The Raising Her Voice programme includes a Pan-African coordination project, with associated work in seven countries: Gambia, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. The project seeks to bring about the ratification and effective implementation of the African Women’s Rights Protocol in each country to end gender inequality and discrimination.

Background

The African Women’s Rights Protocol was developed by African leaders in response to the demands of African women’s movements, and came into force in 2005. The Protocol guarantees comprehensive rights to women – including, but not limited to, the right to take part in political processes, to enjoy social and political equality with men, to control reproductive health and to bring an end to female genital mutilation.

Raising Her Voice supports the Solidarity for African Women’s Rights Coalition (SOAWR) to accelerate ratification, domestication and implementation of the Protocol across the continent. SOAWR is made up of 39 organisations from across Africa, including all Raising Her Voice country partners. This enables the project to share learning between countries, and draw on the experiences of individual countries in support of advocacy work at continental level.

2010 was a successful year, with SOAWR’s advocacy initiatives contributing to both Uganda and Kenya ratifying the Protocol. In 2011, ratification by Equatorial Guinea and Gabon has brought total ratification to 31 countries.

Objectives

- Ratification of the Africa Women’s Rights Protocol, without harmful reservations, in at least three Raising Her Voice countries.
- Domestication of the Protocol in at least five Raising Her Voice countries and increased ring-fenced funding for aims contained in the Protocol by at least four national Governments.
- To improve the capacity of all branches of the state, ensuring that Governments have the necessary skills and mechanisms to implement the Protocol effectively.

“The SOAWR Coalition has provided a special kind of leadership since this Protocol came into force. Armed with creativity, determination, commitment and a lot of hard work, women activists in the SOAWR network have been able to lobby, sometime coerce and to ensure that the Protocol came into force in record time.”

Litha Musyimi-Ogana, Women and Gender Development Director, African Union Commission

Achievements

Increased capacity of women’s organisations

In order to build an effective, continental coalition of women’s organisations, Raising Her Voice has strengthened the capacity of individual partners to engage grassroots women and to carry out national-level advocacy. Women’s organisations are increasingly making use of the Protocol at national level to engage policy-makers, security agencies, and traditional and community leaders. This is discussed in more detail in the individual country case studies.

Increased solidarity across the groups

There is increasing solidarity between the women’s groups implementing the project. For example, SOAWR members supported Sudanese women’s protests by issuing a press release and enabling them to make a submission to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. Equality Now, the SOAWR secretariat and Oxfam’s implementing partner in the Pan-African programme, collects
experiences and learning from coalition members and distributes a SOAWR newsletter in four languages. Resources are also shared on the SOAWR website: http://www.soawr.org/en/

Regional and Pan-African lobbying and advocacy

Raising Her Voice carries out lobbying and advocacy around the annual AU Summit and at high-level ministerial meetings, and has facilitated the participation of grassroots women in key meetings at national, regional and continental levels. For example, SOAWR enabled poor and marginalised African women to attend the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women, to share their experiences of how their status has changed since the Protocol was adopted.

In March 2011, SOAWR, Oxfam and other partners supported women survivors of sexual violence in conflict from Cote d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe to address the AU Peace and Security Council meeting - a powerful way of making decision-makers aware of the impact of sexual violence in conflict on women’s lives.

Significant progress has been made in integrating the Protocol in key policy review processes including the Africa Beijing+15 Review and the Action Plan for the African Women’s Decade 2010-2020.

Working with Governments to accelerate implementation

SOAWR has increased awareness among AU member states on the importance of adopting a multi-sectoral approach to fast-track implementation of the Protocol. The approach unpacks a state’s obligations under the human rights instruments it has ratified and matches these to the institutions or sectors of Government with the greatest comparative advantage to ensure faster and comprehensive implementation.

Equality Now, Oxfam and UN Women worked together to organise two stakeholder meetings for countries that have ratified the Protocol. The meetings served to: introduce the multi-sectoral approach framework to women’s organisations and Government officials; provide space for Governments to share ideas and develop action plans for domestication and implementation of the Protocol; and encourage states and civil society organisations to work together to implement the Protocol in their countries, to ensure that women start to benefit from its provisions.

Developing tools to support implementation of the Protocol

Equality Now has launched a ‘Guide to Using the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa for Legal Action’, a valuable tool for all Raising Her Voice partners, members of the judiciary, paralegals and human rights activists. The guide builds on early successes of using the Protocol to bring cases of women’s human right violations to both domestic and regional courts. For example, the Protocol was recently cited in a judgement against the Zambian Ministry of Education after the rape of a schoolgirl. The Ministry has paid substantial damages and is engaging in a full review of sexual harassment policy and procedures across the education system. See: http://www.soawr.org/resources/Manual_on_Protocol_on_Women_Rights_in_Africa.pdf

Lessons

- Working in a multi-national coalition has enabled SOAWR partners in different countries to speak with a unified voice. Different actors delivering the same message across the continent has increased legitimacy and strengthened advocacy. Solidarity among SOAWR members has been essential in pressurising Governments to ratify the Protocol.
- Raising Her Voice has enabled SOAWR’s model of collective advocacy and partnership at the regional level to be replicated in national-level projects. This has made work at national level more visible and has increased awareness amongst citizens and Government. National coalitions supported by RHV have emerged in Gambia, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda.
- SOAWR has successfully linked advocacy to key moment, for example, the Kenyan and Ugandan Governments hosting important AU meetings, to push for national Governments to ratify the Protocol as a way of demonstrating their commitment to women’s rights. This should be replicated in more countries to put pressure on Governments to ratify and/or implement the Protocol.
- Visits to Government officials in their capitals yields better results than advocacy at AU Summits alone. For instance, national-level advocacy has convinced the Government of the Gambia to pilot the multi-sectoral approach to domesticate and implement the Protocol and other women’s rights commitments.

Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.