

Key Steps to Coalition Building: Advocating for Women's Rights, Advancing Peace and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

Photo: UN Women/Guatemala

Introduction

This brief is the outcome of a **Peer Exchange** session¹ organized by the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) and Spotlight Initiative² on 4 November 2021, bringing together **over 220 participants from over 120 civil society organizations (CSOs) from 33 countries**. The **Peer Exchange** session gathered civil society actors and women's rights organizations to share their experiences, strategies and challenges of working in coalitions to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) and advance peace. This brief builds upon the insights and reflections of local women peacebuilders, humanitarian and feminist activists as well as grassroots CSOs working to prevent conflict and end VAWG.³

Why is coalition building critical to promote peace and end violence against women and girls?

Coalition building can:

1. Lead to increased influence, impact and lasting social change:

Grassroots CSOs can better coordinate and obtain more substantial impact when working in a coalition. For example, smaller CSOs can benefit from the expertise and advocacy skills of larger or more established CSOs who are well connected.

In Uganda, the Coalition for Action on 1325 (CoACT) existed as a loose coalition for four years before becoming an established organization with registration, staff and a strategic plan in Uganda.⁴ Establishing a formal coalition enabled CoACT to advance the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda and mobilize policy makers to engage in EVAWG efforts.

CoACT's achievements include major policy and legal reforms such as establishing the functional National Steering Committee and National Technical Committee to monitor the National Action Plan III on WPS, and passing the Domestic Violence Act and Female Genital Mutilation Act, among others. This would not have been possible without the collective action of multiple women's rights organizations through the coalition.⁵

In Honduras, the coalition Civil Society Group (Grupo de la sociedad civil), includes CSOs and state entities that focus on 11 areas of work.⁶ The coalition engaged with institutions such as UN Women, the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and private entities as part of Platform 611. The coalition was able to incorporate the term "violence against women" in the penal code as well as review the qualification of sexual crimes and criminalization of social protests, especially those aimed at human rights defenders and women. **Strategically, the coalition operated temporarily until its main goal was achieved: the civil code was revised and approved.**

2. Facilitate representation and expertise strengthening of civil society actors with diverse skills and knowledge. Through unifying organizations of different sizes and outreach, coalitions can be inclusive and meaningfully engage women with different experiences from across regions and sectors, including those with influence and the most marginalized. Furthermore, coalition building can ensure CSOs avoid a duplication of efforts and emphasize mutual learning so that all members – from local to national-level organizations – can learn from each other's expertise. For example, those participating in coalitions often report acquiring **increased leadership opportunities and negotiation skills**.

¹ A Peer Exchange Session is an online interactive discussion enabling knowledge sharing and mutual learning between CSOs. Peer Exchange Sessions are solution-oriented, reinforce solidarity and horizontal relationships among the participants.

² In 2019, WPHF and the Spotlight Initiative established a strategic partnership to channel funding to CSOs working to end violence against women and girls including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflict and crisis settings. The alliance between WPHF and Spotlight Initiative has led to concerted investment in promoting the leadership of women and civil society movements to address the multi-dimensional aspects of VAWG in conflict and crisis.

³ This includes the Coalition for Action on 1325 (CoACT – Uganda); Innovators Against Gender-Based Violence (Zimbabwe); Feminist Movement for Peace, Women's Pacific Route (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, Colombia); Foundation for Community Initiatives (FCI – Liberia); Sauti ya Mama Mukongamani (SMM – Democratic Republic of Congo); Civil Society Group (GSC – Honduras) and Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI – Jordan), as well as others that participated in the session.

⁴ More information on CoACT's work can be found [here](#).

⁵ More information on the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) Coalition coordinated by CEDOVIP can be found [here](#).

⁶ Such as engaging youth, elderly women, indigenous women, persons with disabilities, the rural sector, labor movements, etc. For more information on the Civil Society Group (Grupo de la sociedad civil) visit [here](#).

3. Support pooling of resources: Coalition members often share resources to achieve a common goal and can make use of the spaces, forums and events coordinated by larger organizations. Working in a coalition can also provide opportunities for resource mobilization by applying for funding as a consortium and can help CSOs gain broader reach and visibility through increased media exposure. This can support fundraising efforts and make it easier to reach donors, which is particularly vital in crisis and conflict affected countries where financing for local women's organizations working in peace and humanitarian action is very limited.

In Colombia,⁷ the Feminist Movement for Peace, Pacific Route of Women (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres) is a network of more than 300 organizations that was created in 1996 to document the effects of armed conflict and violence in the lives of Colombian women. The Pacific Route of Women partnered with other organizations to form a Women's Truth and Memory Commission and influence the negotiations between the Colombian government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Through mobilization, advocacy and evidence generation, the Pacific Route of Women and their allies were able to include **130 measures on women's rights and gender in the final peace agreement. The Pacific Route of Women is now advocating for the implementation of these measures.**

Step 1: Building a coalition

Key principles and considerations for building a coalition include:

Ensuring a feminist and intersectional approach

It is critical that coalitions be **inclusive to the needs and diversity of voices** of women, girls and gender nonconforming individuals facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Having **men as allies and champions** can be beneficial and generate support. At the same time, it is important to cultivate **safe spaces for women, girls and gender nonconforming members**. Furthermore, confidentiality and Do No Harm are guiding principles when working in a coalition to promote women's rights and end VAWG. **Emphasizing self and collective care is key to feminist coalition building.**

Identifying partners and coalition members

Coalition building can bring together diverse individuals and groups of advocates to identify common priorities and challenges to work towards the same purpose. A helpful tool can be to **map** the organizations that work to end VAWG and advance the WPS agenda to identify what work has already been done across focus areas (such as for service delivery, prevention, advocacy and awareness raising) and identify the expertise and reach of each CSO. This **can contribute to better coordination amongst CSOs by leveraging their strengths while working together towards a shared objective. Local leaders** can also help identify women's rights organizations at district levels.

When identifying partners, **helpful questions to ask** can include:

- ☒ What common problem is impacting the community and how is it experienced by different groups? Are some community members disproportionately impacted?
- ☒ Who else has identified this problem and is working to address it?
- ☒ Are organizations serving the most marginalized in the community, such as women, girls and gender nonconforming individuals facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination? (I.e., due to their sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, religion, being differently abled, migration and marital status or otherwise?)

Recognizing local women's rights organizations as leaders and equal partners

The experience of coalition building is dynamic. Engaging community-based organizations and grassroots women's rights organizations as **leaders and equal partners in coalitions is critical to uphold feminist principles and have a direct link to communities.** This helps ensure the coalition **directly serves and advocates for evolving needs at community levels.** Local organizations can also act as ambassadors of the coalition to garner grassroots support.

Coalition building must be context-specific

Advocacy and awareness-raising within communities can build **collective support and a strong movement around a shared objective.** This can also mobilize community volunteers to support the activities of the coalition, particularly in the foundational 'start up' phase. To support both wider reach of the coalition and ensure it meets the specific needs of distinct communities, it can be helpful to have organizations in each district/regional scope. These organizations can work towards the overarching goals of the coalition while also focusing on the specific needs unique to each area. One organization in each district/region can be nominated to act as a representative, and these representatives can meet several times a year to review progress and impact by the coalition.

Capacity building of all coalition members strengthens the effectiveness of the coalition and builds camaraderie

Engaging in continuous capacity building can keep members with diverse perspectives focused on a **shared objective and build sisterhood.** Creating opportunities to mentor newer women's rights organizations can support **wider reach and foster collaboration over competition.**⁸ It can be useful to **consistently identify learning needs** across the coalition to equip each member with the critical knowledge and skills to advance the objectives of the coalition. Common focus areas that benefit from capacity building often include legal instruments, planning, monitoring and evaluation of programmes, and enhancing the social accountability of rights-holders.

⁷ For more information on the Colombian Women's Truth and Memory Commission, visit [here](#).

⁸ See examples - [Localizing Resolution 1325 A training handbook](#) (2020) and [A Training Handbook for Women CBOs Gender Equality, Women Empowerment and Ending Violence against Women and Girls](#) (2021)

Step 2: Operating effectively in a coalition

Useful tips to work together in a coalition

Define clear objectives, strategies and agree on the timeframe of the coalition

- To be effective, it can be helpful for the coalition to focus on one issue at a time. CSOs can establish a **time-limited coalition** that is focused on a **specific objective** or build a **longer-term coalition with a broader scope**. It is important to ensure that all coalition members accept the agreed objectives, strategies, and timeline.
- Engage in **joint planning**, such as including annual or 4-year work plans, as well as joint implementation and reporting. It is important to involve senior management and financial officers from the CSOs part of the coalition.
- Conduct **needs assessments** with coalition members to effectively build the capacities of members, especially in core skills such as financial management and strategic planning.
- Develop an **accountability framework** - this can support members with holding one another accountable in respectful ways.

Sign partnership agreements or protocols for collaboration, specifying the roles and responsibilities of coalition members

- Identify the **kinds of partnerships** that are needed to advance the objectives of the coalition, including which are strategic or tactical and to what end. For example, forming alliances with organizations that may have different perspectives for a specific period of time can help advance certain aims of a coalition.

Assign focal points within each organization and representatives or branches at grassroots levels

- Select one organization to **lead the coordination of activities** and manage sub-grants if needed. Forming a Secretariat or team of nominated representatives from each CSO in the coalition can help lead members and organize the work of the coalition.
- Decentralize certain activities to increase efficiency and ensure the coalition responds to the needs of each context.

Ensure inclusive communication and transparent information-sharing

- Information-sharing should go both ways to align with feminist principles - upstreaming information from the local level and keeping members informed of what is happening at regional and national levels.
- Using local languages and sign language will increase accessibility and enable persons with different abilities to meaningfully participate in the coalition.
- Identifying key contacts in member organisations from the start and using specific channels to **inform all coalition members at the same time** is helpful to facilitate swift communications, such as a group email or WhatsApp group.
- Inform focal points of issues within the coalition (e.g., copying them in emails).

Be patient with the process

- Identify which processes can be considered an objective or result of the coalition to demonstrate progress. For example, laying the necessary foundations to build effective coalitions are also milestones - this could include finalizing agreements with all coalition members, forming partnerships, and assessing the capacity needs of coalition members.
- It is important to foster understanding that though there may be agreement on shared principles, members come with varying capacities. **Collaboration, supporting one another and leveraging the expertise that each CSO and member brings can foster healthy relations in the coalition.**
- Appreciating members and recognizing the achievements and work done by the coalition helps **boost morale**.
- **Holding an annual exchange** with all coalition members can provide a space to celebrate achievements, discuss areas for improvement, and support continued engagement. **Exchanges are important to build trust and solidarity** among coalition members.

Raise awareness in communities and encourage local ownership

- Using film, animations and music can engage people of different age groups, education levels and with different access to technology.
- Organizing meetings with duty bearers can support advocacy, strengthen partnerships and **build trust**. This can help ensure the objectives of the coalition are **prioritized at higher levels and support the sustainability of the coalition**.
- It is critical to advocate for **sustainable funding** for the coalition and its members, including for local, grassroots women's rights organizations. Organizations can leverage their unique skill sets and offer their advocacy support even if they cannot contribute financially to a consortium. It is useful when more established organizations support funding efforts for smaller and/or newer organizations in the coalition.

Lesson learned: Build alliances with champions or ambassadors at community levels. It is important that coalition members maintain regular contact with communities and train champions to monitor the situation and trends related to their area of work. This will enable centrally-located members to stay informed of what is happening in remote regions.

"Regarding the advantages of the coalition, I start from the idea that **alone we are invisible, together we are invincible**. For example, I run a platform - the Platform of Haitian Women's Organizations for Development (Plateforme des organisations de femmes haïtiennes pour le développement - POFHAD, Haiti) - where everyone shares each others' work through their networks to increase visibility. When we obtain funding, we provide others with responsibilities to strengthen their capacities. At the end of the year, **we organize meetings to take stock** and identify our strengths and weaknesses. Today, our country [Haiti] is going through an unparalleled crisis - women are kidnapped, raped, and killed. We cannot move from one region to another, and **only the coalition's work allows us to exist**." - participant from Peer Exchange Session.

The main challenges of operating effectively in a coalition include:

- Different **capacity gaps of coalition members in terms of knowledge** can lead to tension and inefficiency.
- There can be **conflicts of interest** between organizations engaged in the coalition.
- A **lack of financial resources, restrictive laws on legal registration of civil society actors and limited support available for women's rights organizations** can contribute to limited fundraising opportunities for civil society-led coalitions. Barriers lead many coalitions to rely on volunteer-based work, which can be unsustainable. When many organizations apply individually, it can also generate competition for resources and create issues for the coalition's ownership.
- When coalitions are broad - in terms of the number of members and geographic scope - there are risks that coalitions can be centred in city capitals and thus do not embrace the leave no one behind principle. Large coalitions can also suffer from disorganization and inefficiency.
- The **protection of coalition members** is a key concern, particularly in contexts where there is **shrinking space for civil society and backlash** against those working to end VAWG and build peace. The relationships between coalition members and the authorities can put other coalition members at risk. This can derail the advocacy work of the coalition and trust among its members.
- When coalitions have an explicit focus on women and girls, this can **lead to the exclusion of other groups** such as the LGBTQI+ community, trans and gender nonconforming civil society members.
- Diverging views amongst civil society and women's groups on whether **men-led organizations** can join feminist coalitions can be another challenge.

Step 3: Amplifying results of the coalition and learning from the process

Foster a collective spirit and accountability

It is important to emphasize that the work is done collectively to build community and give recognition to those who contributed. Each coalition member can share the results of the coalition's work through their own communication channels while **acknowledging the contribution of all coalition members**. In addition, periodic experience-sharing and knowledge exchange between members can allow members to **review the coalition's results and adapt future plans or strategies to build on previous lessons and promising practices**.

Build upon and systematize learning of the coalition's work





Documenting successes and lessons from working in a movement is crucial. Producing **knowledge products** is a helpful way to do so. For example, the Women's Pacific Route of Colombia (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, Colombia) published a document to summarize the research approaches and working procedures they used to document cases of VAW in the context of the Colombian armed conflict.⁹ **Taking time to reflect and assess what was learned from working in a coalition is important** and can be turned into simple visual knowledge products, such as the slide deck "[Building Connection Movement Activism for ending VAW](#)" by the Gender-Based Violence Prevention Network and JASS. This allows others to learn from the experiences of a coalition and to advance their own efforts more effectively from the start.

Another useful practice comes from the Sauti ya Mama Mukongamani (SMM) platform. The platform gathers **36 women-led organizations and individuals** who regularly publish **written reports** of their actions and results on the website.¹⁰ SMM also uses participatory evaluation tools to generate evidence that will be used in future advocacy actions.¹¹






"Coalitions empower CSOs to pressure and challenge the status quo. Coalitions at the regional level can enhance peer learning between women's organizations. When women's coalitions unite their voices, discuss key issues, raise awareness and advocate for one unified cause (as for example, amending a legal text that threatens fundamental rights), they increase the likelihood of achieving mutual goals and advancing transformative change." - participant from Peer Exchange Session.

Useful resources on coalition building to advocate for women's rights, advance peace and end violence against women and girls are available [here](#).

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⁹ Pacific Route of Women (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres), [Memory for life A truth commission proposal from women for Colombia](#) (2013)

¹⁰ See the [Report of the activities of the 2019 16-day activism campaign against GBV in North Kivu](#) and [Quarterly Report of Sauti ya Mama Mukongamani \(January – March 2021\)](#)

¹¹ See the [Community Score Card \(CSC\)](#) and [Social Norms Analysis Plot \(SNAP\)](#)