions to make them more resilient and less dependent on state actors (Viswanathan, 2021). Climate change and environmental hazards require development actors to have adaptive capacity and create chronic and acute stressors that exacerbate or amplify pre-existing VAWG risk factors, such as poverty, rigid gender roles, and personal and community conflict (GBV AoR Help Desk, 2020) Armed conflict, natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies can pose significant challenges to and require the adaptation of VAWG prevention programming (UNICEF, 2020). In many settings, VAWG prevention activities had to substantially adapt in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including moving to smaller group sizes, with measures to maintain social distancing, and shifting content to virtual platforms (Raising Voices, 2020). Some VAWG prevention activities were suspended or from the start the start of the pandemic, owing to limited access to communities and beneficiaries, governments prioritizing their response to the impacts of COVID-19 or enforcing lockdowns, and beneficiaries being unmotivated to engage in violence prevention programmes, as their attention was focused on survival and health risks (UN Trust Fund, 2020).

Internal factors, including organizational capacities or budgets, can also require the adaptation of VAWG prevention programmes. For instance, a review of the adaptation of evidence-based programmes suggests that lack of time is one of the most cited reasons for adaptation, including deleting or changing programme content (Moore et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2007). Limited resources and difficulty in retaining participants are also common reasons driving programme adaptation (Moore et al., 2013). Additional internal reasons for adaptation include difficulties in finding adequate staff to deliver the programme, competing programme priorities and resistance from implementers (Moore et al., 2013).

2.1.1. External factors

UN Trust Fund grantees highlighted many reasons for adapting their projects, including external crises and fluctuating contexts. Several practitioners noted how environmental threats and events (e.g. floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, extreme/changing weather conditions and

tornadoes) could significantly influence implementation. For example, a few projects identified how heavy rain could hinder travel (especially in locations with dirt roads), and lead to activities or events being postponed or changed. As a representative of WJI in Guatemala noted:

We had to adapt some methodologies and tools to respond to the needs of the beneficiaries. For example, in some communities our legal literacy courses were offered 2 hours a week, but due to the heavy rains, we accommodated a shorter time so as not to affect the participants' return and not to affect the attendance of women in the groups (focus group discussion (FGD) participant, 4 May 2021).

Similarly, a practitioner from RRRT in Solomon Islands noted how the timing of project activities was affected by harsh weather:

If you are accessing people by boat, it becomes impossible to physically travel there. So you are constantly adapting the timing of activities. That is the challenge of changes with a season where there is more rain, especially now with climate change. For our part for safety, you cannot allow staff to travel in rough weather on boats to get to remote villages and potentially get stuck or not make it there (interview, 12 May 2021).

Many practitioners emphasized the political instability of their contexts, which could require the adaptation of intervention activities. Military wars, gang conflicts, state violence and/or political uprisings occurred in many of the project contexts during implementation. For instance, one practitioner from Beyond Borders in Haiti identified the challenges of planning projects given the unstable political context: "We can't really know what's going to happen because we live in an unstable country." (interview, 31 May 2021) Staff related how blocked roads in Haiti due to political protests and gas shortages prevented staff from travelling to communities, and delayed project activities, the printing of materials and obtaining institutional review board approval. Parents sometimes chose not to allow their girls to attend the projects' girls' groups for fear they would encounter political protests. Both heavy rain and civil unrest prohibited community members from attending project activities. Beyond Borders staff

used phones and WhatsApp to communicate with their networks and maintain relationships, and activities were rescheduled when feasible to ensure the safety of staff and participants travelling.

As another example, PHR conducted a security assessment of its project area in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and temporarily postponed travel amid political tensions and demonstrations and moved its office to a new compound closer to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission. Until it was safe to do so, staff refrained from travelling within and around Bukavu and remained at the compound. National elections held in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kenya during the UN Trust Fund grant increased women's risk of experiencing sexual violence, given the post-election violence (characterized by unprecedented sexual violence) that followed the previous national general elections. PHR thus worked closely with its networks, strengthening existing partnerships, to develop plans to prevent sexual violence and respond to victims in case political events precipitated such violence. It also scheduled training sessions to avoid the times when election-related violence would be most likely to occur.

A major external challenge identified by practitioners as requiring adaptation was the COVID-19 pandemic. The projects implemented by PHR, SUR and WJI were completed before the COVID-19 pandemic started. **All other practitioners had to significantly adapt their projects in response to health, economic and safety threats related to the pandemic and related response measures.** Among the projects that were completed, through the interviews and FGDs, practitioners emphasized how their ongoing projects have adapted in the light of the pandemic. **A common and often major adaptation was pivoting from in-person to remote formats, because of COVID-19-related restrictions on gathering and social distancing requirements.** For instance, PHR had developed training videos on informed consent and forensic photography during its UN Trust Fund grant period. These videos were used during the pandemic in place of convening large groups. Given the limited internet and bandwidth for online meetings, small groups would meet where it was safe, including outside, and local facilitators would use the videos to help maintain the quality of the training. PHR also worked with trainees to use existing and familiar technology, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Google Groups, to connect trainees.

Many practitioners highlighted the challenges involved in moving projects to remote or virtual formats. CDM in Honduras adapted to the pandemic by holding virtual thematic trainings (through Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp groups, etc.) with activists and school groups. Yet it was challenging for participants and/or practitioners who were not comfortable with technology or did not have access to the Internet. Mobile phones and/or chargers were provided to women so that they could access the Internet. Some practitioners from RRRT in Solomon Islands similarly identified the challenge of adapting to online programming given its implementation context:

It is not the type of project you can switch to online modalities. You need to accompany people closely. Geography matters. For our region we have this complexity of multiple islands, remote communities you can't access by road. This project has a support team in Suva, [but] it has been a struggle to communicate with colleagues in Honiara, because you can't get onto [the] Internet or phone and can't hear each other. With travel, there would have been a chance to meet once a year, and that disappeared. It is different from projects in Asia and other places where there is some better connectivity and telecommunication (interview, 12 May 2021).

Given that RRRT staff could not travel to project communities at the beginning of the pandemic, it adapted to communicating with participants over the phone, and used the radio to raise awareness of violence against women (VAW), the role of associate justices (AJs), and available services and their contact information. **In a field that often relies on intense face-to-face interaction between front-line workers and communities, the COVID-19 pandemic sometimes disrupted the very foundations of programming.** For instance, practitioners working through schools were unable to reach young people because of school closures, or to adapt the programming for use online. SIHA's project in South Sudan was impacted by school closures in response to COVID-19, as the core programme was training teachers to pilot a school-based curriculum promoting sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, legal awareness and VAWG prevention. Indeed, a common implementation challenge caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was delays to project implementation. As one grantee noted:

We paused programming for a few months. This affects awareness of local communities, as they did not have information for a number of months. They forgot some of this information. Timing and continued information is important with these types of projects (interview, 12 May 2021).

Delivering food packages to women's networks during COVID-19. Credit: Centro de Derechos de Mujeres

Another practitioner similarly emphasized: "Long absences from communities in [a] community mobilization process that is relatively young and ongoing is a momentum killer." (FGD participant, 25 May 2021)

Some practitioners reported that the pandemic fuelled the adaptation of the types of support they provided to participants to reduce the impact of COVID-19. For instance, in the aftermath of food shortages and economic shocks post-COVID-19, some practitioners pivoted to provide hygiene kits, basic food supplies or livelihood activities to marginalized communities.

2.1.2. Internal factors

Internal factors could also drive adaptation, including the capacity needs of organizational partners, staff or key stakeholders. Some practitioners found that it was necessary for their projects to be adapted to mitigate resistance or backlash in response to their interventions. For instance, the one religious (Catholic) school that SIHA engaged with in South Sudan was initially resistant to some of the curriculum content, especially the sexual health content, including on contraceptives. Staff responded by having special meetings with the school leaders to find a mutually agreeable outcome to move forward. Practitioners noted their internal agreement that cutting the sexual health content was not an adaptation that maintained fidelity to the programme design.

Working with many and varied stakeholders could commonly prompt adaptation, to meet their various needs and priorities. As a practitioner from SUR in Chile noted:

Projects have outcomes and a plan and when you work on a project with so many actors such as ours, like the police, which are very important and big, with all its hierarchy and complexity, plus other organizations. In this project, it was necessary to be flexible and continue adapting our work if we thought it was one thing before but turned out to be another later. I think this is an important theme, how to be flexible with a project that involves so many actors (FGD participant, 4 May 2021).

Other practitioners had to adapt their projects because they did not reach participants as intended, because of barriers to engagement or to sustaining the involvement of participants over time.

The PBK indicates that organizations working to prevent VAWG face numerous challenges in the course of their work at multiple levels. Practitioners identified a variety of internal and external challenges and changes, some of which required immediate adaptation, while others required adaptation that occurred more gradually over time. **These experiences demonstrate why continuous adaptation is necessary. They also highlight that such challenges or crises are commonplace for all WROs and CSOs working to end VAWG,** and not only for those operating in humanitarian emergencies or conflict settings.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Many of the challenges prompting VAWG prevention projects to adapt were environmental, which required flexible programming, and prioritizing safety and finding ways to maintain the engagement of staff and participants.

- The COVID-19 pandemic generated significant challenges for projects, including the need for practitioners to move programming online to mitigate the impact of project locations (i.e. schools) being closed, delaying implementation and changing programming priorities.

- Political challenges, including elections, security threats and conflict, are a reality for many VAWG prevention programmes and can cause delays to implementation, affecting the timing or location of activities.

- Some challenges prompting adaptation were more internal, including capacity gaps, responding to backlash and resistance, working with a diversity of partners, and barriers to the engagement of intended participants, which are common given the complexity of VAWG prevention programming.

Given the significant challenges practitioners faced, it is critical to identify how to foster the resilience and adaptive capacities of CSOs and WROs working to prevent VAWG, which is the focus of the next section.

2.2. How VAWG prevention programmes adapt

2.2.1. Knowledge and information

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the Local Development Capacity framework, an important component of adaptive capacity is the ability to generate, receive, assess and disseminate knowledge and information in support of appropriate programmatic and financial adaptation (Jones et al., 2010). Successful adaptation requires an understanding of likely future change and adaptation options, and the capacity to implement suitable interventions (Frankhauser and Tol, 1997). An important aspect of this component is raising the awareness and building the capacity of stakeholders to inform adaptation decisions (McGray, 2009), and raising awareness of the needs of particular groups in a community (Ospina and Heeks, 2010). Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEAL) and embedding practitioner learning have been found to support the process of adaptation for VAWG prevention programming (AWDF, 2020; Palm and Clowes, 2019; Raising Voices and AWDF, 2019). Adaptive programmes need a mechanism for learning and feedback, but also the opportunity to use that learning to adjust (O'Neil, 2016; Valters et al., 2016). As Wild et al. (2015, p. 34) argue, "adaptive processes are not just about 'muddling through'. Rather, they start with some initial hypotheses, test these and then revise the approach in the light of what is found, using the best available information at the time" (O'Neil, 2016). Yet critiques of the development industry suggest that the predominant focus of donors on achieving direct, short-term results based on project designs that over specify expected outputs and inputs allows insufficient time for iterative learning (Booth and Unsworth, 2014; O'Neil, 2016). Project assumptions can often be formulaic and unrelated to the specific contexts (O'Neil, 2016).

The PBK elicited for this synthesis review reinforces that CSOs and WROs require strong MEAL systems to identify and adapt to ongoing challenges and changes.

Many practitioners suggested that understanding local contexts was essential to inform adaptive programming, including the project design, theory of change and type of VAWG prevention to prioritize. For instance, WfWI staff and participants identified honour killings as one of the most pressing gender-based violence (GBV) issues in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). Through roundtable discussions with key stakeholders, WfWI staff identified the main causes of the salience of honour killings and the cultural norms that support this form of violence and adapted the project to more effectively prevent this type of violence. Similarly, PHR practitioners identified sexual violence against children in conflict settings as a common form of violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the project pivoted to address this type of violence more sufficiently. PHR also worked to ensure its MediCapt application (designed to document cases of sexual violence, with standards to prosecute perpetrators of such crimes) was tailored to suit local clinicians, which was found to be integral to its successful use.

In addition to the design phase, many practitioners related the importance of collecting real-time data throughout implementation to inform ongoing adaptation, including through regular consultations with participants and a strong MEAL framework. Many practitioners emphasized the importance of contextual adaptation being informed by multiple stakeholders and/or forms of data. For example, Beyond Borders adapted the SASA! programme to incorporate women and girls with disabilities more effectively through a process involving situational analyses, pilot training sessions, focus groups, interviews, legal reviews, and the collection of baseline data. In South Sudan, SIHA met with key personnel from the project schools, officials from the ministries of gender and education, and hosted focus groups made up of students, teachers, parents, and traditional and religious leaders. The meetings were meant to provide an understanding of the context so that the curriculum could address the specific needs of the stakeholders and beneficiaries. All stakeholders had an opportunity to review the draft curriculum informed by these meetings.

MEAL systems can identify critical barriers to participants engaging with programmes. For instance, the Warvin Foundation and WfWI in Iraq found that

many female participants dropped out of the project training owing to barriers including lack of transportation centres (exacerbated by weather conditions), lack of material incentives and lack of childcare options. The project responded to participant feedback and pivoted to address these barriers, by adjusting training schedules; providing women with supplementary skills in, for example, literacy, the English language, sewing, handicraft-making and first aid, and vocational training; and offering equipment (i.e. sewing machines and salon kits) to participants with high potential. A bus was hired to help participants access the centres, monthly packages of food supplies were offered, and childcare options were established. WJI in Guatemala similarly learned that for workshops and activities with women's groups, it was necessary to assess if a day-care service was needed to allow women to participate in the project and prevent children from being exposed to issues related to VAWG that could affect them psychologically. Addressing such barriers to engagement with programmes is an important component of adaptive programming, and the ongoing MEAL permitted adaptation in this respect.

Practitioners noted the importance of collecting regular feedback from project participants as a critical source of knowledge and learning. IYWD in Zimbabwe found it helpful to have an activist steering committee that met monthly to share reflections on project progress, analyse possible opportunities or threats, consolidate learning, and adjust its programme strategy as necessary. On a quarterly basis, they reviewed MEAL data to assess the programme's progress against indicators. PHR created an advisory group including key clinicians, law enforcement, judges, and lawyers, and consulted them regularly throughout the project. PHR also employed a listening tour in Kenya to generate additional dialogue beyond the training workshops and network meetings, to ensure that project activities aligned with local professional needs and addressed specific challenges.

Some practitioners emphasized the importance of having strong partnerships and regular communication with local stakeholders to support the understanding of programme dynamics and allow adaptation as needed. As one practitioner said:

We tried to work closely and communicate with the province police, provincial government, and NGOs (Christian Care, Women's Council and Family Support Center) – as they ran programs in those communities, were based in those communities and would understand the dynamics of men and women and the roles that they play and how that may hinder or contribute to how they access the project (FGD participant, written response).

An important component of MEAL to support adaptive programming identified is tracking who a project works more or less effectively for. As one practitioner noted:

Women and survivors of violence are not one homogenous group. At the end of the day, programmes may work for certain people in certain circumstances but not for everyone. How do you ensure with programming you leave the space open? Tracking consciously, and putting it into MEAL processes, which groups of women is this programme working for, which groups are not being impacted and why (interview, 12 May 2021).

Many practitioners identified the importance of tracking and monitoring for differences in programme impact and accessibility among those in rural/urban areas, and of different educational levels, refugee status, socioeconomic status, age groups and abilities, and so on. For instance, in response to awareness that government institutions and social services were failing to reach indigenous women living in rural areas, WJI pivoted to pilot the use of tablets for video consultations with women in rural communities. One practitioner emphasized:

Adaptive programming means being responsive to the needs of the community that the projects are working with. Recognizing that within one country the dynamics or the way of working in the urban centre and outer islands would be very different. Therefore, being able to respond and work with that to ensure that women and girls in those areas can benefit from the project (FGD participant, written response).

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that some practitioners shifted their approach to collecting MEAL to remote means. One grantee noted how their project used WhatsApp groups during the COVID-19 pandemic to generate ongoing monitoring and evaluation:

We had to use our WhatsApp groups. Most of the time they would give us information in real time. This group allowed them to connect and be joined by various stakeholders at the local provincial level, and it made communication easier and was a monitoring and evaluation adaptation to the reality of the present times (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

Another grantee noted the importance of relying on pre-existing relationships to monitor and evaluate programming during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Because of distance, it has been more difficult to get to community activities to do that kind of support and learning work throughout the period. We had to rely on people based in the community and telephone reports rather than our own observations and that changes things, but we are still able to get a lot from them and their reporting based on having people who live in the community where we are working (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Understanding and regular monitoring of programme contexts is essential to inform adaptive programming, including ongoing reflections on the programme design, theory of change and focus of the VAWG prevention work. This helps ensure VAWG prevention programming is relevant and contextually grounded and can inform necessary adaptations.

- VAWG prevention programming is complex and requires the flexibility of organizations, not only after the inception phase, but throughout implementation. Such flexibility is fostered by listening to the needs and priorities of participants and communities and being open to pivoting implementation.

- An important component of MEAL to support the adaptation of programmes where necessary is taking an **intersectional** approach by tracking who a project is working (or not working) for or who a project is accessible (or not accessible) to, to ensure that no one is left behind.

- WROs and CSOs are well placed to access knowledge and information around programme dynamics, including successes, challenges and adaptation needs, as they often have strong presences in communities and relationships with community members and key stakeholders.

2.2.2. Asset base

LITERATURE REVIEW

A project's **ability to cope with and respond to change depends heavily on access to, and control over, key assets** (Jones et al., 2010). Assets include both tangible capital (natural, physical and financial) and intangible capital (human and social) (Prowse and Scott, 2008). Lack of availability and access to appropriate resources can significantly limit the ability of a system to cope with challenges, such as the effects of climate change or wider development pressures (Jones et al., 2010). A review of funding to WROs and feminist movements suggests that allowing flexibility across budget items is important to enable groups to respond to opportunities and challenges as they emerge in their contexts, while remaining aligned with programme objectives (AWID and Mama Cash, 2020). Another review of what works for empowerment identified the importance of a regular source of income that an organization has discretion to spend on whatever activities it believes will be most effective in making a difference (Cornwall, 2016). Yet assistance for women's rights and gender equality is often too prescriptive or rigid to support feminist action and gender reform that is genuinely locally led (O'Neil, 2016). Adaptive programmes require flexible funding and contractual arrangements that encourage learning around meaningful change and have the flexibility to adjust (Booth and Unsworth, 2014; O'Neil, 2016).

An asset base was identified as a critical factor underlying the adaptive capacity of practitioners. Many practitioners emphasized that access to and control over assets require flexible funding models. This included having the flexibility to revise project budgets, indicators, and objectives in response to changes in design, including after inception, or in response to changing

circumstances. In some cases, changing circumstances could warrant non-cost extensions (i.e. an extension to the project/grant length without a budget increase). As one practitioner noted:

Adaptation as a core component driving a pilots' success is its ability to adapt to circumstances. So having flexibility within budget is important within reason. Ability to have no-cost extensions is important (interview, 12 May 2021).

Some practitioners emphasized that their organizations were southern organizations and were dependant on donor funding for survival. Certain aspects of funding, such as being linked to specific projects and outputs, could, in turn, make it harder for such projects to have the flexibility and agency to adapt. Yet such organizations are also often well equipped to be adaptive given their presence and relationship with communities, creating a certain paradox. As one practitioner noted:

Local organizations are both in a great position to be adaptive and resilient because they are mostly women's organizations or disability rights organizations and based in communities so they are completely surrounded by the ambience of people's needs and opinions and know with social norm changes where to go next, and at the same time, sometimes the blockages in resilience come from funding and procurement requirements where it's like you have your hands tied behind your back (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

Flexible funding structures allowed organizations to promptly address evolving situations and ensure more effective and responsive programming, without the concern of losing funding or not meeting donor expectations. Some grantees appreciated the accountability mechanisms established by donors with objectives, indicators, deadlines, and check-ins. One practitioner noted: "To have a partner with these expectations helps us get better, adapt and ensure we meet our deadlines … this helps us do much more." (interview, 13 May 2021) However, the rigidity of certain funding structures was noted by some practitioners as hindering an appropriate response to changing circumstances:

We have to adjust according to our reality. The [UN Trust] Fund does not really give us this possibility because we have to respect the strategy that we first outlined in the project application and not respect the strategy that conforms to our reality (interview, 31 May 2021).

Adolescent girls peer into a women's rights workshop.
Credit: Lisa Shannon/Women's Justice Initiative

As one interviewee summarized, the improvements to the funding process are made "not by letting things go by but being more flexible to the socio-political or environmental conditions that are not completely within our command" (interview, 31 May 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant disruptions to all grantees with active projects. Measures to adapt budgets in response to the pandemic included incorporating the costs of distributing personal protective equipment, purchasing office materials (e.g. laptops) to ensure staff had the capacity to work remotely, and developing materials or campaigns related to the COVID-19 crisis. The UN Trust Fund's flexible response, which included diverting or increasing funds, and accommodating changing time frames, was positively received. This flexible funding was identified as a critical factor underlying project resilience and adaptation in response to the pandemic. As one practitioner noted:

We were lucky to have donors that were saying "do what you need to do and listen to your community" and not demanding the same results within the same time frame (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

One practitioner noted that this differed from some funders, which offered them limited flexibility to adjust activities or be supported as organizations despite the challenges faced amid the pandemic:

Some donors continued to be police like in overseeing our activities and experiencing high-level and timely outputs even though we were facing multiple challenges (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

Larger organizations (i.e. international NGOs) with better access to flexible and core funding could more easily adapt than projects reliant on donor funding, especially if stringent conditions applied. For instance, WfWI in Iraq noted the importance of its organization having a flexible funding model and local staff, which helped it adapt its project:

Although our project at WfWI in Iraq ended in February 2020, right before COVID-19, at WfWI we have a flexible funding model and all local staff in our country offices so these both helped us continually adapt and tweak approaches throughout our three-year project. This meant that even after experiencing challenges with a local partner, we were able to reorganize activities and still achieve the major objectives (FGD participant, 4 May 2021).

A grantee from SUR in Chile emphasized the importance of open and regular dialogue between grantees and funders to enhance and support flexible funding:

It is good to ensure there is flexibility in funding if something unexpected comes up like a pandemic, flooding or [an] earthquake, which happens a lot in our country. Political and authoritarian issues also appear. Having dialogue with the funder is very important in order to adapt and change (FGD participant, 4 May 2021).

A project's asset base includes available and relevant expertise among staff. Some practitioners related the challenges they had experienced in relation to staff turnover, or finding and hiring appropriate and qualified staff, which could affect planned timings and the effectiveness of programmes. For instance, the Warvin Foundation in the KRI faced significant staff turnover, and inadequate staff capacity in MEAL and project management, which delayed the beginning of its project. WfWI encouraged the Warvin Foundation staff to complete UN Trust Fund online training and offered capacity-building sessions tailored to their observed needs. Yet the temporary suspension of international flights into the KRI challenged the ability of WfWI staff to travel to the KRI, and it had to adapt to provide more remote support. WfWI and the Warvin Foundation eventually mutually decided to conclude the partnership, and WfWI took over the implementation of all activities in the second year of programming. Difficulties in the partnership were largely linked to the Warvin Foundation's operational capacity, and difficulties in meeting UN Trust Fund reporting requirements. WfWI noted that in future it should consider conducting more extensive partner assessments in regions where it does not have a country office, and whether this may affect the selection and outcome of its partnerships.

- Flexible and core funding were identified as key to supporting adaptive programming, including flexibility to change budget line items and project activities, and, in cases of significant delays to implementation outside the control of organizations, being awarded non-cost extensions.

- Grantees' ability to adapt programming is enhanced by donors finding a balance between flexibility and accountability and ensuring regular dialogue between donors and grantees to promote donors' transparency and comprehension of the internal and external challenges that projects face.

- The asset base includes the capacity and expertise of organizations to implement and adapt their programming and meet the requirements of funders. WROs and CSOs often need to partner with other organizations, and thus should carefully map the capacities of organizations before partnering for implementation of any project.

- Funding that is not flexible or comes with stringent conditions can hinder WROs' and CSOs' agility and ability to adapt and pivot in response to changing circumstances, although these actors are well placed to know when and how to adapt.

2.2.3. Institutions and entitlements

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutions are the "rules" that govern belief systems, behaviour, and organizational structures (Ostrom, 2005). An appropriate institutional environment that allows fair access and entitlement to key assets is an important characteristic of adaptive capacity (Jones et al., 2010). Institutions themselves should have the capacity to be flexible, and in some cases evolve, to allow adaptation. The degree to which institutions empower or disempower people, and the extent to which individuals, groups and communities have the right to be heard and responded to also plays an important role in adaptive capacity. The institutional norms and behaviours around adaptation can influence how individuals react to shocks and changing trends (Dulal et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2010). There is

increased awareness of the importance of institutional strengthening for WROs and CSOs (UN Trust Fund, 2021), especially in the context of COVID-19 (UN Trust Fund, 2020). Promoting adaptation and resilience requires significantly increased investment in building women's organizations and groups (GBV AoR Help Desk, 2020). Although it is helpful to consider the institutional dimensions of organizations, this section highlights organizational capacities and management, including staff capacities, as per the elicited PBK. Such factors are important to prioritize, as the skills, attitudes and behaviours of staff or facilitators are key to the successful implementation of programmes to prevent GBV (Bartel, 2018).

Some practitioners relayed that monitoring, identifying, and responding to capacity gaps of staff and key stakeholders formed an important component of institutional resilience and adaptation. CDM in Honduras realized that some young counsellors were very good facilitators but were considered too young, and that others with more experience were more effective in treating VAWG cases. As a result, CDM adapted to implement the project with a combination of two advisers, whose skills and experiences complemented each other's. As another example, through pre- and post-training tests and observations, staff at Beyond Borders in Haiti learned that many activists had a poor understanding of key definitions and use of appropriate language to describe people living with disabilities. In response, staff held refresher training sessions with activists during monthly activism meetings.

Some grantees noted the importance of monitoring the impact and appropriateness of training activities and pivoting to ensure the capacity needs of participants were met. For instance, PHR in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kenya learned that one-off training sessions were insufficient to change physicians' behaviours, and that intensive training, ongoing mentoring and reinforcing their learned skills were required. As another example, through trainee feedback and post-training analysis, PHR identified key areas of improvement, including to its MediCapt application. PHR adapted to conduct training sessions at more regular intervals, with time in between for participants to apply the new skills and knowledge they learned and offered

face-to-face or remote mentoring from experts. Similarly, through pre- and post-training and competency tests, RRRT in Solomon Islands recognized that there were gaps in AJs' and community facilitators' understanding of family violence, and that, therefore, more than the originally planned annual training was required to prepare them to speak to communities about VAW. RRRT adapted its model to an accreditation system, which involved participants completing training, passing a competency test, and receiving a training pack to better equip them for their roles. RRRT also learned that some AJs were alleged perpetrators of domestic violence, had not been formally appointed local court justices and/or did not have the capacity to issue interim protection orders. RRRT adapted to deliver targeted training to smaller groups of facilitators, AJs and other stakeholders, such as the police. This could thereby identify and manage underperforming AJs and facilitate greater engagement between police and AJs regarding protection orders. Finally, RRRT realized that most AJs were older men, so the project changed the target criteria to include potential AJs, thus involving more women. **Insufficient exploration of pre-existing capacities can be difficult and costly to address after implementation has begun.** For instance, a practitioner from RRRT believed its project design phase was shorter than ideal. Greater emphasis on assessing the appropriateness of the local court justice model could have helped to guide the development of project activities and avoid foreseeable issues with the capacity of targeted stakeholders.

Reducing the size of group training sessions was a common adaptation in response to changing capacity needs, and to create optimal conditions for learning. For instance, during the first semester of a women's legal literacy course, WJI in Guatemala learned that groups of 35–40 women were too large for one facilitator to oversee. It adapted to reduce the size of the groups and provided more follow-up and technical assistance. **Providing more regular training sessions or check-ins was another common adaptation in response to identified capacity gaps.** One grantee from Beyond Borders in Haiti highlighted that in its project plan, it had limited the number of meetings with partner organizations. Yet during check-in calls, it realized that some partners were not fulfilling their obligations for a variety of reasons and additional meetings would have allowed for increased support, yet this had not been budgeted for in the original proposal to the UN Trust Fund:

On check-in calls, they tell us everything is being done and going well, but when I visit, I find that it's not the case. We may have to visit them twice a year because if they are having issues, we need to increase our support to them. But the project stipulated only one visit. If we can have the second visit, we can provide much more support for their implementation (interview, 31 May 2021).

Assessing the capacity of stakeholders or participants could result in a shift in the project's target group or groups. For instance, during the first year of implementation, the Warvin Foundation and WfWI in Iraq identified a major gap in government capacity. In response, it shifted from focusing on NGO's capacity to targeting government hospitals and departments serving GBV survivors. The targeting of key participants was also expanded to include a greater number of non-Syrian participants, as many Syrian refugees had returned to Syria from the KRI by mid-way through the project.

Assessing the appropriateness of project activities for key stakeholders could require adaptation in terms of how to target them. For example, SIHA in South Sudan realized that its initial plan to conduct awareness sessions outside school hours would result in low attendance by teachers and students. In consultation with the Ministry of Education and the five targeted schools, it pivoted to incorporate its programme curriculum in school course work. While waiting to receive approval for the curriculum delayed project activities, this ensured the curriculum was integrated and would have a wider reach. WJI in Guatemala faced challenges in establishing a set of change agents to promote the project and action plans at community level. The project adapted to reinforce the role of community leaders, who ended up assuming the role initially envisaged for the agents of change. WJI also faced challenges working with a particular judge misclassifying cases of VAWG, who was interviewed to develop a strategy to address the issue. WJI adapted its service provider training to provide an explanation of the difference between intrafamilial violence and VAWG under Guatemalan law and the application of the Femicide Law. SUR in Chile, Colombia, and El Salvador, adjusted its timing

and plans regarding the engagement of police based on their availability and preferences. This responsiveness laid the groundwork for developing respectful alliances with the police.

A common adaptation around how to target stakeholders was a change in the frequency of engagement. For instance, CDM in Honduras experienced a challenge with the regular rotation of authorities, which had not been sufficiently considered during project planning. It adapted its strategy to reintroduce the project to new authorities at the beginning of each mandate. Similarly, to address the high turnover of local leaders, who rotate every two years, WJI in Guatemala deployed community advocates to ensure continued implementation of community action plans whenever new leaders took office.

To be adaptive, institutions should ensure the entitlement and empowerment of people, so that individuals and groups have the right to be heard and responded to. Many practitioners agreed with this important component of adaptive capacity and valued how their organizations strove to listen to and be responsive to the various needs of community members and project participants. One practitioner identified respecting staff and participants as an important component of adaptive capacity: "No matter what happens is to adapt to a community's new or emerging needs in a way that has respect for the staff and activists within communities that are working on the project." (Interview, 25 May 2021)

Another grantee noted the critical role of their organization in responding to the COVID-19 crisis because of its strong existing relationships with communities and local government, and its respect for their newfound priorities:

When the COVID pandemic hit, we teamed up with the local government and were part of the COVID-19 response task force. We were not only responding to the pandemic but programmed as an organization with approval of the government. For us, we demonstrated resilience through our strategic diplomacy and relationships we had built over the years. We managed to rely on them and be each other's support (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Assessing and responding to the capacity needs of key stakeholders and participants form a critical component of adaptation and can foster institutional resilience.

- Adaptive programming includes organizations being flexible regarding the stakeholders and/or institutions they target and how they target them, which can require significant readjustments to organizational approaches or operational processes.

- WROs and CSOs are generally well placed to ensure communities and project participants are recognized and heard (an important component of adaptive capacity), including because of their strong working relationships with communities and key stakeholders.

2.2.4. Innovation and creativity

LITERATURE REVIEW

A key characteristic of adaptive capacity is a system's ability to foster innovation and support new practices in response to social and environmental changes (Smith et al., 2003). This is about not only high-tech and large-scale innovation but also forming spontaneous or autonomous local initiatives in response to changing shocks and trends (Wongtschowski et al., 2009). Innovation is closely linked to knowledge and communication, which help organizations to understand how best to take advantage of the opportunities presented by a changing environment, and to the asset base, which can determine the economic ability of organizations to take risks and find the resources to innovate (Jones et al., 2014). Programmes should be open to experimenting to learn from different possible solutions and/or strategies to achieve them, which requires them to be open to failure (O'Neil, 2016). Yet a review by O'Neil (2016) of gender and development programming notes that conscious and structured experimentation to test and adapt is the principle least applied in gender-related programmes, and in development programmes more broadly. A major driver of innovation and creativity identified in this

synthesis review was the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic posed significant challenges to programming, it also allowed the amplification of certain feminist discourses (Kabeer et al., 2021; Ventura Alfaro, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic created a fundamentally uncertain terrain for VAWG prevention and response, and a need for adaptation, which offered significant learning potential and opportunities for innovation.

Despite the many challenges COVID-19 posed to VAWG prevention programming, the pandemic also fuelled innovation, creativity, and opportunities, including new models of collaboration. For instance, some practitioners emphasized how strengthening remote programming could be useful in the long term if and when other challenges require it, whereby stronger capacities for remote programming support preparedness and risk mitigation. Beyond Borders in Haiti adapted to COVID-19 restrictions by using WhatsApp, social media, text messaging and phone calls to support activists. Activism activities were adapted to remote avenues, including participatory radio and dialogues through smart phones, and megaphones were used for outdoor conversations:

We developed tools to sensitize and educate people on how to work with disabled women and girls under times of crisis and the pandemic. We recorded small skits, ads [advertisements] and graphics. This was new for us. We still maintained in-person activities, but with COVID restrictions, we could not have more than 10 people (interview, 13 May 2021).

Beyond Borders practitioners noted that these innovative approaches will be useful if civil unrest or other crises in Haiti require remote engagement:

Opportunities for learning in terms of how to use our materials in distance way, activate a network from a distance, which will be useful in a next period of time where we cannot get to our communities directly. This led to creative thinking and ideas (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

RRRT staff in Solomon Islands similarly reflected on the benefits of shifting to radio programming:

Beyond Borders staff support during COVID-19.
Credit: Beyond Borders/ Depase Fwontyè yo.

It was a positive shift because it became more generalized, given radio is better access to information for rural communities where they don't have access to many other forms of information and services, it meant we were reaching a wider group beyond just those project provinces. The radio reaches a wider audience and not just one community. Smaller gatherings and groups are good for impact, but it is a huge burden on project staff and a huge cost, hiring a boat to go to each village costs SI$3000 (interview, 12 May 2021).

CDM in Honduras pivoted its programming by providing women with phones and chargers to access the Internet. This allowed young women to take ownership of new technologies as an educational resource, to strengthen their networks, and to exchange crucial knowledge and experiences, such as care and emotional support for survivors of violence.

In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, some practitioners adapted their interventions to have a stronger focus on self-care and well-being. For instance, PHR identified the importance of self-care activities, especially given its work with health professionals:

One thing we saw to be increasingly important was training on self-care and resilience and creating space for service providers and professionals to debrief and decompress. This work is tough on us and on service providers, and that became a lot of the focus of our work (FGD participant, 4 May 2021).

Similarly, WJI in Guatemala prioritized the need to provide staff members with emotional support and budgeted for monthly group therapy sessions with a psychologist to teach individual and collective self-care strategies. WJI had already been instrumental in this regard by recommending that the UN Trust Fund make self-care a required budget line in 2019, especially for small organizations that may not have the ability to provide such support services. The UN Trust Fund included a mandatory budget line for self-care (of $2,000) for all small grant applications from cycle 21 (2017). Likewise, IYWD established a self-care and well-being programme for activists, including training young women on coping mechanisms and encouraging their collective responsibility.

Some projects adapted their efforts to support staff and/or community members to protect themselves against COVID-19 and meet their basic needs. For instance, CDM in Honduras reallocated some project funds to cover basic needs of participants, such as food and medicine, given the increased poverty among women due to loss of livelihoods and the economic crisis generated by COVID-19. SIHA staff in South Sudan received a knowledge pack on how to respond to the pandemic, and a COVID-19 safety policy was developed to help protect them. The project provided participants and staff with access to personal protective equipment, hand-washing facilities, masks, and sanitizer. Beyond Borders in Haiti distributed personal protective equipment kits through local government offices to make mobilization activities safer. A practitioner from Beyond Borders related the challenge of creating expectations from local government of giving material goods, which is different from its traditional programming, but that this was helpfully based on and reinforced existing collaborative relationships:

It was a nice trust-building piece. In part because we had positive relationships prior, and they didn't know us as an organization that came and gave stuff and drove away. We were also aware that if it happened early in the relationship, they would continue to expect us to come with stuff. That's not our style and we don't have budget for that and it's not what we do, and that tone was mitigated because of our relationship (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

The project further adapted to teach girl groups to sew masks and to encourage activists to monitor the safety of girls through door-to-door visits. This was warranted amid school closures and increased levels and threats of violence, including gang-related violence. Activists also shared COVID-19 prevention messages and raised awareness about violence against women and girls with disabilities amid the pandemic. This was important given the identified fear, stigma, and denial about COVID-19 as a foreign disease, which could undermine trust regarding messaging around the pandemic.

Even after schools reopened in South Sudan after being closed because of the pandemic restrictions, it was difficult for SIHA to access students through planned

activities, including male and female youth student clubs. This was because even with permission, families worried about being perceived as breaking COVID-19 restrictions. SIHA staff thus adapted to work with out-of-school young people through a mentorship programme, and incorporated income-generating activities and seed funding with women's groups to sew masks and reusable sanitary pads, through which they could access additional students. The project purchased these sanitary pads to create hygiene kits to support girls attending school during menstruation. SIHA noted the importance of offering livelihood-building activities, given the pandemic's worsening of socioeconomic conditions, in preventing the increased risk of child marriage, especially if families could no longer pay for school fees. This speaks to the importance of tuning adaptive programming to and prioritizing key and emerging risk factors for VAWG.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- The COVID-19 pandemic fuelled innovations that adaptation made possible, including focusing on self-care and the well-being of staff and participants, and helping community members mitigate their risk of catching the virus.

- Digital initiatives necessitated by pandemic restrictions were a common form of innovative adaptation. They can allow grantees to reach a greater number of people, although it is critical to ensure they can be accessed and are effective. Learning how to work remotely more effectively can prepare organizations to work this way again in response to future crises and can thus be an important risk mitigation strategy.

- WROs and CSOs were in a good position to adapt to meet COVID-19-related needs and address key risk factors for VAWG amid the pandemic, given their access to knowledge and information, and their ability and agility to pivot programming. This suggests the vital role of such organizations and the importance of supporting them to work in more innovative ways.

2.2.5. Flexible governance and risk mitigation

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability and tools for organizations to anticipate change and incorporate relevant initiatives into future planning and governance form an important aspect of adaptive capacity (Smith et al., 2003). Decision-making systems benefit from being flexible enough to include new information and knowledge regarding changing environmental, social, and political conditions (Jones et al., 2019). Organizations should be forward-looking in nature, anticipating future weaknesses and vulnerabilities and creating opportunities for appropriate adaptive actions (Jones et al., 2019). Despite the recognition of the importance of addressing GBV in disasters, there is a lack of standardized integration of GBV in disaster risk reduction, including preparedness and contingency planning. An analysis of flexible governance needs to also consider the technical capacity of institutions and the power relations behind decision-making, including whose voice is heard, and whose interests count (Jones et al., 2019).

Some practitioners emphasized that being aware of and planning for environmental threats is useful in mitigating risks and informing adaptation decisions, especially regarding the timing or frequency of intervention delivery. Some practitioners emphasized the importance of prioritizing the safety and access of staff and participants amid environmental challenges. For example, a representative of Beyond Borders in Haiti noted the risk aversion preparations necessary during hurricane season, and the importance of taking this into account when planning for the location and timing of activities:

We prepare for damage because the environment is very precarious. But we can only prepare a bit in that we can expect problems but not exactly which and how much. It's important to have a plan B, and even plan B may not work (interview, 13 May 2021).

Beyond Borders staff noted that they planned two possible dates for activities in case the first was cancelled. Logistics, administrative and finance staff also aimed to seek human and material resources early owing to many resources being centralized in Port-au-Prince, which could be affected by protests and other delays.

Some practitioners noted the importance of keeping staff and participants safe through adaptive programming that monitors and responds to potential risks. For example, IYWD noted the importance of monitoring the challenging context in Zimbabwe, including long power cuts and a shortage of foreign currency and fuel. It adapted to ensure these challenges would not affect the delivery of its project by using alternative energy sources and innovative strategies, including special arrangements with progressive local banks or offshore banking to receive donor funding in a foreign currency. IYWD also ensured the language describing its work (i.e. women's health workshops) was less likely to be misconstrued to mitigate the risk of possible surveillance and/or harassment. The increased visibility of WJI in Guatemala raised concerns about its staff's security and increased the organization's awareness about the need to review its security protocols. WJI adapted by moving to a new office with a security camera and an entrance that requires staff to buzz in to provide greater security.

Some practitioners noted that an important aspect of risk mitigation is adapting projects in response to resistance and backlash. For instance, WJI in Guatemala faced resistance from local leaders and adapted to have more meetings to explain the project and emphasize the importance of their participation. WJI learned that it is important to reach out directly to community leaders and to address any misinformation or negative reactions that may spread in communities. A key factor in addressing reactions to controversial cases was ensuring strong communication between WJI's legal services programme, and community advocates and women's rights education programmes, as community advocates and women's rights education programmes work more directly in communities and are more likely to witness backlash. WJI began scheduling bimonthly meetings between programmes so that staff who work directly in the communities could respond appropriately.

Flexible governance and decision-making in response to the changing needs and priorities of programme participants were identified as forming a critical component of adaptive programming. One practitioner identified the importance of such flexibility in programme design, and writing project proposals in a way that supports such flexibility:

There were a lot of things about adaptive programming we build in as we know things will happen. We know we need to write things in such a way to allow for some flexibility and some listening to the community and going left rather than right because of what they are telling us. Having those regular feedback loops (FGD participant, 25 May 2021).

Several practitioners emphasized the importance of having embedded and respectful relationships with communities, to ensure participatory decision-making and responsive programming:

The style of programming is very much already a responsive model. We have a lot of people in the community that are based in the communities where we work so it helps because they can tell us what is possible, what they are experiencing, even if through a phone call or a chat. They can communicate that right away (FGD participant, 4 May 2021).

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Given the precariousness of VAWG prevention programming, forward-looking risk mitigation is a critical component of adaptive capacity. WROs and CSOs should apply a long-term analysis to identify mechanisms and risks factors that could affect their work and draw up appropriate risk mitigation responses for when emergencies or threats occur.

- Prioritizing the safety of staff and participants and flexible decision-making (from the proposal-writing stage to throughout implementation) are important components of adaptive programming and risk mitigation.

- Flexible decision-making is supported through embedded relationships with community members and key stakeholders and participatory planning.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This synthesis review offers an important contribution to the evidence on the adaptive capacities of organizations working to prevent VAWG by documenting **why** VAWG prevention programmes adapt, from the perspectives and using the PBK of 10 CSOs funded by the UN Trust Fund. Frequent and significant internal and external challenges meant that practitioners had to adjust their programme strategies and activities to stay on track to meet overall objectives. Although front-line feminist organizations and gender-related programmes often use informal reflection and adaptation to adjust their strategies to changes in their external environment, these decisions, and the reasons for them are rarely documented or disseminated (O'Neil, 2016). The PBK highlights how WROs and CSOs require a certain level of agility and resilience to modify their programming in response to unforeseen challenges, risks, and changes, which inevitably arise.

This synthesis review also offers important insights into **how** VAWG prevention programmes adapt. The PBK identified many important factors that allow practitioners to adapt, including risk management and flexible decision-making, opportunities for structured learning with rapid feedback, and embedded relationships between grantees and communities. The PBK highlights the importance of strong MEAL frameworks in enabling an understanding of what elements of the programme need to be adapted and how programmes can be adjusted (e.g. the nature/content of activities, duration of activities, participants to target and order of activities). MEAL should be used by practitioners and donors not only to identify the progress, achievements, or success of programmes, but also to actively track what does not work and why. Indeed, openness to challenges (or failures) should guide MEAL frameworks for VAWG prevention programming. Carefully identifying and responding to challenges can be critical in supporting innovative practices and creativity, as evidenced by the PBK elicited for this synthesis review.

The findings indicate the important role of donors in supporting the adaptive capacities of WROs and CSOs.

Funders can enable and incentivize adaptive programmes through long-term horizons and trusted partnerships, flexible funding arrangements and more creative thinking about results reported (O'Neil, 2016).

There is a lack of documentation of adaptive VAWG prevention programming, especially outside humanitarian settings or other than focusing on adapting evidence-based prevention models. The PBK identified how important adaptive programming is across a variety of settings for VAWG prevention, which can be a precarious domain. The practitioner insights from this selection of projects inform key recommendations to foster adaptive programming to prevent VAWG. The recommendations target practitioners, donors, and researchers in the field of ending VAWG.

3.1. Recommendations for practitioners

1. **Apply a risk mitigation approach to plan for potential disruptions.** CSOs and WROs often face a myriad of unexpected contextual challenges that require the adaptation of their programme design and implementation to ensure its success and relevance. Practitioners should account for and plan for such risks from the design phase to implementation and MEAL. Anticipating and mitigating risks is an important component of resilience and in supporting adaptive programming and includes establishing and following security and safety protocols for staff and participants, and being flexible regarding the timing or frequency of intervention delivery. Lessons learned regarding environmental challenges stress the importance of taking a holistic approach to risk analysis, including assessing environmental risks and hazards and implementing safeguards. Projects in regions with relatively frequent natural or environmental disasters should plan and make assumptions around weather

trends (i.e. consider how programme-planning and timing may look different in rainy seasons).

2. **Assess and respond to the ongoing capacity needs of staff and stakeholders and barriers to engagement for participants.** An important component underlying adaptive programming is regularly assessing the diverse capacity needs of staff and key stakeholders, such as through pre- and post-implementation feedback forms and observations. Such insights can help in tailoring responses and ensuring no one is left behind. Adaptation may involve making changes to meet capacity gaps, for example by identifying conditions for optimal learning and addressing barriers to participants' engagement. For instance, adaptation may result in smaller group sizes, more regular training sessions, an accreditation system, providing transport costs or a childcare service, or a shift in target group. For practitioners that are partnering with others, it is important to conduct a careful partner capacity assessment before co-implementation.

3. **Ensure regular feedback loops and ensure knowledge turns into action.** Adaptive capacities require regular review and analysis of collected data to contextually inform and actually adjust programming. Data should ideally be collected with multiple key stakeholders from within and outside organizations – that is, through advisory committees, which should meet regularly during the inception period and throughout implementation.

4. **Foster creativity, testing and innovation, which involve a degree of risk but also bring rewards.** Innovating in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic helped strengthen projects, including their ability to work remotely. This was done through assessing and adapting to the capacities of participants to use and access technology, and striving to create opportunities for engagement (i.e. WhatsApp groups or videos for facilitators to use in person). These lessons, in turn, will help prepare projects to effectively work remotely in the future if and when external factors (e.g. political insecurities) require it.

5. **Ensure flexibility and openness to changing project priorities.** This may include a shift in the type of VAWG a project focuses on, or additional priorities to focus on (e.g. strengthening self-care and well-being or adapting to meet participants' basic needs in the context of COVID-19). Such flexibility can be an important trust-building exercise with project communities and participants and can help address key drivers of VAWG.

6. **Strengthen institutional capacities for adaptation.** Adaptation is a skill in and of itself and requires internal and external support and dedicated leadership. An adaptive management approach requires flexible budgets, decision-making, workplans and MEAL systems.

Christin, a SIHA Project Officer, discusses the project plan with students in Wau. Credit: SIHA

3.2. Recommendations for donors

1. Flexible funding is warranted to support adaptive programming. This includes funding a sufficient inception phase, and openness to programme design and budgets changing after the inception phase, and in response to feedback from participants or key stakeholders and changing circumstances. Donors should support core funding of WROs and CSOs, which is crucial to allow them to adapt their programming, and, if warranted, non-cost extensions.

2. WROs and CSOs are well placed to apply adaptive programming to prevent VAWG and respond to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and donors should continue to prioritize funding these actors. WROs and CSOS often have strong relationships and regular feedback loops with communities, service providers and/or government, which gives them credible insights and opportunities to apply adaptive programming.

3. Adaptive programming requires a relationship of trust between donors and grantees. Donors need to strike a balance between maintaining the accountability of grantees and cost effectiveness while also supporting the adaptive capacities of grantees and respecting their autonomy. This balance can be more easily achieved through regular dialogues with grantees to understand their fluid implementation contexts and how they can best navigate internal and external challenges and changes.

4. Donors should encourage and fund significant and appropriate inception periods as a platform for adaptive programming. This is warranted, as the adaptive capacities and resilience of organizations is strongly linked to knowing and tailoring a programme to their contexts, assessing the capacity needs of staff and stakeholders, and planning for potential contextual risks or challenges.

5. Donors should allow time and safe spaces for grantees to share adaptation needs. Such opportunities should be offered when designing projects, at inception, throughout implementation and at the evaluation stage. This should include guidance for grantees on how to handle, track and report risks. Donors should foster avenues to share lessons learned in the processes of piloting and testing innovative or adaptive solutions, which could allow the documentation of solutions in response to wd to better outcomes for programmes.

3.3. Recommendations for researchers in the field of ending VAWG

- **More research is needed to understand why VAWG prevention programmes must adapt.** The majority of evidence is on adapting evidence-based VAWG prevention models from one setting or population to another, rather than adaptive programming throughout implementation. This is an area that PBK could contribute to significantly.

- **More research is needed to assess the characteristics and factors underlying the adaptive capacities and resilience of VAWG prevention actors.** There is a need to focus particularly on how to foster the adaptive capacities and resilience of WROs and CSOs to prevent VAWG.

- **More research on processes of adaptive programming in different geographies and in different sociocultural contexts is warranted.** The nature of adaptive programming varies from one context to another and documenting the specificities of how VAWG prevention programmes adapt is important, including factors that enable or constrain WROs' and CSOs' capacities for adaptive programming.

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