

FOSTERING SURVIVOR-CENTERED RESPONSE SERVICES

Oxfam’s **CREATING SPACES To Take Action on Violence Against Women and Girls¹** (CS) project (2016-2021) aims to reduce violence against women and girls (VAWG), including the prevalence of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Following the socio-ecological model on violence prevention,² the Creating Spaces project applied a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder approach, at the individual, household, community, and societal/institutional levels, to prevent and respond to VAWG and CEFM. The project is implemented by local partner organizations, with support from Oxfam country offices and Oxfam Canada.

In the project districts, women and girls experiencing violence were often unaware of their most fundamental human right to live free of violence, as enshrined in international and national laws.³ Access to survivor-centered⁴ response services (e.g. psycho-social, legal, shelter, livelihoods, health) especially in underserved areas was very limited, inadequately resourced to meet immediate needs, and stigmatized by communities.⁵ **Based on project successes and challenges, this document shares lessons learned from Creating Spaces’ strategies to improve the access, use, and quality of response services for survivors, and to build community support against gender-based violence (GBV).**



Credit: Tom Pietrasik / Bangladesh

- 1 The Creating Spaces project was designed in 2016 to primarily address violence against cis gender women and girls. Oxfam Canada acknowledges that gender-based violence also has a disproportionate impact on trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people; the institution is working to expand programming to be inclusive to gender non-conforming people.
- 2 The socio-ecological model on violence prevention is a best practice theory of change utilized by practitioners to consider four interrelated levels of intervention that are instrumental in combating gender-based violence – individual, relationship, community, and societal. For more information (pg. 13): https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/ending-violence-against-women-oxfam-guide-nov2012_2.pdf
- 3 <https://42kgab3z3i7s3rm1xf48rq44-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Creating-Spaces-Common-Elements-of-Violence-Against-Women-and-Girls.pdf>
- 4 A Survivor-centered approach seeks to empower the survivor by prioritizing their rights, needs, and priorities; treating them with dignity and respect; and ensuring they have access to relevant, inclusive, accessible, and quality services. <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/652-survivor-centred-approach.html>
- 5 Creating Spaces Baseline Study Summary Report. October 2018.

Creating Spaces Approaches: VAWG Response



Empowered women, girls, and survivors through rights-based education, leadership building, and information on response services



Developed comprehensive service provider directories



Trained service providers, law enforcement, traditional leaders on survivor-centered and gender-responsive practices⁶



Educated government bodies and advocated for stronger VAWG response policies



Established Women Support Centres with comprehensive survivor-centered services (counselling, legal, medical, shelter, livelihoods), housed within district police headquarters



Provided referral services (legal, psycho-social, and health) for survivors in underserved areas



Increased community awareness on women's and girls' rights



Delivered livelihoods training and resources⁷

1. RIGHTS-BASED INFORMATION EMPOWERS

First and foremost, it is paramount to educate communities about women's and girls' rights, and on harmful social and cultural norms that are perpetuating gender-based inequalities and violence. Through 1766 workshops across the CS countries, women and girls learned about their intrinsic and legal rights, what constitutes violence and the harmful impacts on their wellbeing. This knowledge equipped them to recognize different forms of VAWG, advocate for themselves, and gave survivors the courage to change their circumstances. Educating men, boys, elders, and community leaders was equally important to shift perspectives on the acceptability of VAWG, and to create an enabling environment where survivors could safely leave abusive situations, and seek services and supports.

In many project districts, most community actors lacked awareness of the breadth of services available to survivors of violence. Information on response services must be accessible at the local level, so that survivors are empowered to seek recourse, and civil society and women's rights organizations (CSOs, WROs) and service providers are prepared to provide referrals. With greater awareness, women and girls were more likely to report instances of violence and access services.

In the **PHILIPPINES**, the National Police's Women and Children Protection Desks in partnership with CS

partners provided mobile educational sessions to communities on women's and girls' rights, GBV, and local services for survivors. The **BANGLADESH** team provided rights-based education to 63 journalists to amplify media reporting on GBV. In **PAKISTAN**, the CS team conducted a community mapping of all available support services for survivors, and used this information to develop region-specific service provider directories; these were shared CSOs/WROs, alliances, government representatives and service providers.

2. EXPANDING ACCESS TO SERVICES MATTERS

In remote and rural areas, there is often limited service provision for survivors, and most women and girls have restricted mobility and resources to travel outside their community for support. In these circumstances, innovative mechanisms can be employed to provide localized services. In **BANGLADESH**, the CS team facilitated linkages between survivors and health and legal services to expand access to survivor-centered support, thereby increasing the number of domestic violence incidents reported. In **INDIA**, CS established two Women's Support Centers offering comprehensive response services in underserved areas; over the project cycle, 1082 survivors received critical information on options, counselling, referrals, medical services, livelihood supports, and a linkage to law enforcement should they wish to take legal action. In some cases, existing response services are severely under-resourced to provide adequate

⁶ Gender-responsive practices ensure that service providers are trained in gender-equitable and inclusive care, and grounded in an understanding of women's and girls' rights in order to adequately respond to the needs and priorities of women and girls, and particularly survivors of VAWG and CEFM.

⁷ Survivors are only able to consider leaving abusive situations if they have the financial means to support themselves and their dependents. See Learning Brief #5 (released in December 2021) on Creating Spaces' key lessons learned on livelihood supports for survivors.

care to survivors. For instance, CS **PAKISTAN** provided 100 hygiene kits, and 30 bunkbeds, and bedding to a shelter home in need, particularly after it endured a scabies outbreak.

3. SUPPORT SURVIVOR-CENTERED SERVICE PROVISION

Social and cultural norms that normalize violence have profound influence on how service providers and law enforcement engage with women and girls experiencing violence. Insensitive and stigmatizing treatment compounds the trauma survivors are already experiencing and may act as a disincentive to seek help. In some cases, service providers may be well intentioned yet lack the training and/or resources to effectively respond to VAWG cases. CS partners played an instrumental role in strengthening service provider capacity to deliver survivor-centered and gender-responsive care, and expanding their knowledge of women’s rights and legal frameworks that outlaw VAWG. In **PAKISTAN**, the CS team trained 181 service providers in women’s shelter homes in Sindh and Punjab on VAWG case handling and worked with them to develop a holistic range of survivor-centered services including life skills, mental wellbeing, adult literacy, and arts therapy. In **BANGLADESH**, CS partners trained 50 lawyers on best practices when handling VAWG cases. Additionally, 160 judges received training on gender equality and existing legislation on VAWG and CEFM, which ultimately contributed to the Judicial Administration Training Institute’s adoption of a gender equality module within its foundational training course.

4. ADAPT RESPONSE SERVICES TO SURVIVOR NEEDS

Oxfam and partners developed various social accountability tools to enable direct feedback from clients on the quality and relevance of response services. These tools helped service providers learn more about client needs and priorities, and to develop more survivor-centered services; they also provide valuable data to government bodies to inform policy developments on VAWG response. The **BANGLADESH** team piloted an Interactive Voice Response tool to collect real-time feedback using mobile technology, **PHILIPPINES** partners used a Community Score Card, while **INDIA** partners implemented a real time feedback MIS system.

5. PEER-TO-PEER SPACES PROVIDE SURVIVORS WITH INVALUABLE INFORMAL SUPPORTS

Establishing local, peer-to-peer women’s groups was one of the most promising CS approaches to empower women and girls. Through these safe spaces, women and survivors learned about their rights to live free from violence, they shared their stories, gained the confidence to seek change, formed networks of support, and received referrals for response services. These peer groups served as informal accountability mechanisms, stopping countless cases of VAWG and CEFM, and providing psychosocial supports to survivors, particularly in underserved areas. In **NEPAL**, project partners formed 180 Community Discussion Centres (CDCs) by and for women. The peer-to-peer model empowered women through education, life skills, access to resources, and emotional supports. In many locations, CDC women were motivated to start door-to-door campaigns to change community attitudes, behaviours, and norms that discriminate women and girls.

“ I was beaten by my husband last year when I performed Deuda⁸ on Women’s Day with other women from the village. I was not a member of CDC at that time. After my participation in CDC, I understood various aspects of women’s rights and laws against violence. I discussed these with my husband and other family members and insisted that I would take legal action if they continued any kind of violence on me. My husband now supports me with household chores and participates in social events like Deuda.”

—CDC participant, Nepal



Focus group with women leaders and the Women and Children’s Protection Desk of the Philippines National Police. Led by CS partner, UnYPhil-Women. Feb 2020. Credit: Jaire Tuburan/Oxfam Pilipinas.

8 Deuda is a popular group dance in Western Nepal

6. EDUCATE POLICYMAKERS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR COMMITMENT

In many contexts, even when laws exist to protect women and girls from violence, the systems in place to enforce them are substandard, particularly in rural and remote areas. Duty bearers require a shift in their own awareness, values, and attitudes to prioritize issues of gender-based violence and to resource services for survivors.

CS partners had an influential role in educating policymakers on harmful social norms and the associated socio-economic costs; on the prevalence of VAWG and the state of response services; and on the various legal frameworks and policies that promote women's and girls' rights and outlaw VAWG. By providing knowledge and technical capacity in over 250 workshops/meetings, these CSOs/WROs were better positioned to push government agencies to follow through on their commitments. **CS PAKISTAN** advocated to the Punjab Women Protection Authority (PWPA) to increase funding for shelter services. They facilitated the PWPA's visit to the Panah Gah shelter in Karachi, to provide an example of a well-operated facility. This encouraged PWPA to develop models for self-sustained Punjab-based shelter homes through private-public partnerships.

7. STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY-BASED ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR SURVIVORS

In many project districts, there are village courts in place to resolve conflicts within and between households. CS partners trained the community leaders and elders that lead these arbitration processes to educate them on VAWG, its implications, and how they can support the implementation of existing laws that protect women and girls. Survivors should feel empowered to seek an end to their abuse using local mechanisms.

9 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

Community Leaders play an essential role in responding to VAWG: Case study from India

Mr. Mubarik is the village head of Bhojaheri village, Purkaji Block, in Uttar Pradesh. After four years of participation in the CS project, he was instrumental in promoting women's and girls' rights, and women experiencing violence would reach out to him for support. For instance, Azra and her husband, Chand, approached Mr. Mubarik for help, because Azra's in-laws had been abusing her for years and demanding more dowry. Mr. Mubarik visited Azra's in-laws' home several times to counsel the family, but the violence did not stop. Mr. Mubarik then called for a meeting of community leaders in the village, whereby a resolution was passed in favour of Azra and Chand. Mr. Mubarik is celebrated as a harbinger of change who is paving a path for survivors seeking justice.

8. KEEP PROGRAMMING ADAPTIVE TO RESPOND TO EMERGENT ISSUES, SUCH AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Survivors' changing needs and priorities must be taken into consideration in VAWG response strategies. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, GBV cases significantly increased, and with response services shut down during lockdowns, survivors often had no where to turn for support.⁹ CS partners pivoted their strategies to provide a lifeline for survivors. For instance, **INDIA's** Women Support Centres gained the trust of local women by continuing to offer critical services, including phone-based counselling, when most other service provision stopped. **CS PAKISTAN** aired a radio campaign to raise awareness about national helplines for survivors, reaching 27.9 million listeners over seven days, in more than 100 cities across Punjab and Sindh. They also reallocated resources to shelter homes to keep survivors safe, with the provision of masks, hygiene kits, and stress management training.

For more information on the Creating Spaces project and other learning briefs, visit: <https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/creating-spaces-impact/>

