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We arrived here together.
Overview

It starts with inspiring a belief that a new way of being is possible.

Raising Voices is a nonprofit organization advancing the prevention of violence against women and children. The prevention of violence is about changing social norms. It cuts to the heart of who we are as individuals and communities, and awakens the human desire to forge equitable relationships.

Over the past twelve years we have innovated a positive and impassioned form of activism that has roused critical thinking and change in homes, communities, schools, organizations and ultimately the corridors of government. From injecting new ideas to creating the tools for acting on those ideas, our efforts have combined to inspire a new way of being.

Since our first days in 1999, we have grown from two founders to a team of thirty staff, from having two partners to over sixty partners, and from $30,000 to $2 million in annual budget. What story do these numbers tell? The story of an organization striving for maximum possible impact while honoring the passion and quality cultivated by staying small. The story of commitment to the communities of the Horn, East and Southern Africa, yet with increasing influence on action and dialogue beyond.

When our journey began, the prevention of violence against women and children was rare in our field. Individual activities, while transformative for participants, were rarely addressing the societal roots of violence. Just twelve years later, prevention pervades discourse internationally. We believe we played a part in this evolution. Now, when you talk about preventing violence against women and children, the name Raising Voices often appears. This makes us proud.

And yet the work has barely begun. History shows that shifting how we understand and honor each other’s human rights is a long but world-changing journey. Dismantling a climate of violence requires far-reaching support that includes every corner of society.

In twelve years, the one thing we have learned above all else is that the journey is worthy of the effort.
A Vision Comes to Life

In 1999, with a $30,000 grant as our only income, we begin a journey that will bring the approach to countless communities. No funding, an upstream journey begins. Voices is born. With two founders and 1400 children and 1100 adults, we dedicate our efforts to preventing violence against women and children, Raising Voices is born.

A Vision Comes to Life

1999

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Our community mobilization model spreads to over fifty countries, we begin expanding our focus to preventing violence against children. Starting with fifty Ugandan schools, we initiate a research tradition based on capturing voices—strengthening advocacy and fieldwork by engaging those who will ultimately lead change.

Primary Prevention Innovation

With a $30,000 grant as our only income, we support grassroots organizations adopting community mobilization models for preventing violence against women—our mission demonstrates its capacity to inspire a critical mass of community members to lead societal change.

Criteria and Innovation

Looking to Children

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A woman who enjoys equal power with a man becomes a source of strength for so many other women. Living free of violence and full of possibility, she is proof that change can happen.

In our work, we see her more and more, and her journey informs our efforts. Among many things, she has shown us that hope is essential; that women are forever resourceful and resilient; and that shifting power dynamics at home, although unsettling, is ultimately rewarding for everyone in the family.

Just as these women inspire us, so do the communities that surround them—communities beginning to reject violence against women in all its forms, while motivating everyone to uphold people’s human rights equally. From these communities, we have learned that everyone can (and must) do something, that men are allies, and that activism comes from the heart.

A woman’s control over her body and sense of safety is fundamental. It is a prerequisite for everything else. Yet so many women live without it. For this reason, we are passionately working to bring power and possibility into women’s lives by addressing the roots of the injustices many experience on a daily basis.

In the years to come, we aspire to further strengthen the efforts of the activists and organizations now mobilizing communities toward change; we strive to increasingly influence this field of work by shaping discourse and practice; and we commit to investigating the hidden implications of our approach, in order to hone our efforts for the greatest possible impact.

With conviction and compassion, we carry on.

“I now know I have power.”

To everyone who knows a woman,

Join us,

The Violence Against Women Prevention Team
Over the past twelve years, it has been inspiring to watch the growing use of our methodologies and the increasing initiatives preventing violence at the community level. For so long, prevention was considered to be ad hoc trainings and awareness raising, rather than long-term, systematic efforts to shift the social norms that breed violence. From the beginning, we knew that a foremost priority would be helping to build a new understanding of what effective prevention looks like—and that doing so would require building a new body of resources that in themselves would be invitations to act.

Our progress in this regard has been palpable, and our activities multifaceted. Our resources describe a methodological evolution. They include our Resource Guide for mobilizing communities to prevent domestic violence, to our corresponding training video entitled The Approach in Action, to our Training Process for enhancing the capabilities of community activists, to the SASA! Activist Kit for preventing violence against women and HIV. Simultaneously, we have also strengthened conceptual dialogue, by authoring various thought pieces, by fostering discourse between activists through the GBV Prevention Network, and by speaking out on critical advocacy issues. Altogether, these initiatives have created a new and hopeful understanding of primary prevention—locally, regionally and internationally.

The success of activism relies on skillful execution. A group of passionate, well-intentioned activists achieves little without the skills required for their work. It has always been our focus to articulate the “how” of prevention, and not just the “what”—but moreover, to do this by providing the practical training, details and materials needed to animate the work, first in the minds and then on the ground. Today, our partners are honing their skills rather than building from scratch. They come to us with a clearer understanding of their knowledge gaps and are challenging us with their experiences. As their needs become more refined, our offering becomes more sophisticated. Together we are raising the bar for performance in the field.

Over the years, we have strengthened skills through both direct and indirect efforts. Groups have called on us directly for training and technical assistance, or have asked for our collaboration in the field. However, our indirect impact cannot be overlooked. Activists globally have described the substantial skills gained from having free access to all our resources. While these resources are suitable for broad reference and adaptation, they were intentionally designed with the specificity that enables full implementation and independent skill building. They embody principles that speak to multiple cultures and countries. They include the level of detail, step-by-step guidelines and full complement of materials that make every aspect immediately actionable, and every idea so clear that it inspires countless more.

We have always known that our strength was building the strength of others. Today we celebrate the outcomes of this approach, as we see the exponential reach it has realized.

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Children

“Big people should know that children are not just for tomorrow—but also for today. We are here, and we have things to say!”

A child with self-worth is a vision to behold. Alive with imagination, free from violence, with spirit unbroken—this child symbolizes a community at its best. Such a child has a voice. When that voice is heard, the simplicity and clarity of ideas therein reveal rare and wondrous insights. That voice reminds us that children are the present, and not just the future: that they are actors today, and not just potential for tomorrow.

However, so many adults are bound by the legacy of their own violent childhoods and treat children as they themselves were treated—extinguishing children’s voices before they emerge. This reality hurts, and locks entire societies into a fate of unfulfilled potential, with a poverty of possibilities. Yet therein lies the opportunity for any adult to learn alongside children the alternatives to violence and to ensure the cycle is broken before influencing new generations. This is a powerful act of regeneration—the abandonment of the familiar for the possibilities of today.

Nelson Mandela once said that “there can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.” These words make us stop and reflect on the disconnect between our compassion for children and how children are so often treated. These words narrow our attention on one simple fact: a violence-free childhood is every child’s right.

In the coming years, our work at Raising Voices will include crafting more ideas that help others stop, reflect and change their minds about children: what they are worth, what they are capable of, and how we should nurture and cultivate that potential.

To succeed in this work, we will need to listen to children deeply and skillfully. We will need to work with every corner of the community, from schools to churches, from neighbors to public officials—with all who have a hand in shaping children’s experiences of childhood.

With passion and pragmatism, we will persist—energized by the urgency of this work.

To everyone who knows a child,

Join us,

The Violence Against Children Prevention Team
**When we started this work, one thing above all else was missing: the articulation of children’s perspectives on the violence perpetrated against them.** Our first priority was to listen—to bring forth children’s voices in a child-centric manner, and to help them claim their rightful place in public discourse. Over the years we have learned a lot about the nuances of children’s perspectives and have sought opportunities to bring children’s priorities to the public sphere.

Today, through a variety of initiatives, the voices of Ugandan children are integrally present in our work. In some cases, these voices have been directly responsible for specific changes. For example, what children told us about what a good school would look like from their perspective is now the foundation of our widely used *Good School Toolkit*. What refugee children shared with us about their experiences of violence, motivated UNHCR-approved agencies in Uganda to make specific commitments for action.

In addition, children’s voices have had a broader influence, increasing the overall support for the prevention of violence against children. For example, our frequently accessed report *Violence Against Children: The Voices of Ugandan Children and Adults* and our award-winning multimedia campaign both feature children as key protagonists for their cause, and both have substantially shaped public dialogue in Uganda.

In 2008, we launched an annual national media campaign that has since stimulated dialogue throughout homes, schools and workplaces. Using strategically timed contributions on radio, television and in newspapers, this campaign succeeds by triangulation—with people’s engagement increasing with each new exposure. The dialogue is further enriched by personal engagement through activities such as mural painting, community outreach, days of activism and more.

These efforts have shifted the landscape for Raising Voices in Uganda. We have gained the interest and trust of journalists and media houses. We have received recognition as experts, with key groups asking for guidance on how to prevent violence against children. We have earned a voice in policy-making processes and the respect of key allies within the Ministry of Education and Sports and the National Council for Children—relationships we can use strategically to advance the issues that concern children. Importantly, the energy of this work has also strengthened the collective standards and creativity in efforts preventing violence against children, which we can now continue to build upon.

As a result of sustaining this dialogue over several years, today a monthly audience of two million Ugandans are watching, listening and following our lead. This reality provides us with even more motivation to continue pushing boundaries.
The Raising Voices Story
Many people ask us, Why East Africa? Because we had lived and worked here? Because it was what we knew? In truth, the reasons are many, and yet one reason stands above all others: in East Africa, community abounds. People live with deep connectivity. The personal is public. Life is raw and exposed. Incidents of violence against women and children are frequent and visible, and yet so are acts of compassion and of the human spirit. Since change requires an open heart and the combined efforts of many, East Africa seemed a perfect place to begin.

That said, the rich humanity of East Africa also gives the illusion that change will come quickly—that you can easily touch people’s lives. Of course, change is never easy. Seventy percent of women in Uganda and almost all children live with violence in their lives, and although change is in motion, it would be a disservice to romanticize the real tess.

Amid a myriad of development efforts, we decided that delivering quality work required rooting ourselves in the lived realities of the region, and that meant a commitment to place. However, we also recognized the benefits of staying connected to a broader international community. Thus, we became a rare breed in the development community with our feet firmly planted in the soil, yet with a reach that crosses oceans. This combination has brought rare insights, unlikely to come through one perspective alone. While colleagues all over the world have inspired our thinking, our regional roots have strengthened each effort.

East Africa

A vision comes to life when it finds the right home. With a pioneering model of violence prevention—and eventually a $30,000 grant that would feel like a windfall—Raising Voices found a home in Kampala, Uganda. Although just a two-person operation at the start, there was passion and commitment from collaborating partners to help pilot the founding model in a community outside Kampala called Kawempe. There, as seen across East Africa, a sense of community was alive and ever-present. That community spirit became an anchor of hope in those early days and in the years to follow for testing change grows in the connections between people, and through an inspired collective effort.
Believing in the Human Spirit

In twelve years, we have learned a lot about people. The most striking revelation of all has been the resilience of the human spirit. We have learned that people, when inspired, reach for the best within. And when presented with a future that resonates, they bring their personal lives to bear.

However, this reality is as powerful as it is fragile, and depends on showing a deep respect for people and human nature. As a result, it has shaped Raising Voices in three fundamental ways.

First, we have learned to begin with ourselves. Working at Raising Voices is not just a professional journey; it is a personal one. We support each other in reflecting on and envisioning the change we seek in our individual lives. We take the time to meaningfully examine why we each do this work, what it means to do this work, the values and dreams that brought us here, and how through our work we grow ourselves.

Second, we have committed to being vision-driven rather than project-driven. We have learned that chasing projects produces initiatives that by design must be imposed upon communities. In contrast, our vision—of people leading their own transformation—inspires us to innovate ways for action to emerge from within communities. It leads us to pursue work that sparks critical thinking, healthy debate and grassroots action—creating opportunities for individuals wanting to be activists on their own terms, equipping organizations with the approaches for generating a critical mass to lead change. Ultimately, our vision impels us to invest trust in people.

Third, we have learned to see our work as an interchange rather than an offering, as a two-way conversation rather than a one-way act. In so many ways, community members tell us where they are at and what they are ready for. They have so much to say, and we have the responsibility to listen. Just as individual change comes gradually, community change is also a staged evolution that will, and must, take on a life of its own. Our job is not to control the process, but to believe in people, and in how that belief will spur positive change.

Following its pilot, the Raising Voices community mobilization model became known for sparking dialogue and action against violence against women at every level of society. It was a fresh take on development work that emphasized the complex and interconnected qualities of communities themselves—from engaging individual women and men, to their families, friends and colleagues, to the institutions they relied on, to the media that informed them, to the leaders shaping public opinion, to the government officials crafting legislation—all through a multifaceted web of activity. The meaning and order for these activities came from theories and principles that underpinned their implementation. However, success hinged on one unspoken belief: that the human spirit, when called to action, would respond.
The Art of Activism

As the work evolved, so did the visual landscape. Raising Voices’ posters, murals and cartoons appeared throughout communities in a multiple languages, usually as part of larger community-led initiatives. They depicted a storyline that at the time was rarely seen in violence prevention: positivity that echoed the promise of the change they encouraged. Crafted by local artists, they felt recognizable. Artfully simple, they triggered emotional understanding. But above all, they played a part in changing the face of activism itself, as fear-based images condemning perpetrators of violence gave way to images of hope and possibility. Groups began encouraging change through positivity rather than shame, while community members welcomed activism that felt relevant, inspired and uplifting.

In contrast to the activism fueled by anger and aggression is an activism defined by hope and possibility. But what allows this alternative activism to be positive yet penetrating? What enables it to be arguably more powerful?

We have learned that positive activism invites people in. If activism simply tells, there is little for people to bring of themselves. If activism asks, it allows people to take part in shaping ideas. People’s first reactions may be to challenge or reject, but in doing so they gain the security needed to later consider alternatives.

We have learned that positive activism must be personal and, often, in-person. No matter the number of television ads, radio dramas, posters and cartoons, their effect must be supplemented by in-the-community, on-the-ground, face-to-face engagements with community members for their full potential to emerge.

We have learned that positive activism must be immersive. If people see a single message, it is them against it. If they are exposed to new ideas from multiple places of trust—a poster in the hair salon, a radio drama on their favorite station, a comic at a friend’s house, a mural on the wall of the health clinic—they feel the liberty to pause and reflect. The activism becomes integrated into their personal world, and thus, safer to connect with.

Lastly, we have learned that positive activism must give life to an alternative future. It is ineffective to say that something is wrong, unless people can see the desirability of what is right. When people hold in their hearts and minds the vision of an inspired future, when they feel joined by community in the realization of that future, then the energy becomes contagious and creates a groundswell of change.
The Values of Being Nimble

Growth is seductive. It lures you into a vision of doing more, better, faster. Since our founding in 1999, we have continually aspired to grow our capacity. However, our current team of thirty is still modest compared to many nonprofits, and this is intentional. Over twelve years we have learned to respect growth, and today we value our modest size as an unquestionable source of strength.

Being small has made us nimble. It provides us the ability to evolve rapidly and responsively, based on the needs of our team, and of the communities and partners we serve. It enables us to remain at the forefront of ideas and methodologies and to keep pace with the steady advancement of prevention in the field.

Being nimble brings opportunities. With minimal bureaucracy, we can learn from issues as they arise. As a close-knit team, we can fuel a culture of passion. With everyone seeing the details, we can share an attention to quality. With team members propelled by values, we know when we slip from our path.

However, being nimble requires careful choices to ensure efficiency and effectiveness: which initiatives synergistically enhance one another, which staff positions form a powerful core team, and which tasks are best completed by external collaborators. Being small requires forethought, more than we ever imagined. It brings challenges that demand focus.

Opportunities and challenges combined, our modest size has led us to become a better version of ourselves. We have retained the spark of the early days, while increasing our effectiveness and impact. Our commitment to our organizational values creates a culture that energizes and requires energy. It attracts those who thrive on continually listening, learning, responding and evolving. In the end, it inspires a different kind of growth.

As the work grew, Raising Voices became recognized for its innovative contributions to the field, and was often called upon at all levels to contribute insights, methodologies and skills. This growing influence, although inspiring, introduced new and challenging terrain. Collaborating with global activists to national government, while making ideas for how to build on past achievements, sometimes distracted from the organization’s focus on developing practical ideas that made rhetoric actionable. The overarching question during this time: How best will we realize our vision? Beneath that: How do we maintain quality? How do we nurture team passion? How do we remain flexible? How do we stay true to ourselves? Ultimately, the answers were found in the value of managing growth.
It is still the early days for truly comprehending what primary prevention looks like on the ground. The only way to proceed is through innovating, testing and evaluating new ideas, with the courage to have one’s approach redirected rather than affirmed.

Over the past twelve years, we have learned that progress comes as much from imagination as from knowledge; that while building our strength and credibility, we must forever stoke the inventive mind that will inspire new ways to awaken change. This imperative to keep innovating can be disconcerting, as it requires thinking outside the mainstream. Simply put, we work against the status quo, while asking for faith in a vision that will take years to achieve. Nevertheless, partners and community members are bringing their ideas to the table, while making brave changes to their lives and the way they live.

Since our founding in 1999, our work has required trust in something beyond our grasp, with no guarantees about the journey or destination. Yet from the women and children striving for lives free of violence, and from the community members building a culture that supports them, we have learned to hold true to our vision and to persist along the paths that lead us closer.

We have learned that fresh ideas and action are most powerful and penetrating in three domains: practice, learning and influencing. These areas of work will define our way forward.

**Activism** means continuing to inspire and support communities, organizations and institutions in strengthening and pioneering violence prevention on the ground. **Innovation** means integrating opportunities for reflection, analysis and evaluation at every level to strengthen accountability and to contribute learning to the field. **Influencing** means investing in the far-reaching impact of collaborating with partners, the Ugandan government, donors and the international community in shaping the policies and programs that redefine what’s possible.

With vision and courage, change will come.
To our funders, our Board of Directors, our partner organizations, community members and children—you believed in us. Our success comes in large part from your confidence, trust and investment in our potential. Each accomplishment, each breakthrough, each life touched would never have been without your belief in our vision and philosophies. Whenever we are connecting with partners and community members, whenever we are bringing our voice to global dialogues, whenever we are shaping new ideas from our experiences—you are with us.

This journey is equally yours. Thank you.

The Moriah Fund
The Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund
Canadian International Development Agency-Gender Equity Support Project
Hivos
Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
American Jewish World Service
UN Women
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
The Oak Foundation
The Sigrid Rausing Trust
The Ford Foundation
McKnight Foundation
An Anonymous Donor
Nela Foundation
The Slobodin Fund
Tides Foundation
Irish Aid
UN Women Trust Fund
The Stephen Lewis Foundation
Program for Appropriate Technologies in Health
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine