STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE PROGRAMMING THROUGH TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Raising Her Voice in Nigeria

Why ending violence against women and girls and gender-based violence became a strong focus for Raising Her Voice[1]

The lead implementing partner of Raising Her Voice (RHV) in Nigeria is the Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA).[2] WRAPA is a national women's rights organisation which, since 1999, has been advocating for the domestication of CEDAW[3] and, more recently, the African Union Women's Protocol (AUP).[4] One of its core activities is providing legal aid expertise and redress for survivors of violence against women (VAW). Since 2001, WRAPA has served as the secretariat for the Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women (LACVAW). In 2003, WRAPA, using the platform of LACVAW, renewed legislative lobbying for a Violence Against Women (VAW) Bill, but the National Assembly rejected the proposed bill and momentum waned.

Five years later, in 2008, the RHV programme began in Nigeria, with WRAPA as the implementer. RHV had the twin aims of promoting the participation of poor and marginalised women in governance and decision-making, and domestication and implementation of the AUP. The focus on the AUP opened up a new opportunity for legislation on women's rights and VAW. At the same time, increasing reports of the kidnapping of women and children, election violence sometimes targeted at women, and increasing domestic violence, rape and gang rape has led to a renewed interest in the VAW Bill, this time addressing the new emerging forms of violence, such as kidnappings, bombings, political violence and wizardry, including cruel disciplinary mechanisms for the accused, the majority of whom are women and children.

With WRAPA's history of managing the LACVAW coalition, the RHV project became the new coordinating platform for the campaign, which calls for legislation to prohibit VAW in private and public spaces and to provide redress for violations and discrimination. Resistance from male legislators led to the re-naming of the bill as the 'Violence Against Persons Prohibition' (VAPP) Bill, though its content remained focused on violence against women. WRAPA then formed an alliance of over 17 civil society organisations, faith and community-based organisations working on women's rights to implement the RHV project. This led to a huge mobilisation of lobbying efforts for the passing of the VAPP Bill, including extensive work to build supportive alliances of grassroots women leaders in poor and marginalised communities.

This case-study identifies the activities, achievements and impact of those aspects of the RHV project which relate to work on VAW.

Alliance building with women activists from poor communities

The project has provided training to 100 grassroots women leaders in nine states in Nigeria to increase understanding on women's rights, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and the AUP, offer skills in negotiation and advocacy for women's inclusion, and build confidence and self-esteem. Using grassroots women activists and

women in parliament as role models, it has overcome many barriers, such as illiteracy, to empower these grassroots leaders. The training has led some participants to be elected as leaders in Community Development Associations, where they have been able to voice their concerns about VAWG. Their skills and confidence in negotiation have improved. For example, a group of Hausa women in Kano drafted plans to curtail VAWG in collaboration with religious and traditional leaders and succeeded in voicing their opinions and initiating a debate on marital rape. Over 500 women and 200 men attended the public hearing on the VAPP Bill, thanks to the mobilisation organised by WRAPA and RHV partners.

At a personal level, women have come to understand violence against them as a violation of their rights and discover, for the first time in many cases, their right to be involved in local politics regardless of their status. They have started to deconstruct the notion of rape being a result of inappropriate dress or location and reject these commonly held justifications. The bar of intolerance to VAWG has been raised. There is a gradual breaking down of the culture of silence on violations as seen in increased reports of VAWG by women at WRAPA's legal aid clinic and RHV partner organisations.

'The RHV project has achieved the following. Women who are being maltreated unduly by their husbands are beginning to get information on where and how to seek redress without necessarily losing their marriages. I think this is a key element in giving voice to the voiceless.'
Executive Director of Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre

Until now, 70% of women experiencing domestic violence would not have spoken out due to the social stigma and lack of legal redress that resulted in impunity for its perpetrators. Now the situation is beginning to change. A review of media reports showed that survivors of VAWG/GBV are more open to reporting and discussing their experiences than before the RHV project began. At a mock tribunal of VAWG cases in 2009, many grassroots survivors of domestic violence testified publicly, with dramatic effects on their confidence and self-esteem, and the willingness of other women to testify.

'The issues I have gone through have made me realise my rights...I now know that this ignorance of a thing is what is killing women. I have decided to help other women and teach them about their rights because this is what is helping me get back on my feet', *a tribunal testimony*

National lobbying and advocacy

The main RHV objective has been to work within a strategic partnership to draft and achieve the adoption of a model law for the domestication of the AUP. This led to the adoption of the Gender and Equal Opportunities (GEO) Bill which merges and articulates the aspirations of the AUP, CEDAW and the National Gender Policy. Achieving this has been fast-tracked by working with the National Coalition on Affirmative Action (NCAA) which is the national platform that drafted the GEO Bill. NCAA is an umbrella body for women's rights, and works for the adoption of quotas (35% seats held by women) and mechanisms for women's inclusion using the principle of affirmative action.

LACVAW demonstration for VAWG legislation

As part of the process of domesticating the AUP, RHV also took over coordination of the LACVAW campaign and its lobbying for the VAPP Bill. The goal of the campaign is that in different states and on different issues of

violence, laws on VAWG will seek to end discrimination against and exclusion of women from governance and decision-making processes. The LACVAW campaign has been wide-ranging and innovative in its attempts to get the bill passed. WRAPA, through expert networking and strategising, influenced government institutions, civil-society organisations (CSOs), media and community networks to mobilise for a public rally at the National Assembly (attended by 3,000 people) during the annual 16 days of activism on VAWG in order to support the speedy passage of the VAPP Bill. This resulted in a commitment to accelerate the legislative processes, and led to a public hearing on a high profile rape case and to commitments to domesticate the AUP provisions which protect women from violence. Other activities have included:

- harnessing the support of religious and cultural institutions (by engaging Catholic priests, imams and traditional councils) for the domestication and implementation of the AUP and to campaign for ending VAWG;
- the publication of a national report on the situation of VAWG/GBV in Nigeria;
- achieving UNFPA and UNIFEM[5] support for the training of media correspondents on VAWG reportage, and law enforcement agents on response to VAWG survivors and victims;
- plans to undertake a survey of VAWG reportage and statistics to generate a catalogue of evidence related to the VAPP Bill;
- building the capacity of policy-makers in state and federal governance structures (creating gender desk officers) to understand and integrate the concerns of poor women in policy formulation and to create mechanisms for increasing their participation in governance.

Overall, the successful creation of spaces for dialogue and deepened partnership with legislators, ministries, government agencies and traditional/religious leaders on VAWG and women's political participation represents an enormous achievement. There has been very active participation of members of various parliamentary committees and legislative staff in the processes around the GBV Bill with a marked increase in awareness of and support for women's rights issues, including amongst male legislators. Under the 7th National Assembly, the bill received overwhelming support during its first reading in parliament and the hope is that it will soon pass into law following four years of negotiation and lobbying.

The project has employed the following key national lobbying tactics to achieve progress with the passage of VAPP Bill:

- The coalition used a 'vote for the VAPP law or we won't vote for you' approach when lobbying prospective parliamentarians on the campaign trail.
- Power mapping of the legislators to identify those for and against the VAPP Bill, and the gender champions, both male and female.
- Identifying and working closely with relevant committee clerks who have key inside knowledge and institutional memory, and can facilitate easy access to legislators.
- Use of live testimonies, pictures and video clips of survivors of VAWG/GBV. Also short documentaries targeted at: a) educating the public; and b) legislators, to inform them of the rationale and urgency of the bill and be shown before its third reading in parliament.
- Consistent lobbying of parliamentarians through one-on-one meetings and strategic use of social media, including text messaging and repeated phone calls to representatives in State Assemblies.
- Engagement (through a paid consultancy) of a former serving legislator and lead sponsor of the GBV Bill during the 6th assembly as the coalition's Legislative Technical Expert. Considered an 'insider', she is helping to fast-track the process.
- Raising public awareness: a fact sheet on the VAPP Bill was produced; the AUP was simplified and translated into local dialects; a compendium of VAWG/GBV in Nigeria (prevalence and response) was produced. All were widely disseminated.
- Engaging with and strengthening media advocacy platforms to increase visibility

for the VAPP and improve the quality of reporting on VAWG/GBV.

Media and communications

One of the project's aims has been to give increased visibility to the AUP, VAWG/GBV and discrimination against women. A core group of electronic and print journalists were supported technically to improve reporting techniques on these issues. There has been good coverage of the content and benefits of the AUP through radio spots, TV panel discussions, live phone-in programmes, debates on national and state TV, and Facebook pages. Road shows have been staged involving 100 Youth Corp members to protest the high rates of GBV/VAWG in Nigeria. Overall, the project has led to greater commitment from the media to support the objectives of RHV and increase public understanding of women's rights issues, and a closer working relationship with civil society on this agenda.

Community mobilisation and coalition-building

The building of a strong, broad national coalition of 17 CSOs all working on different women's rights issues at different levels across the country, each of whom linked to other organisations, has been one of the key successes for this project and lies behind the huge progress that has been made in lobbying on the VAPP Bill. The diversity and geographical breadth of the coalition has enabled RHV to be implemented across all regions of Nigeria, as well as enabling the campaign to appeal to a wide variety of interest and faith groups. Engaging with these institutions of religion and culture has helped to break down fears and engender dialogue. New constituencies have been brought into the debate; for example, there have been eye-opening debates amongst school children, including opening up spaces for debate amongst young girls in the community. The national coalition has linked grassroots women's groups (particularly poor, rural and indigenous women) to decision-makers at different levels (both parliamentary, traditional councils and different faith groups) and to the media. It has fast-tracked the lobbying work by collaborating with the National Coalition on Affirmative Action (NCAA). At a regional level, it is linked into the Pan-African coalition on the AUP and can therefore draw on its strategy, information and funding opportunities to enhance its effectiveness.

Conclusion

The process of linking the RHV project into the existing national campaign on the VAPP Bill meant that the strong national coalition on women's rights built up by RHV to support the domestication of the AUP became a natural vehicle for the VAPP campaign. RHV has provided the platform and legitimacy for CSOs to collectively advocate for legislation of the VAPP Bill. Being linked to RHV has also meant that strategic policy moments could be more easily seized for legislative advocacy for VAWG at state level. In turn, the LACVAW campaign has increased the support for the RHV project through the huge momentum created around the VAPP Bill and by expanding its partnership base and outreach.

In terms of overall impact, the fact that so many coalitions have come together in this process, including LACVAW, NCAA, GAA,[6] has meant that, under the strong leadership of WRAPA, there has been an enormous increase in the synergy, transparency and unity of purpose among civil society actors on the issue of women's rights, and in particular ending VAWG.

Written by Fiona Gell, with thanks to Hadeezah Haruna-Usia, RHV coordinator in Nigeria for her insightful contributions.

NOTES

[1] This paper focuses on the violence faced by women and girls on account of their sex rather than other parts of their gender identity. It's important to acknowledge here both the limits of the paper and the importance of other work around violence and other vulnerable groups, including the gay, bi- and trans-sexual community and boys and men. Gender-based violence (GBV) encompasses all physical, sexual and psychological violence that is rooted in individuals' gender roles and identities. The most common and pervasive form is Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG). Since the use of these terms is context dependent, VAWG/GBV will be used throughout.

[2] The Raising Her Voice (RHV) programme is a five-year programme which started in 2008, working across 17countries and funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development.

[3]The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women.

[4] The AUP offers a comprehensive picture of the issues confronting women in Africa and sets out a mechanism to address such issues. It provides protection for women's human rights including VAW, SRHR, harmful traditional practices and discrimination.

[5] The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), now part of UN Women

[6] Gender Affirmative Action is one of WRAPA's recently ended projects funded by DFID. GAA is a parliamentary technical support focused project.