

CENTERING WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' LEADERSHIP TO COMBAT VAWG AND CEFM

Oxfam's **CREATING SPACES To Take Action on Violence Against Women and Girls¹** (CS) project (2016-2021) sought 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. The project was implemented by local partner organizations, with support from Oxfam country offices and Oxfam Canada. Following the socio-ecological model on violence prevention² and global best practice³, Creating Spaces applied a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder approach, at the individual, household, community, and societal/institutional levels.

Before the project was implemented, women and girls from the project districts were often unaware of their most fundamental human right to live free of violence, due to deeply entrenched social norms that had perpetuated gender-based discrimination for centuries. Building on Oxfam's work on transformative women's leadership, Creating Spaces empowered women and girls to understand their rights and to strengthen their capacity to claim them. The results were profound, as they gained confidence, became advocates for women's and girls' rights, stopped hundreds of cases of VAWG and CEFM, influenced policy change, and gained leadership positions in their communities.



Creating Spaces Women's group in Dinajpur, Bangladesh. Photo credit: Abir Abdullah/Oxfam

- 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 See R Jewkes et al. (2020). "Effective design and implementation elements in interventions to prevent violence against women and girls: Evidence Brief,"; <https://www.whatworks.co.za/documents/publications/377-effective-design-and-implementation-briefweb25-02-20/file>. See also Kerr-Wilson et al. (2020). A rigorous global evidence review of interventions to prevent violence against women and girls, What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls Global Programme, Pretoria, South Africa: <https://www.whatworks.co.za/documents/publications/374-evidence-reviewweb/file>

This document highlights project learnings on promising practices that ignited women and girls' role in preventing and responding to VAWG and CEFM, and built their representation and influence within decision making processes.

PROMISING PRACTICES IN BUILDING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Challenging normalized societal practices of gender-based violence through awareness creation and knowledge dissemination was a powerful catalyst for positive change starting at the individual level. Through over 3000 workshops, the project educated women and girls on their human and legal rights, being equal to that of men and boys, and on the gender discriminatory social norms that affect every facet of their lives. For instance, Muslim women and girls were empowered through exposure to certain scriptures in Sharia law that promote their rights and protections, such as on marriage, divorce, and dowry payments. This knowledge and awareness led to transformative changes in women and girls, as they developed their sense of self-worth, agency and leadership skills to challenge the gender status quo and advocate against VAWG and CEFM for themselves, family members, and the broader community.

PEER SPACES BUILD COLLECTIVE SUPPORT TO TAKE A STAND

The project supported peer groups for women that became safe spaces, such as **NEPAL's Community Discussion Centres** (CDCs), where women were educated on their rights, and built their agency and leadership skills. The safety of women's peer groups proved highly empowering, enabling women and girls to support each other to take actions to transform their own and others' lives. Safe spaces enabled stigmatized topics to be discussed without fear. They provided space for accessing information on VAWG referral services and informal psychosocial support when formal services were not accessible. Women also used these spaces to access economic opportunities and mentoring to improve their livelihoods. This supported women's confidence to claim their rights and dignity in the public sphere. Women involved in peer groups came to be seen as

change agents and role models in their communities, illustrating what is possible when women can gather, and have space and opportunity to thrive.

LIFE AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS BREED CONFIDENCE TO TAKE ACTION

Creating Spaces offered women and girls various trainings to build their confidence and leadership capacity to advocate for themselves and others. Across the Creating Spaces countries, women and girls advanced their literacy, negotiation, civic participation, campaigning and advocacy skills. When women and girls were equipped with these skills, along with knowledge and peer support, they were empowered to step into their households and public spaces and claim their rights. For instance, in Indonesia, despite having no formal legal training, women were trained to contribute to community-level policy developments during 'town hall' meetings to protect and promote women's and girls' rights.

LIVELIHOODS SUPPORTS BUILD AUTONOMY

Fostering women's economic empowerment equipped survivors to build their financial independence, and equalize power within the household to protect themselves from harm. In **NEPAL**, 101 women were given Start and Improve Your Business training and seed money for business development and a further 256 CDC members launched their own businesses, changing the living situations of many women. In **INDIA**, 75% of the 307 women who received livelihood supports had started their own businesses by the fifth year of the project. Learn more about Creating Spaces livelihood supports [here](#).

ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITIES CAN CATAPULT WOMEN AND GIRLS INTO LEADERSHIP ROLES

Beyond capacity strengthening opportunities, Oxfam and partners facilitated women and girls’ access to decision makers including community, religious, and government leaders, in order to amplify their advocacy efforts, gain practical leadership experience, build influential relationships, and participate in decision making processes that affect their lives. For example, in **BANGLADESH**, such connections helped women to speak directly with decision makers about the need for quality public services for women. Overall, through involvement in over 300 decision making spaces and meetings, 1312 women and girls across the Creating Spaces countries built their credibility and visibility within their communities as change agents, giving rise to new and unprecedented leadership opportunities for women within governance bodies.

AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS PRIORITIZES TRADITIONALLY EXCLUDED WOMEN AND GIRLS

An intersectional lens served to fine-tune interventions, ensuring they were targeted to reach the most disenfranchised women and girls. Across different contexts, this included women and girls from religious and ethnic minorities, rural areas, and marginalized castes. For instance, in **INDIA** the project targeted tribal women who had been silenced through the traditional caste system. For the first time, these women gained opportunities to engage with local and state authorities and address the inequalities they face.

A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH CULTIVATES AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP

The project interventions extended beyond women and girls, and engaged multiple actors to foster community support for women’s and girls’ growing agency and leadership, and mitigate against any potential backlash. These included but were not limited to:

- **Training project partners** consisting of both Women’s Rights Organizations (WROs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to respond to VAWG and CEFM more effectively, and develop gender-equitable institutional policies.
- **Forming alliances** with WROs, CSOs, and youth groups had a significant positive effect towards sustainable, long-term advances in women’s rights and gender justice. This power in numbers provided women and girls with greater protection and influence as they raised their voices against gender inequality and discrimination. In **PAKISTAN**, Creating Spaces supported the establishment of the ‘Women’s Alliance Pakistan’, bringing together women’s leadership groups to advocate against VAWG and empower women in rural areas to ensure that their voices are heard by state institutions.
- **Engaging influencers** (e.g. community and religious leaders, law enforcement, lawyers, journalists, legislators, and other government officials) to educate on harmful social norms and women’s and girls’ legal rights; lobby for structural, policy and legislative changes; and improve access to quality support services for survivors. Gaining influencers’ support was a critical step in swaying public opinion and shifting harmful gendered practices at the community level. For instance, CDC members in **NEPAL** would rally the support of municipal officials to stop imminent child marriages.
- **Providing rights-based education to community members** of all genders and ages prompted gradual shifts in traditionally gendered attitudes and behaviours, and thereby cultivated a safer environment to nurture women’s leadership.

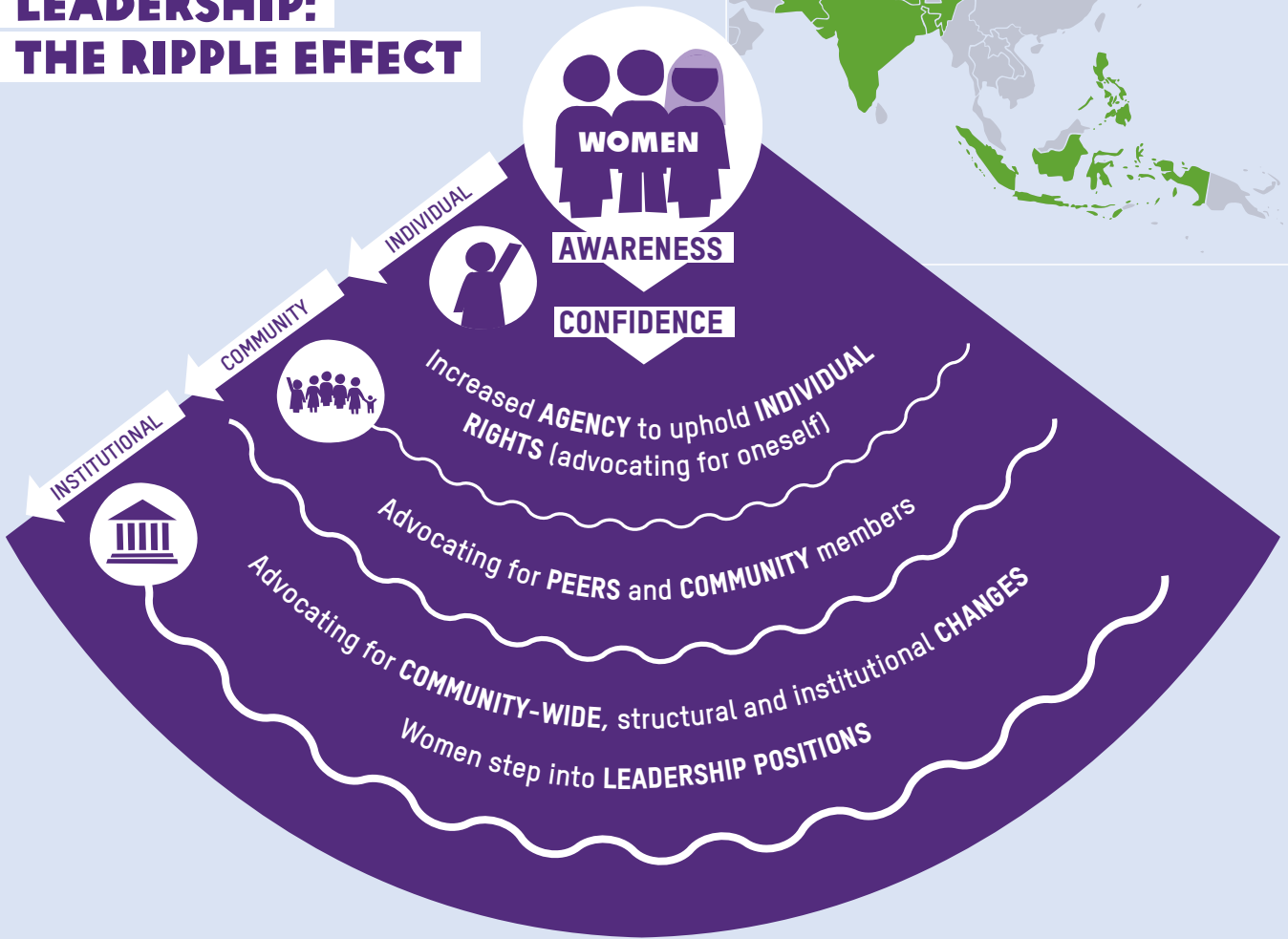
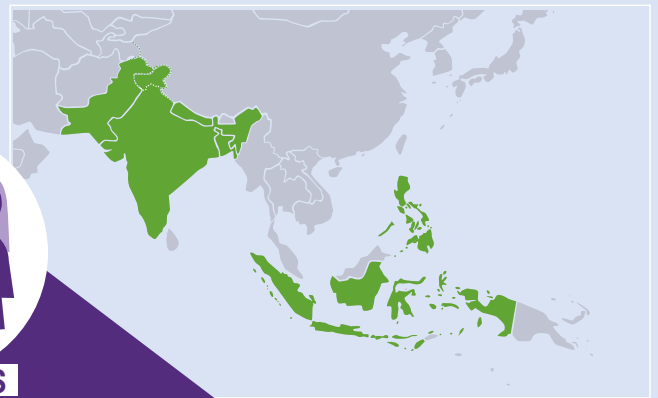


Shameen Raza/Oxfam Pakistan

IMPACT

These mutually reinforcing programmatic approaches had a profound ripple effect of change from the individual to institutional levels, with women and girls at the forefront.

CENTERING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP: THE RIPPLE EFFECT



INDIVIDUAL:

The project documented numerous examples of women and girls who had gained the confidence to stand up against various forms of violence and discrimination they faced. For instance, a young woman from Faridpur district, **BANGLADESH** who was being forced to get married sought support from the

Creating Spaces youth group and local authorities, and successfully stopped her own marriage. As well, the majority of women who received livelihood supports were able to renegotiate their role within the household to pursue small businesses, which enabled them to build their personal agency and financial independence⁴.

⁴ Beyond shifting gender roles to allow women to work, it is equally important to renegotiate decision making power and the redistribution of care duties within the household to foster women's economic empowerment. Learn more [here](#).



Woman from the Community Discussion Centre in Dailekh, Nepal. Photo credit: Oxfam Nepal

HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY:

Women and girls often went beyond themselves to advocate and support other female household members (e.g. sisters, daughters) and village women facing gender-based discrimination and violence. They played a crucial role in identifying VAWG cases, facilitating referral pathways in underserved areas, and through direct interventions with families. These women served as an informal accountability mechanism to enforce laws protecting women and girls, promoting their rights, and dissuading VAWG and CEFM. For instance, CDC women in **NEPAL** worked together to stop 300 child marriages over the course of the project. In **BANGLADESH**, Farida Yasmin, a Creating Spaces influencer and local sub-district leader, received the distinguished Faraaz Hossain Courage Award 2019 for her leadership in stopping 59 child marriages in her region.

SOCIETAL AND INSTITUTIONAL:

Across the six countries, women and girls trained through the project gained the confidence to **participate in community decision-making processes where their voices were previously silent**. They lobbied local to national governments, with support from CSOs and WROs, on stronger policies to protect women and children and promote their rights and entitlements. This shifted their status in their communities and gave them access to traditionally male dominated spaces and roles. In **INDIA**, women leaders from Chhattisgarh successfully advocated for devoted space in the local office to create a women's resource centre. In the **PHILIPPINES**, women and youth leaders forged an agreement with local service providers to strengthen support services for women and girls, especially survivors of violence, leading to many positive developments, such as the advancement of the VAWG desk in the municipality of Guindulungan.

Women and girls were recognized for their courage and leadership, by **earning positions in local and provincial governments, and village communities**. There are important examples of women joining

formal committees, such as the police force’s special VAWG committee in Uttar Pradesh, **INDIA**, and the village and provincial development planning teams in South Sulawesi, **INDONESIA**. In **NEPAL** alone, the team devoted considerable effort to building women’s leadership capacity at the grassroots level. This resulted in more than 2 000 women from the CDCs securing positions in local level decision-making structures such as school management committees, parent-teacher associations, women’s cooperatives, construction committees, water-user groups, and forest committees.

“ I started my journey with Creating Spaces at a very tough phase of my life after my father died. With the group’s constant support, I completed my education, and became a primary school teacher. Now I am a member of the School Management Committee.”

— Woman from Tangail district, Bangladesh

CASE STUDIES



Niranjana stands up for exploited female workers

Twenty-six-year-old Niranjana, a Dalit⁵ woman, lives with her husband and children in Noornagar village in Uttar Pradesh, **INDIA**, in an area marked by religious communalism and caste discrimination. She was one of the first women to join a Creating Spaces women’s group, led by local partner Astitva, and urged other women to join as well. Niranjana was unhappy that women farm laborers were paid half of what men were for work of equal value. Niranjana reflected that *“I always used to be disturbed about this discrimination and could not understand why women work more than men but earn less.”* Participating in the women’s group motivated her to take action and advocate for higher wages. Niranjana raised awareness about women’s economic rights and proposed that female labourers collectively demand an increase in their daily wage rate. Hesitantly, all the women demanded the wage increase, but were instantly turned down. In response, all women laborers in the village stopped going to work and after a 15 day boycott, the employer agreed to their terms and increased their wages, although not yet equal to men. Niranjana happily recalls the day their demand was met as a day of rejoicing. She believes that full equal wages to men *“will be a reality soon in Noornagar.”*



Zohratul advocates for policy reforms in Indonesia

In 2018, Zohratul Maklumat attended her first Creating Spaces workshop on women’s and children’s rights hosted by project partner, SANTA. Since then, she regularly attended these workshops in her village, and felt empowered to engage in decisions that affect her life. Zohratul invited other girls in her village to work with her to convince their village community to reject the practice of child marriage. In 2020, Zohratul had four village development planning proposals approved by officials to:

- 1 Offer activities aimed at increasing the capacity and participation of women in the village development process;
- 2 Establish forums and programs for women’s empowerment activities;
- 3 Invest in women’s leadership trainings; and
- 4 Build or provide a physical venue where women’s and children can convene.

5 Dalit people are part of the lowest caste group in India, previously termed ‘untouchables’. They experience widespread exclusion from society based on their caste status.



Women-led Community Discussion Center activities. Nepal. Photo credit: Aarati Sharma/Oxfam

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

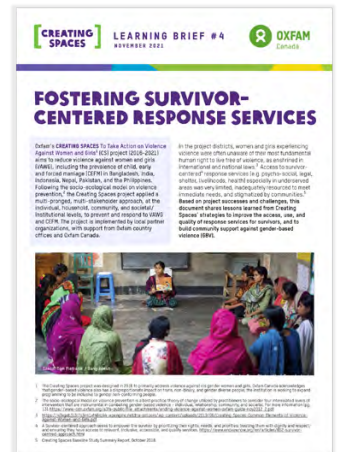
Learning Brief #1:
INFLUENCING THE INFLUENCERS

Learning Brief #2:
YOUTH MOBILIZING CHANGE TO PREVENT VAWG AND CEFM

Learning Brief #3:
CAMPAIGNING AND ADVOCACY: CASE STUDIES FROM THE PHILIPPINES AND INDONESIA

Learning Brief #4:
FOSTERING SURVIVOR-CENTERED RESPONSE SERVICES

Learning Brief #5:
WHAT WORKS TO ADVANCE WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT (WEE)



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