



THEMATIC BRIEF

STRENGTHENING MOVEMENTS

PREPARED BY GENDER AND INCLUSION HUB AS PART
OF THE FINAL EVALUATION OF THE WOMEN'S ACTION
FOR VOICE AND EMPOWERMENT (WAVE) PROGRAM.
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International development stakeholders are increasingly recognising the power of social movements, and the important role that movements play in influencing societal change.

The Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE) program focused attention on stronger movements as a key lever for societal change towards gender equality.

This thematic brief shares learnings from the final evaluation of the Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE) program implemented from 2016-2020 in Asia and the Pacific. This brief was prepared by Gender and Inclusion Hub consultants, who conducted the final evaluation of the WAVE program.

WAVE's goal was for women to lead transformative, sustainable change towards gender equality, enabled by strategic feminist engagement. Eighteen women's rights organisations in Cambodia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Timor Leste partnered with IWDA to implement WAVE.

Each of these women's rights organisations brought extensive experience, expertise and strength of relationships in movements in their contexts.

The WAVE final evaluation demonstrated the outcomes of this objective, and lessons about how the diverse women's rights organisations and movements amplified their collective voices and took joint action to influence change in their communities and in the systems of injustice affecting them.



Cover image: Bridgette Mohin, participant in Leadership forum march, with Bougainville Women's Federation (BWF), in Bougainville. Photo by: Harjono Djoyobisono

Image: Consultation meeting at Ta'ang Women's Organisation headquarters, Lashio, Myanmar. Photo by: Harjono Djoyobisono

WOMEN'S ACTION FOR VOICE AND EMPOWERMENT – FINAL EVALUATION

WHAT ARE FEMINIST MOVEMENTS, AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

Image: Pionie Boso, Women's Rights Action Movement,
Solomon Islands. Photo by: Gemma Carr



Against the backdrop of rising populist and dictatorial national leaders and ever-more-dangerous and closing space for civil society, is a story of sustained and resilient feminist activism in movements. Evidence shows that the most important and consistent factor driving progressive policy change is feminist activism.¹ Feminists around the world are building movements that reflect the agendas of diverse women and other marginalised groups on the ground.

Movements are typically made up of a wide array of advocacy organisations, activists, service delivery partners, artists, grass-roots groups and individuals. There is strength in numbers and in solidarity among members.

Women who understand and uproot patriarchal systems are at the heart of feminist movements. To overcome systems of injustice, movements need a base of people who understand those unjust systems, and who are willing to act on it. Movements can only grow stronger if there is a base of constituents who see the problem from their own experience and come together to find ways to change it.

Feminist movements are fed by the process of constituent groups coming to understand how the systems of patriarchy affect their lives and seeing how their participation in collective action can make a change. The changes may be demands for change in legal and policy arenas, responsiveness and fairness of government services, access to information and/or a way to voice ideas and opinions through democratic and inclusive governance.

“Through analysis and reflection processes in WAVE, [we learned] insights about what it means to be part of a movement. It is about more than advocating for change, it means making sure that our organisations and our network also reflect those values internally and have the same inclusive practices that we advocate for.”

WAVE PARTNER

¹ S. Laurel Weldon & Mala Htun (2013) Feminist mobilisation and progressive policy change: why governments take action to combat violence against women, *Gender & Development*, 21:2, 231-247.

WOMEN'S ACTION FOR VOICE AND EMPOWERMENT – FINAL EVALUATION

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOVEMENT OUTCOMES IN WAVE?



Image: Participants at the WAVE all partner workshop in Cambodia, in 2019. Photo by: Simon Toffenello.

WAVE supported individual women and women's rights organisations' efforts to support and expand their movements in all five countries. WAVE partners reported that their movements grew stronger in two ways:

1. WOMEN'S CAPACITY TO SELF-ORGANISE AND LEAD COLLECTIVE ACTION

By the end of WAVE, there was evidence of women with stronger capacity to self-organise and lead collective action on their own behalf. This started from an expanded base of critically-conscious women and men at the community level.

As part of the WAVE program, women across a range of diversities and contexts found space for critical reflection on pertinent gender and power issues, with a platform and new-found confidence to express their ideas. WAVE partners

facilitated grassroots constituent groups to form, learn together, and organise themselves to lead their own actions. WAVE partners did more than simply support the expansion of the base of movements by substantial numbers, they strategically built the capacity of women at the community-level as movement leaders to act collectively.

Box 1, below, highlights the process and the outcomes of stronger capacity to self-organise, as facilitated by one WAVE partner in Cambodia, United Sisterhood Alliance, as described by its staff.

Box 1. Stronger capacity to self-organise and lead action

"We mostly use our hearts to work. We can see the unfairness in the society, when they [our constituents] are very poor, uneducated, they get that unfairness, even worse than us. ...Our alliance is very happy because we see the community's change. The change happens due to a lot of elements. We have safe space for them to join. We use it as a space for them to come not only for training courses but also for them to share information, whether about their family, relatives, or other problems. They can meet and talk, share the ideas and give comments with each other ... When the citizens do not have education and they are poor, it is hard to mobilize. And for sex workers, mostly they are extremely poor, they live in a rented room, and they view themselves as not having a future. They care only today or tomorrow whether there is rice for them or not...their health is weak... so it is not easy for women. So, when they are invited to a meeting, we do not talk only about the policy, we talk about what problems they face and what they need.

.. we see that for the community ... the change is their participation. And they

not only come and have the motivation to participate, but they also ask us about the policy. They ask us: How did the petition we signed yesterday go? What we should do next step, how we need to follow up with the ministries? Like that! We see that they have self-confidence in some debates. Through participating, they become braver, dare to talk in public on their issues."

"...For instance, sex workers, at the beginning, we could hardly connect with them to get information ... But we kept engaging with them, understanding their rights, and listening to their problems. Finally, they dared to speak out in public. They talked in the [public] forums with representatives of the ministry present. This is amazing! Previously they don't even speak with us. Still, now they can dedicate their problems, [and using] events, confront with ministry level and authorities.... What we are proud of is, they can do it by themselves as a citizen. This is the movement we want. When we talk about resilience that can make them demand or live by themselves, rather than depend on the institutions." *United Sisterhood Alliance staff*

Box 2 shows another example from WAVE partner SWAN in Myanmar.

Box 2: Building consciousness of an expanded base of movement members at community level

WAVE partner SWAN organised women's exchanges for over 600 rural ethnic minority women per year in three northern states in Myanmar, all affected by conflict and violence. SWAN recognised that most rural women had never before had the opportunity to meet together, discuss their issues, to laugh and provide mutual respect to each other. These women's exchanges provided an entry point into critical consciousness building. The exchanges utilised experience-based

group discussions using mutual exchange of ideas and life experiences. As a result, women who were typically excluded from community discussion and decision spaces reported they have become more confident in negotiating and problem solving. They also reported that they were subsequently viewed with more respect by others. With an eye towards sustainability, SWAN trained a cadre of women community leaders who subsequently organized and led other women's exchanges.

2. INCREASED STRENGTH OF MOVEMENT ARCHITECTURE

A second movement outcome highlighted by the WAVE evaluation was the increased strength of the movement architecture. The WAVE program supported partners to build and strengthen their networks, coalitions, and alliances for the purposes of expanding their voice and the strength of their change messages on structural change. Several partners described the "culture of collective action" that grew in their networks or at the community level and cited WAVE's support for stronger relational webs.

"WAVE has been very supportive of connecting organisations with different skills sets. We are more based on empowerment of the individual women, but other organisations' works are related to ... policy change. But we work together, all different levels, to bring about change and to have the movement grow bigger." -WAVE partner

In WAVE, these alliances grew both in the number of participating members and in the diversity of participating members. The network of participating groups and organisations included more representatives from rural areas, and groups representing a greater diversity of thematic issues. Some WAVE partners noted that their alliance agendas and processes became more inclusive during WAVE, with the agendas incorporating issues faced by the most marginalised of member constituents, such as the rights of ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, women workers in textile and sex industries, farmers and artists or people identifying as LGBTQI+.

Box 3 provides details of the work of WAVE partners and collaborators, led by WAVE partner Rede Feto, in Timor Leste.


Box 3. Stronger movement architecture in Timor Leste

In Timor Leste, WAVE partner Rede Feto is a network of organisations working to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Rede Feto is mandated to convene civil society members and networks, bringing together groups for setting common agenda platforms. WAVE provided Rede Feto with the stable and flexible funding needed to fulfil this role, and in turn, provided support to a broad array of women's rights organisations in the member network. Rede Feto worked towards a more progressive and inclusive agenda by engaging with a diverse range of organisations representing groups like persons with disabilities and LGBTQI+ groups. While funded by WAVE, Rede Feto doubled its member organisations from 24 in 2016 to 48 in 2020.

Rede Feto utilised a successful strategy of hosting National Women's Congresses to convene a broad array of stakeholders to develop common advocacy platforms. In 2019, as a lead up to the 5th National Women's Congress, Rede Feto expanded the participation of civil society groups in its member base, and hosted district

conferences in all 13 municipalities to bring women from across the country together to discuss women's rights issues and recommendations for a pathway forward. This inclusive, participatory grass-roots effort facilitated the convening and input of community women into the agenda-setting. The resulting Platform of Action in 2019 demonstrated a significant shift from previous years in that it demonstrated stronger feminist analysis about the structural barriers that contribute to gender inequality in Timor-Leste, and called for a focus on progressive issues including women's participation in decision-making, sexual and reproductive rights and social protections for marginalised groups. It identified patriarchal culture as the root cause of gender inequality, and called for the main actors, including religious institutions, to eliminate this barrier. The Platform of Action provides the road map for collective action and women's rights advocacy in Timor-Leste for the subsequent 4-5 years, and is used to influence government stakeholders and key Ministers to prioritize

WHAT WORKS TO STRENGTHEN MOVEMENTS?

A photograph of two women, likely of Southeast Asian descent, looking down at a document. The woman on the left is smiling and has her mouth open as if speaking. The woman on the right is looking down at the document. They are both wearing casual clothing. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a building. The image is overlaid with a large white text box containing the main title and a paragraph of text.

WAVE partners, including IWDA, shifted their own thinking and practices through participation in WAVE. Most of the partners in WAVE (including IWDA) brought a long history of working in international development, and for some, the idea of being part of a movement was new territory. For other partners who self-identified as activists and feminist activists, it was an essential component of their organisational identity. Many WAVE partners suggested that, during WAVE, their understanding and perception shifted about what their role in movements should be and these new ideas also influenced changes in their practices.

ACT IN SOLIDARITY

Many described new insights on movement principles such as solidarity and transparency. These principles influenced the ways that they related to peer organisations.

“WAVE partners have influenced our thinking on solidarity action in movements. Before, we thought that movement [actors] need to be in the same way (uniformity), then we understood that it’s not necessary to be uniform as long as each organisation could achieve a common goal and are on the same page... We changed our perspective from misunderstanding uniformity to understanding, accepting diversity. It doesn’t mean when they don’t endorse our statement, we consider them not in solidarity with us. If they don’t endorse, but instead use part of our statement or messages in their advocacy campaign or even bring this for discussion within their team, this is already showing their solidarity.” WAVE partner

RECOGNISE COMPLEMENTARITY OF ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE MOVEMENT

A shift in perspective about movements came with a clearer picture of the ecosystem of actors in the movement landscape and how their own work complemented the work of others, all leading to the same goal.

“In the women’s movement, we all have to work together. But we have our own approaches. For example, [some] work more on the higher level, with government ministries. Our approach is different from that. We work closely with the community. We empower committee members to speak out about upcoming bills (legislation). At the end, we have the same goal, but we have a different approach. That’s why, you know, we have to work together, but with different approaches. It depends on where you are, what your organisational experiences and background are.” WAVE partner

APPLY FEMINIST PRINCIPLES TO OPERATING MODELS AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

Though all partners had a history of working on gender equality, through WAVE some WAVE partners realised greater confidence and skills in applying feminist movement principles and approaches in their work. Many partners, including IWDA, named some changes in their thinking about what a feminist approach to social change looks like in practice, including more attention to self-care, and paying attention to women’s double burden of unpaid work. One partner appreciated WAVE’s feminist organisational capacity strengthening framework, which helped them to consider sexual and reproductive health issues as relevant to both their organisation and to themselves as individuals. This partner found that opening up to talk about such personal topics at work helped them to connect and build solidarity, thus allowing “our sisters to click together.” Many WAVE partners described their learning and application of a lesson about internal organisational integrity (“getting your own house in order”) as a key feminist movement principle.

CONSIDER THE ROLES OF GRANT MAKERS AND DONORS

IWDA staff shared their viewpoints and lessons learned from WAVE on how to proactively engage with and strengthen movements. WAVE supported a shift in perspective. For IWDA, it pushed staff to see a broader ecosystem of actors beyond IWDA’s traditional local partners, with opportunities for engagement that are broader in scope. IWDA staff learned the importance of their own roles in ensuring flexible and opportunistic convening spaces for movement actors to meet, learn, negotiate and plan together. It also provided stimulus to IWDA to articulate its role in national women’s and feminist movements in the region, with thoughtful questions about decolonising approaches to partnerships, and when to step up, stand with, and/or when to step back.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, drawn from both successes and lessons learned from WAVE, are made for implementers of development programs focused on feminist movement strengthening, as developed by the consulting team evaluating the WAVE program:

1. Incorporate opportunities to reflect on and practice models of feminist leadership and feminist organisational principles and processes in one's own group and institution.
2. Invest in building the critical consciousness and leadership capacity of constituents at the community level. This builds a mass base of movements and ensures sustainability - when institutions fail, the community with capacity will go on.
3. Find opportunities to convene diverse voices and a wider set of constituents at the community level, and leverage venues and platforms that enable people to speak freely.
4. When negotiating a united front and a common agenda for change, articulate your own organisation's mandate and values clearly, and ask others to do the same. Clarify and respect the complementary and distinct roles and responsibilities of each actor.
5. Conveners of individuals and organisations should use soft skills of negotiation, mediation, encouragement. Highlight commonalities and complementarities when building membership. Set up transparent communication channels that allowed for everyone to speak and listen to the group. Identify safe space mechanisms for discussion of possible tensions and ways to address them.
6. Plan for safety, wellness and self-care. Discuss how to collectively respond to threats aimed at specific individuals or groups.

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