ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
LESSONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED BY THE UNITED NATIONS TRUST FUND TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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

Background

The uncertain and context-specific nature of social change means that programmes to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG) must work in adaptive ways. Different communities have specific needs in relation to preventing VAWG, and adaptive programming helps ensure a flexible approach. Women's rights organizations (WROs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) regularly face changing environments and sociopolitical challenges, and work with funders and partners who operate distinct bureaucracies. They often work with marginalized communities, who can be particularly threatened by natural disasters, disease, conflict and economic shocks. Yet there is a lack of documentation on how VAWG prevention programming is adapted in practice, especially outside humanitarian settings; the focus is often on the adaptation of evidence-based prevention models. More attention to the factors that build the adaptive capacities of organizations, especially WROs and CSOs, implementing VAWG prevention programming is warranted.

About this brief

This brief is a summary of a longer synthesis review on the **practice-based knowledge (PBK) of VAWG prevention projects gained by nine civil society organizations**. These organizations were funded by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund), and had to adapt their projects to internal change (i.e. in staff capacity and the engagement of participants) and external crises (e.g. climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic). The brief is based on a thematic analysis of practitioners' evaluations and project reports, complemented by their experiences as reported in focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews. It focuses on **why** and **how** VAWG prevention programmes adapt to changing contexts and circumstances, and in doing so contributes to filling the gap in the evidence. The brief offers recommendations for practitioners, donors and researchers to foster the adaptive capacities of CSOs and WROs working to prevent VAWG.
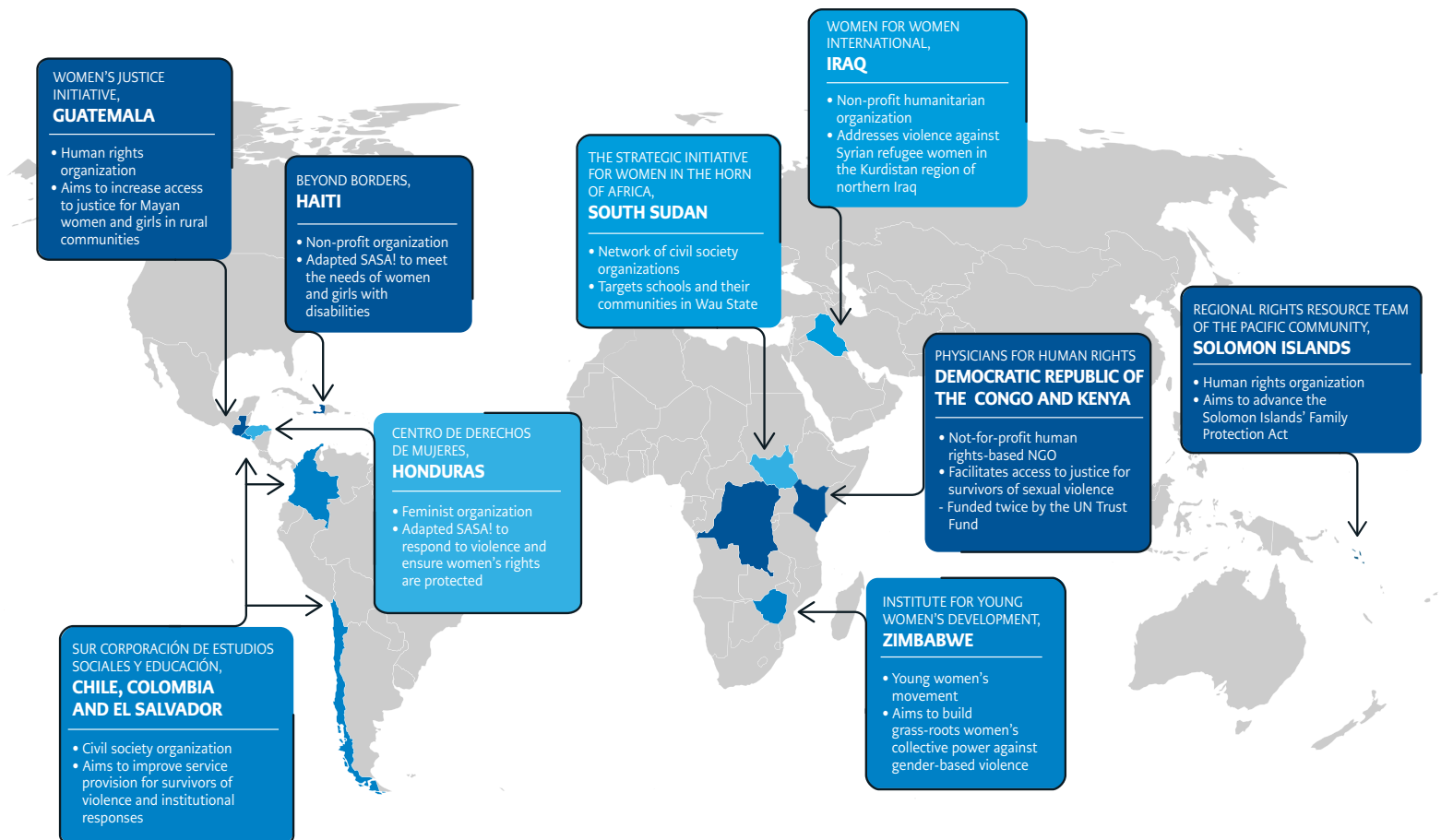
Case studies

At the heart of this brief are practitioner insights from 9 CSOs and WROs working to prevent VAWG that significantly adapted their projects due to changing circumstances and new information. The 9 CSOs 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 CSOs represent a diversity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including local, regional and international organizations. **The projects incorporated a range of strategies to prevent and respond to VAWG.** For instance, 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 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 needs and vulnerabilities to violence. **Many projects included in this brief collaborated with various stakeholders, including police or state actors.** For instance, the Regional Rights Resource Team of the Pacific Community (RRRT) in Solomon Islands sought to advance the implementation of family protection laws, and to provide opportunities for community facilitators and associate justices to promote the rights of survivors of violence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Understanding adaptive programming: a conceptual framework for practitioners' experiences

The Local Adaptive Capacity (LAC) framework developed by the Overseas Development Institute was used to help unpack **how** projects adapted, including factors that supported this (Jones et al., 2010). The framework identifies **five characteristics** of adaptive capacity at local level common to most contexts.

- **Knowledge and information:** ability to generate, assess and disseminate knowledge and information in support of appropriate programmatic and financial adaptation options;

- **Asset base:** ability to access and control key assets – including tangible capital (natural, physical and financial) and intangible capital (human and social) – to respond to changing circumstances;

- **Institutions and entitlements:** the capacity of institutions involved in a project to be flexible, the degree to which institutions empower people, and the extent to which individuals, groups and communities have the right to be heard and responded to by institutions;

- **Innovation and creativity:** ability to create an enabling environment to foster innovation and support new practices in response to social and environmental changes;

- **Flexible governance and risk mitigation:** ability and tools to anticipate change and incorporate relevant initiatives into future planning and governance.
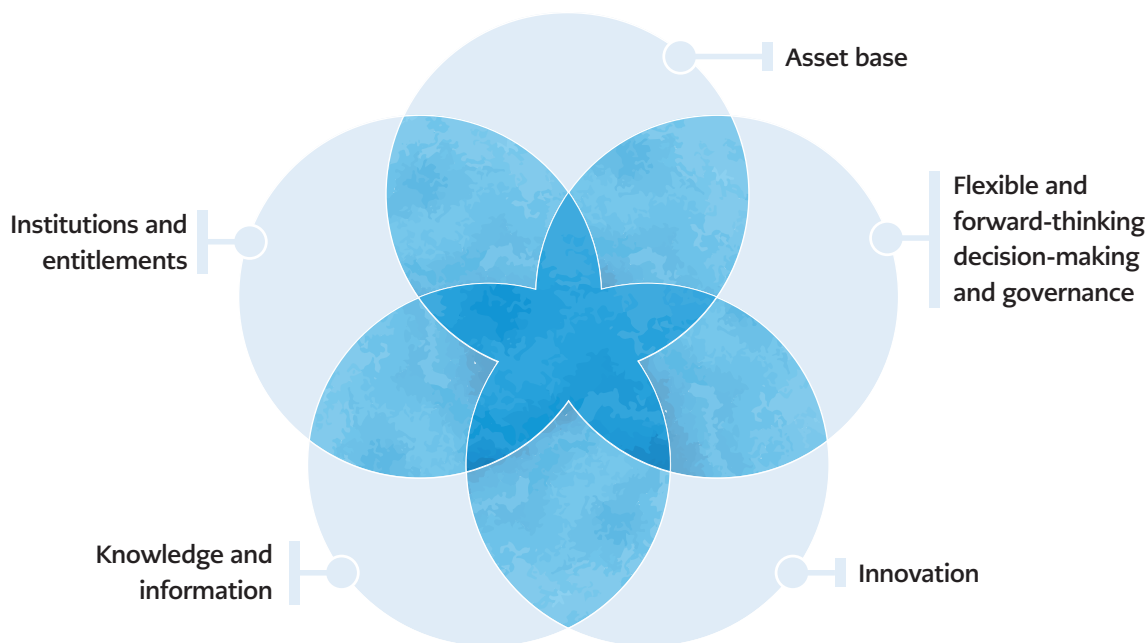
1. Why VAWG prevention programmes adapt

External factors

UN Trust Fund grantees highlighted many reasons for adapting their projects, including environmental threats and events (e.g. floods, hurricanes, earthquakes and tornadoes), which can delay projects or require shifts in the timing, duration or location of project activities but are often not considered. A representative of Women's Justice Initiative 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 (FGD participant, 4 May 2021).*

Many practitioners emphasized the political instability of their contexts, including military wars, gang conflicts, state

violence and political uprisings. For instance, in Haiti, heavy rains and civil unrest prohibited community members from attending project activities. Beyond Borders staff used technology to communicate with its networks and maintain relationships, and activities were rescheduled to ensure the safety of staff and participants travelling to participate.

The COVID-19 pandemic

A major challenge identified by practitioners as requiring adaptation was the COVID-19 pandemic. A common and often major adaptation was pivoting from in-person to virtual formats, because of COVID-19-related restrictions on gathering and social distancing requirements. Many practitioners noted the challenges involved in conducting projects remotely, including participants or practitioners not being comfortable with technology or not having an Internet connection. For instance, practitioners from RRRT in Solomon Islands highlighted the challenge of adapting its project to online programming:

> *"Geography matters. For our region we have this complexity of multiple islands, remote communities you can't access by road … it has been a struggle to communicate with colleagues in Honiara, because you can't get onto [the] Internet or phone … With travel, there would have been a chance to meet once a year, and that disappeared"* (interview, 12 May 2021)

In a field that often relies on intense face-to-face interaction between front-line workers and communities, the pandemic sometimes disrupted the very foundations of programming. For instance, practitioners working through schools were unable to reach young people because of school closures, and project implementation was often significantly delayed. **Some practitioners reported that the pandemic fuelled the adaptation of the type of support they offered to participants to reduce the impact of COVID-19.** For instance, in the aftermath of food shortages and economic shocks, some practitioners pivoted to provide hygiene kits, basic food supplies or livelihood activities.

Internal factors

Internal factors driving adaptation include the capacity needs of organizational partners, staff and key stakeholders. Some practitioners found that their projects had to be adapted to mitigate resistance or backlash in response to their interventions. Working with many and varied stakeholders commonly prompted adaptation, to meet their various needs. Other practitioners had to adapt their projects because they did not reach participants as intended, because of barriers to engagement or challenges in sustaining involvement over time.

The PBK indicates that organizations face numerous challenges in their VAWG prevention work at multiple levels. These experiences show why continuous adaptation is necessary. They also highlight that major challenges and crises are commonplace for all WROs and CSOs working to end VAWG, and not only for those operating in humanitarian emergencies or conflict settings. Given the significant challenges faced, it is critical to identify how to foster the adaptive capacities of CSOs and WROs working to prevent VAWG, which is the focus of the next section.

2. How VAWG prevention programmes adapt

Knowledge and information

The PBK reinforces that CSOs and WROs require strong monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (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.

Many practitioners emphasized the importance of collecting data throughout implementation, not just in the design phase, to inform adaptation, including through regular consultation with stakeholders and participants. For instance, the Institute for Young Women's Development in Zimbabwe had an activist steering committee that met monthly to reflect on project progress, analyse opportunities or threats, consolidate learning and adjust its programme strategy as necessary. On a quarterly basis, it reviewed MEAL data to assess the programme's progress against indicators.

Several practitioners noted the importance of strong relationships with communities to support adaptive capacity. WROs and CSOs are well placed to access knowledge and information relating to programme dynamics, including successes, challenges and adaptation needs, as they often have strong presences in communities and close relationships with community members and key stakeholders.

An important component of MEAL to support adaptive programming is tracking who a project works more or less effectively for. For instance, many practitioners identified the importance of monitoring programme impact and accessibility among those in rural/urban areas, and of different educational levels, refugee status, socioeconomic status, age groups and abilities. A practitioner noted:

> *Women and survivors of violence are not one homogeneous 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).*

Asset base

Access to and control over assets was identified as a critical factor in the adaptive capacity of practitioners. This requires flexible funding models to revise project budgets in response to changes in project design or circumstances. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated many budget adaptations, including for personal protective equipment, equipment to ensure staff could work remotely, and materials or campaigns on COVID-19. The UN Trust Fund's response, which included diverting or increasing funds and accommodating changing time frames (e.g. through non-cost extensions) was positively

received. Some practitioners reflected on how 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 with stringent conditions. A grantee from SUR Corporación de Estudios Sociales y Educación in Chile emphasized the importance of open and regular dialogue between grantees and funders:

> *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 staff expertise. Some practitioners related the challenges they experienced in relation to staff turnover, or hiring appropriate and qualified staff, which could require adaptation in terms of planned timings of activities or capacity-building needs of staff.

Institutions and entitlements

Some practitioners relayed that identifying and responding to capacity gaps of staff and key stakeholders formed an important component of institutional resilience and adaptation. Inaccurate assessment of pre-existing capacities could be difficult and costly to address after implementation began. For instance, a practitioner from RRRT in Solomon Islands noted that greater emphasis on assessing the appropriateness

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

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 or providing more regular sessions were common adaptations to build capacity and promote learning.

Assessing the capacity of stakeholders could result in a change in the participants targeted. For instance, during the first year of implementation, Women for Women International in Iraq identified a major gap in government capacity. In response, it shifted from focusing on NGOs' capacity to targeting government hospitals and departments serving survivors of gender-based violence. The participants targeted were also expanded to include more non-Syrians, as many Syrian refugees had returned to Syria from Iraq by mid-way through the project.

Assessing the appropriateness of project activities with key stakeholders could require adaptation. For example, SIHA in South Sudan realized that its plan to conduct awareness sessions outside school hours would result in low attendance. In consultation with the Ministry of Education and the five targeted schools, it pivoted to incorporate its programme curriculum into school work.

To enable adaption, institutions should ensure that people are empowered and have the right to be heard and responded to. Many practitioners considered it important that their organizations strived to listen and respond to the needs of community members and project participants. One practitioner stated:

> *No matter what happens [it is important] 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).*

Innovation and creativity

COVID-19 posed many challenges to VAWG prevention programming, but the pandemic also fuelled innovation, creativity and opportunities. For instance, some practitioners emphasized how strengthening remote programming could be useful in the long term; stronger capacities for remote programming support preparedness and risk mitigation. Centro de Derechos de Mujeres in Honduras pivoted its programming by providing young women with phones and chargers to access the Internet. This allowed them to use new technologies as an educational resource, to strengthen their networks, and to exchange knowledge on vital topics such as emotional support for survivors of violence.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some practitioners adapted their interventions to focus more on self-care and well-being. Some projects adapted their efforts to support staff and community members to protect themselves against COVID-19 and meet their basic needs. WROs and CSOs were well placed to adapt to address key risk factors for VAWG amid the pandemic given their access to information and their ability to pivot. This suggests the vital role of such organizations and the importance of supporting them to work in more innovative ways. For instance, Physicians for Human Rights identified the importance of self-care activities, especially for 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).*

Flexible governance and risk mitigation

Practitioners emphasized that planning for environmental threats is useful in informing adaptation decisions, especially regarding the timing or frequency of intervention delivery. This includes keeping staff and participants safe by monitoring and responding to potential risks. **Others noted that an important aspect of risk mitigation is adapting projects in the face of resistance.** For instance, Women's Justice Initiative in Guatemala encountered resistance from local leaders and adapted to have more meetings to explain the project and emphasize the importance of their participation. The organization learned that it is important to reach out directly to community leaders and to address the misinformation that can spread in communities.

Flexible decision-making that responds to the needs and priorities of programme participants was identified as a critical component of adaptive programming. One practitioner identified the importance of such flexibility in programme design, and writing project proposals that support this:

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).

3. Conclusions and recommendations

This brief offers an important contribution to the evidence base by documenting **why** VAWG prevention programmes adapt. Frequent and significant internal and external challenges meant that practitioners had to adjust their programmes to meet overall objectives. Although front-line feminist organizations and gender-related programmes often use informal reflection to adjust their strategies to changing circumstances, these decisions and the reasons for them are rarely documented (O'Neil, 2016). The PBK highlights that organizations require agility and resilience to respond to unforeseen challenges and risks.

This brief also offers insights into **how** VAWG prevention programmes adapt. The PBK identified many important factors that allowed practitioners to adapt, including risk management and flexible decision-making, opportunities for structured learning with rapid feedback, and strong relationships between grantees and communities. The PBK highlights the importance of strong MEAL frameworks in understanding what elements of the programme need to be adapted and how programmes can be adjusted (e.g. the nature, content, order or duration of activities, and participants to target). MEAL should be used by practitioners and donors not only to identify the progress, achievements or success of programmes but also to track what does not work and why. Carefully identifying and responding to challenges can be critical in supporting innovative practices. The findings also indicate the important role of donors in supporting the adaptive capacities of WROs and CSOs, including through close partnerships and flexible funding.

The PBK from these projects informs recommendations for fostering adaptive programming to prevent VAWG.

Recommendations for practitioners

1. **Apply a risk mitigation approach to plan for potential disruption.** CSOs and WROs often face unexpected challenges that require adaptation. Practitioners should plan for such risks at all stages (e.g. by establishing safety protocols and assessing environmental risks).

2. **Assess and respond to the capacity needs of staff and stakeholders, and barriers to engagement for participants.** Assessing capacity needs is important in tailoring responses and ensuring no one is left behind, for example by identifying the best conditions for learning.

3. **Ensure regular feedback loops and that knowledge turns into action.** Adaptive capacities require regular review and analysis of collected data to inform and adjust programming. Data should be collected from key stakeholders throughout the project's life cycle.

4. **Foster creativity and innovation, which involve some risk but also bring rewards.** Innovating in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic strengthened projects (including their ability to work remotely) by enabling participants to access and use technology, and creating opportunities for engagement and dialogue.

5. **Ensure flexibility and openness to changing priorities.** This may include a shift in the type of VAWG a project focuses on, or a new focus (e.g. on self-care or meeting participants' basic needs in the context of COVID-19). Such flexibility can build trust with project communities and participants, and help address key drivers of VAWG.

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

Recommendations for donors

1. **Flexible funding is needed to support adaptive programming.** This includes openness to budgets being adapted to feedback and circumstances during implementation. Core funding is crucial to enable WROs and CSOs to adapt their programming, as are warranted non-cost extensions.

2. **WROs and CSOs are well placed to prevent VAWG and adapt to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and donors should prioritize these actors.** These organizations often have strong relationships with communities, service providers and/or government.

3. **Adaptive programming requires trust between donors and grantees.** Donors need to maintain the accountability of grantees and ensure cost effectiveness while also supporting grantees' adaptive capacities and

autonomy. This can be achieved through regular dialogue to understand changing contexts and how grantees can best navigate challenges and risks.

4. **Donors should encourage and fund inception periods as a platform for adaptive programming.** The adaptive capacities and resilience of organizations are strongly linked to tailoring a programme to context, assessing capacity needs, and planning for potential risks or challenges in the early stages.

5. **Donors should allow time and create safe spaces for grantees to discuss adaptation needs.** Such opportunities should be offered throughout the project's life cycle. Donors should foster avenues to share lessons learned from piloting adaptive solutions.

Recommendations for researchers in the field of ending VAWG

1. **More research is needed to understand why VAWG prevention programmes must adapt.** PBK could contribute significantly to the evidence base.

2. **More research is needed to assess the factors underlying the adaptive capacities of VAWG prevention actors.** There is a particular need to focus on fostering the adaptive capacities and resilience of WROs and CSOs.

3. **More research on adaptive programming in different geographies and sociocultural contexts is warranted.** The nature of adaptive programming varies, and documenting how different programmes adapt is important.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This brief is authored by Erin Stern, and is part of a series of briefs produced by the UN Trust Fund. For the longer synthesis review on which it is based, and others in the series, see the UN Trust Fund Learning Hub.

Visit the UN Trust Fund evaluation library for access to over 100 final external evaluations of projects supported by the UN Trust Fund, including most of those mentioned in this brief. The library is searchable by country and theme.

For more information or to give feedback on this product, please contact the UN Trust Fund at untf-evaw@unwomen.org.

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

About the UN Trust Fund: 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.

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