



# LESSONS LEARNED ON INTEGRATING GENDER IN HUMAN RIGHTS AND PEACEBUILDING PROGRAMMING

A Brief for the Strengthening Civil Courage (SCC) Programme

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DEFENDDEFENDERS  
East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the security of our partners, this brief purposefully does not name the people with whom we communicated with, nor their institutions. Thank you to our partners in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen for sharing their stories. We hope this brief captures some of the light and hope you inspire in others every day.

## ABOUT THE SCC

This brief was developed to capture strategies and lessons learned developed by partners of the Strengthening Civil Courage (SCC) Programme. The Strengthening Civil Courage Programme (SCC) is a five-year, multi-country human rights, conflict transformation and peace building programme. It is currently working in some of the most conflict-affected countries in the world. It is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Power of Voices Partnership, and is being implemented by an Alliance of ABAAD, Amnesty International The Netherlands, DefendDefenders, and PAX (the lead Alliance partner). The SCC is working with over 80 local civil society partner organisations across 13 countries in Africa (including Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, the Sahel region) and the Middle East (Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Yemen). It also includes international-level advocacy and influencing work. Given the important role that social inclusion and gender equality play on all aspects of peace work and conflict transformation, the SCC alliance aims to ensure that its work is, at a minimum, gender-sensitive and where possible gender-transformative.

# INTRODUCTION

Within the Strengthening Civil Courage (SCC) programme countries where our partners work, there are enormous gender gaps. Women and youth are hardly represented in places of power, and violent conflict often reinforces and is shaped by gender inequitable norms between men, Women's, and other groups, as well as worsens already widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). At the same time, there is a positive correlation between gender equality, people-centred security and conflict transformation. We know from well-established research and our practice, that women's participation and influence in informal and formal peace processes increase chances of longer-lasting stability.

***Gender equality is an important indicator for the stability of a country and ultimately sustainable peace.***

Applying gender-sensitive and gender-transformative approaches across summarizes the SCC Programme's approach to promoting gender integration across programme strategies and country activities and then dives into lessons learned from partners on how they have addressed gender issues in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

## HOW THE SCC PROGRAMME INTEGRATES GENDER EQUALITY?

Within the SCC Program, gender is both a cross-cutting as well as a standalone supporting strategy that In order for country programmes must be at least gender-sensitive (considers the specific needs of different gender groups) and, where possible, gender-transformative (works to challenge and positively shift unequal gender norms). To help guide the Programme to put this into practice, the Gender Working Group (GWG) was created (members include ABAAD, Amnesty International, Defend Defender, and PAX), providing overall direction and technical support on gender to the SCC Consortium and partner staff.

**The GWG accomplishes this by implementing several strategies:**

- 01** **Developing and disseminating** technical documents such as briefs and checklists that provide concrete recommendations on how to integrate a gender lens into programme activities, and also within their organizations.
- 02** **Organizing** online learning and **sharing** sessions such as webinars and workshops on critical gender topics (e.g. anti-gender backlash in the Middle East, guidelines on how to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse) that are open to both consortium and partner staff.
- 03** **Developing and launching** the Gender Integration Foundational Training (GIFT) e-learning programme open to all consortium and partner staff that includes thematic modules related to gender such as Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), Engaging Men and Militarized Masculinities, and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence.
- 04** **Providing** organisation-to-organisation technical assistance. Almost every country programme is assigned a Gender Focal Point (a gender specialist from either ABAAD or PAX) who is responsible for understanding and addressing the gender-specific needs of the partner. Technical assistance can include providing training on gender topics, invitations to international learning events, periodic check-in calls to address challenging gender issues, sharing of materials, "mentorship" calls to help to develop organizational strategies addressing gender inequalities, and reviewing reports and other technical documents.
- 05** **Consortium** members meeting regularly (every two weeks) to share updates on various activities being implemented across the SCC Programme, organize joint events, and request support on behalf of partner organisations.

There are some challenges of integrating gender at the Consortium level such as varying levels of commitment to prioritize gender issues at various programme levels, the lack of staff capacity to address the individual organisational needs of over 80 partners and Consortium members who come with disparate levels of gender knowledge and experience, and how to ensure the safety of staff working on gender topics in light of global anti-gender backlash.

However, all of the strategies listed above have helped to support both consortium and partner staff approach gender more effectively in their programmes, and deepened their understanding of the importance of this lens when engaging in peacebuilding and human rights work.





# LESSONS LEARNED FROM COUNTRY PARTNERS



In 2024, five activists from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen were interviewed either in person or responded via email to a written questionnaire to capture what they have learned during the past several years of the SCC Programme. Some individuals were part of networks of activists while others were from civil society organisations. For some, working on gender issues was not new to the institution,

meaning it was part of their organizational mandate, while for others this was the first time they received dedicated resources and assistance to work on gender equality.

**Below is a summary of their main lessons learned from addressing gender equality as part of their human rights and peacebuilding activism.**

# 01

**NO MATTER WHERE YOU  
ARE, WORKING ON GENDER  
EQUALITY IS VERY SENSITIVE.**

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Based on the examples and stories supplied by our partners, it is clear that allocating specific resources and capacity support on gender strengthened their institution's investment and focus on this topic. For many, this was the first time they had the space to design and implement programs focused on these issues. For example, PAX provided extra funding to a partner in the Middle East to conduct training on conflict sensitivity for both their staff and the media production company they were working with to better equip them in understanding the context and how to avoid possible conflicts. As a result, this partner stated that advocacy campaigns that they launched promoting women's leadership in political spaces were surprisingly effective. As a result of support from the SCC, this partner was also able to invest in staff capacity to develop videos, policy papers, and workshops with local authorities on supporting women's economic empowerment.

Other partners stated that they appreciated gender-focused capacity-building opportunities and invitations to participate in global convenings where they could

learn from other activists. One partner stated that as a result of a gender analysis training they received, they were more confident to conduct focus groups, and better able to discuss sensitive gender issues with communities. Working with ABAAD, this partner also became aware of alternative Arabic vocabulary and ways of explaining issues of gender equality with communities. This list of "sensitive" terminology was first developed by ABAAD because of their experiences of working in more conservative environments. From the perspective of another partner, the SCC program provider many opportunities to explore gender from various perspectives, supporting them to connect gender-related issues with many facets of their own social activism. For example, this organisation participated in several trainings organised by ABAAD such as on raising awareness and developing policies to address sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment, and exploring the connections between militarized masculinities and conflict. These capacity strengthening experiences expanded their understanding of gender and its far-reaching influence.



In another country programme in the Middle East, the messaging and capacity development they conducted on gender equality had such an impact on the community volunteers they work with, that even though they were not able to explicitly talk about gender equality, the volunteers “still wanted to address women’s rights as part of broader human rights work,” according to this partner. For example, in a project that provides small grant funding to communities one man

The SCC Programme also placed an emphasis on broadening working on “gender” beyond women through addressing issues related to masculinities, and militarism. One partner said that while they cannot do direct training on harmful or militarized masculinities in their communities, they were still able to hold gatherings with men on “how to support women in community participation.” To do so, they designed advocacy themes and campaigns images that were acceptable to the community (e.g. ensuring that all images show women wear a headscarf) and spoke about gender equality using traditional language, communicating that women are

capable of holding onto their Islamic values while also taking on positions of political power. Another partner appreciated capacity building opportunities that introduced concepts as “intersectionality” as an opportunity not only to look at women’s empowerment, but also how to challenge existing power dynamics based on age (e.g. hiring younger people as staff) and disability (e.g. appointing people with disabilities as heads of commissions on civil rights, climate change, civic rights, the environment).

Partners from the Middle East also benefited from gaining access to new learning opportunities and resources such as ABAAD’s YouTube videos, training manuals, and briefs. Another partner stated that an invitation to a peer exchange on men’s engagement in feminism co-organized by PAX and WILPF broadened her understanding of gender equality beyond the opportunities she could get in her home country. Many partners continue to engage in a global Community of Practice that was set up from within the SCC Programme.



# 02

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Peacebuilders and human rights defenders have witnessed dramatic rollback in social, economic, and political rights since the start of the SCC Programme in 2021. Governments across the globe are becoming increasingly autocratic and less accepting of movements demanding democracy and greater social inclusion. Partners and their staff members who are advocating for greater women's leadership and seeking justice for human rights abuses, manage these efforts under increasing risk of threat. Partners emphasize that efforts to promote gender equality must be carefully, strategically and sensitively designed.

In the Middle East, a partner experienced acute backlash from religious authorities when working on a programme promoting women's empowerment in Northern Syria. Rather than stopping activities, this partner sought to better study and therefore understand the root causes of this anti-gender backlash. This research led them to develop a new advocacy strategy to better counter this backlash in the future. As a result of this new strategy, they said that their

focus on gender "became more systematic, comprehensive and realistic."

One partner in Africa also recognized the rising tide of anti-gender backlash and decided with their partners to utilize art as a powerful tool to raise awareness about gender and social justice. They organised many activities, such as open calls for entries into photography, animation, painting, and poetry competitions addressing gender. These initiatives were carried out in collaboration with social media influencers who had received specialised training to challenge harmful gender norms. These influencers participated in campaign efforts using hashtags such as #ResilientWomen, #HimForHer, and #LookBeyond. Through these competitions, participants were encouraged to share or post images on selected social media platforms that reflect the perspectives of diverse communities, "thereby fostering dialogue on gender equality", according to this partner. This initiative allowed for a broader community engagement, urging individuals to look beyond traditional gender roles and actively support gender equality.

# 03

**ENGAGING MEN IN POSITIONS  
OF POWER AND WORKING WITH  
AUTHORITIES IS ESSENTIAL TO  
KEEP THE WORK ON GENDER  
EQUALITY GOING.**

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According to SCC partners, building trusting relationships with prominent political parties, religious leaders, the police, and other figures in positions of authority is essential when working on gender equality. These positions are mostly held by men, who require a careful approach when involving them in gender-transformative work. Such collaboration, while challenging, can help to minimize violence, particularly against human rights defenders and vulnerable groups. It also leads to greater cooperation and meaningful 'wins.' For example, in one country programme, a group of youth trained by the partner conducted a campaign in their city to advocate for the necessity of having a female police unit to more sensitively address violence against women, and to better support women in a safe environment. As a result of their efforts, a governor from one governorate issued a memo to establish the unit and train women to become police officers, the first ever in 2021. For another partner, convincing authorities meant highlighting with them the universality of human rights, promoting inclusion, and emphasizing the harmful effects of discrimination. This partner stated:

“  
**we need to  
make sure  
they feel  
we are their  
friends, not  
enemies.**

- SCC Middle East-based partner -



# 04

**BROAD AND DIVERSE  
COALITIONS SUPPORTIVE OF  
GENDER EQUALITY HAVE BEEN  
BUILT, IN PART, BECAUSE OF THE  
SCC.**

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**A gender perspective is not one-dimensional, [but rather] a holistic approach that reflects the diversity of experiences [leading] to more inclusive, effective, and sustainable outcomes. Hence, it is significant to involve a wide range of voices and experiences in the design and implementation of programs.**

SCC Africa-based partner



To better support efforts promoting gender equality and social inclusion, many partners stressed that it is essential to promote solidarity within civil society, as well as with the communities where human rights and peacebuilding work is taking place. For example, this can mean:

- **Working as a coalition that develops activities together and advocates for change more effectively.** One activist in Africa stated that this coalition can help each civil society organization to implement a small activity, but when done together, the impact “can be much larger.”
- **Promoting an overarching message where all members contribute to spreading the message, but adapted to the audience they can reach.**
- **Reaching out to a range of civil society actors, not just the prominent ones, because the smaller organizations may have broader outreach and better insights into the exact needs of the people.** For example, one partner in the Middle East seeks to build allies among young men and women, university graduates and moderate local leaders who they believe can play a crucial role in building support for gender equality.



Within this type of inclusive partnership building, it is important to foster acceptance and set a good example of inclusion, respect for others, and meaningful participation. According to one partner in Africa, this means meeting and collaborating with other dynamic movements, providing tools and support to encourage non-violent advocacy, helping partners to better formulate their demands and preparing them to dialogue with counterparts, being allies alongside women when they want to take action, and providing financial support, when needed. Another partner sees coalition-building as an opportunity to promote intergenerational activism where women who are better able to articulate their grievances and suffering can also educate their children about how to address injustice. This type of work also happens at the Consortium level. For example, PAX provides an advisory role on how to conduct effective advocacy campaigns related to the arms trade, gender-based discrimination, and how to influence EU and other international actors. This capacity strengthening is then leveraged by the partners to influence policy, conduct community outreach and campaigns.

Within such broad, inclusive coalitions one partner stated that gender equality must not only mean the number of women who participate as beneficiaries, or who are employed by an organization, but also look at how these spaces are providing decision-making opportunities for women. In the communities where partners work, it is essential to make sure women have access to participate and secure spaces to talk. This creates opportunities for women to think together so that they can influence agendas and the spaces themselves. In one country, grant-making is seen as a way to ensure resources are put into the hands of women, shifting the power dynamics, particularly towards marginalized groups, in building programs. This means not always looking to see who is most qualified, but rather seeing in whom can they invest capacity strengthening on leadership training, workforce development, and coaching to give them the chance to fundraise on their own. Such opportunities offer women leaders a way to leverage and strengthen their existing political influence. In this way, unlikely allies are also made.

## CONCLUSION

Though working to challenge gender inequalities across the SCC Programme has proved more difficult in recent years, having a dedicated strategic focus and resources has provided a multitude of opportunities for partners to deepen their focus on gender equality. They particularly appreciated direct technical assistance from their Gender Focal Points, as well as the space to design new and innovative research, advocacy initiatives, and the engagement of broad, inclusive coalitions.