



Learning Together: A Guide for Feminist Practice in Violence Against Women and Girls Research Collaborations

Prevention of and response to violence against women and girls (VAWG) has become more prioritized at the global level in the past decade, with recognition of the pressing need to create safer environments for women and girls around the world. This is a welcome development, building on years of feminist activism and research in the Global South.

As a result of the increasing emphasis on evidence-based violence against women programming and policy, activist-researcher partnerships are becoming more common. The evidence base is strengthened when rigorous research methodologies are brought together with a deep understanding of program and context.¹ These collaborations bring both opportunities and challenges.

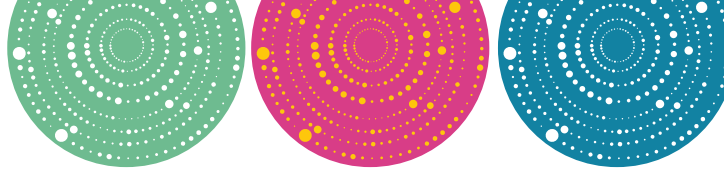


“Hierarchies of knowledge mean that practitioner knowledge and perspectives, together with deep understanding of socio-political context, are not always valued as compared to traditional academic research knowledge . . . Co-production of knowledge is a concept that is central to many research partnerships. Yet in reality there is often a disconnect between providing space for marginalized Southern voices, and the perception (in academia) of what constitutes rigorous, credible evidence.”²

- Christian Aid & Rethinking Research

While evidence is important, there is need to discuss and critique what is considered “rigorous” or “good” evidence and how best to ensure that all research generated and disseminated is grounded in experience and ethical practice. For example:

- **Reflecting on hierarchies of knowledge**—what evidence is considered “robust” and who decides this?
- **Preventing unethical research practices around partnerships**, whereby partnerships between organizations based in HICs (high income countries) and LMICs (low- and middle-income countries) can lead to the exploitation of people and resources in LMICs.³



- **Exploring how evidence is documented**, who has access to it (due to language, format, costs, or other variables), and how the evidence is used to benefit a program and the broader field.^{4, 5}
- **Actualizing mutual knowledge transfer to ensure skills are instilled**—activists can deeply engage in research, while researchers can broaden analysis to include practice-based knowledge, and better appreciate how comprehensive understanding of programming can strengthen research methods, skills, knowledge production and research uptake.
- **Ensuring a shared opportunity and responsibility** for both activists and researchers to contribute actively and meaningfully to analysis through writing, speaking, presentations and/or other forms of participation.

Many existing guidelines on how to break down these questions come from research organizations based in HICs which may perpetuate power inequalities and very few discuss how these collaborations work in practice. We believe that activist-led guidance can support the interests of activist organizations and the development of mutually beneficial and equitable collaborations between researchers and activists.⁶

Who is this guide for?

This guidance note is designed primarily to support activist and feminist civil society organizations in LMICs to navigate and build meaningful, long lasting collaborations in VAWG research. This guidance can also support research organizations and donors to foster more equitable power dynamics within these partnerships. It is our hope that both activist organizations and researchers can grow through researching and learning together in a way that recognizes and values diverse forms of knowledge and experiences, and mutually upholds partners' agency throughout the process.

The “Why,” “When,” and “Who” of Research Partnerships

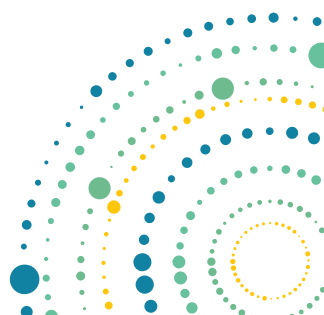
Why Collaborate?

Activist-researcher partnerships can generate learning, build credibility, prompt action, and maximize impact of programs and policies.⁷ The combination of practice-based knowledge with research know-how elicits a meaningful knowledge⁸ exchange where the ultimate impact in VAWG programming and evaluation is better than could have been achieved by either partner alone. All partners can benefit from emerging insights, new skills in research, and develop more effective and informed VAWG policies and programming. Partnerships can also expand the visibility of activist organizations' work in new spaces and to new audiences in wider VAWG sector and provide researchers' insight and skills in understanding and managing on the ground realities of programming.

Box 1. Is partnering with a research institute in the best interest of an activist organization?



Many questions emerge in VAWG programmes and there are different ways learning can happen. A formal partnership with a researcher or research organization is not always appropriate or needed; not every question can or should be answered through a research partnership. Some questions are best explored through internal program monitoring whereas other questions may benefit from more systematic explorations where technical expertise in research and analysis is critical.⁹





When to Collaborate?

As a first step, it is helpful for activist organizations to define their learning objectives and consider whether a research partnership is advantageous to fill specific needs. For example, by discussing:

- **What do you hope to learn?** What are the increased risks of violence against women during COVID-19? How many disabled or LGBTI survivors are you reaching? Why is backlash happening? Is the program reducing incidence of violence?
- **Why is this important?** Is it to respond to concerns from community members? Does it relate to your organizational mandate? Does it respond to donor's requirements?
- **Who will be most interested in the findings?** (e.g., communities, donors, or other practitioners)
- **How will you use the learning to strengthen your work on VAWG?** Can activities be better aligned with community experiences? Will the study strengthen the broader VAWG field? Does it address gaps in existing knowledge on VAWG?
- **Where are you in your program cycle?** Can your learning questions be addressed retrospectively, or do you need to begin prior to any programming? Do you want to add a research component on an existing program or begin a new initiative?

In addition to clarifying organizational learning objectives, it is also helpful to consider whether (or not) you have dedicated staff and systems in place to provide direction and manage a research partnership itself. Most importantly, consider repercussions of including a research component on the communities with whom you work—research may alter activities, require community members to volunteer time, or limit programming geographically. While there is no simple formula for whether (or not) to move forward, discussing these questions within a “do no harm” framework can clarify the positive contributions and potential drawbacks to make an informed decision.

Box 2. When donor-driven demands conflict with realities on the ground

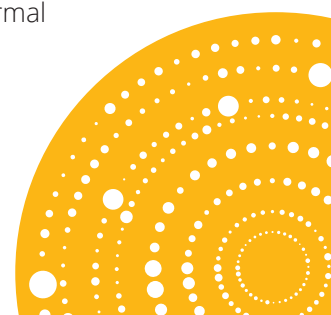


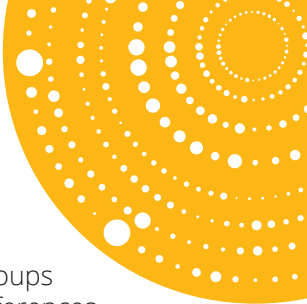
A non-profit organization based in West Africa began implementing a VAW prevention methodology. The project's donor directed the NGO to conduct a randomized controlled trial (RCT) after activities had already started. As a result, the NGO had to separate communities into control and intervention arms, with the control communities immediately ceasing activities already underway. Not only did this compromise the validity of the RCT itself, but

more importantly, was unethical and potentially harmful to the women and other members of the “control” community. Ideally, the conditions of a research should be determined prior to the beginning of programming. If the research begins after programming has commenced, it is critical to identify a methodology that can maintain the “do no harm” principle, such as a retrospective analysis.

Who is a good research partner?

In research partnerships, process follows need; allow your strategic objectives to inform the type of partner needed. There is no “one size fits all” to identifying a research partner. Some collaborations may be pre-existing, while others may result from a selection process initiated by a donor or a call from the activist organization or research institute, involving Terms of Reference, formal submissions, and/or interviews.





Clarity on your organization's learning needs will inform the research consultants and/or groups you approach for potential partnership. Approach partners through pathways such as conferences, internet searches or network recommendations, and then further clarify the objectives of the research together once a partnership has been established.

Consider these questions (and any others) as you deliberate moving forward. Ask for prior research papers and other learning outputs and references of former partners to better understand the capacities, expertise, and approach of potential partners.



Box 3. Qualities of a research partner to consider

Technical Expertise:

- **Content.** Has the research partner engaged in VAWG prevention research before?
- **Research methods.** What are the strengths of the research organizations in different kinds of research methods? For example, are they applying/conducting mixed-method studies¹ (e.g., combining quantitative and qualitative data), qualitative research, participatory methods and/or randomized designs?
- **Linguistic.** Does the research partner have capacity and/or experience in the primary language where the research is taking place, or are there resources for translation?
- **Geographic.** Is the research organization familiar with the social, political, economic, and cultural context? What might the challenges and possible solutions be for working with an institution that is geographically far away?

Values-alignment: Partnerships flourish when they are based on respect and nurtured through a commitment to relationship building, recognition and respect for the skill and expertise of each partner, open communication, equity, and kindness. A shared commitment to feminist principles will help ensure high-quality research that prioritizes women's safety and needs throughout and highlights gender inequalities at the root of violence. Consider reviewing the organization's written values

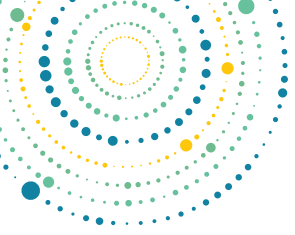
(if available) and having an open conversation about how these commitments will be brought to life during the proposed partnership.¹⁰

Reputation: Does the research organization have a well-regarded reputation in how they approach partnerships in LMICs? This might be assessed through consultations with former/current community organization partners with questions such as:

- **Was the community organization satisfied** with the research partnership and process?
- **To what extent** did the partnership meet expectations?
- **To what extent** was power balanced (or not) during the partnership?
- **Was there a process to ensure** that technical knowledge was shared and left within the activist organization? (Where a research organization invests time to ensure the capacity to engage in research and knowledge generation is strengthened within the activist organization.)

Access to Funding: Is there secured funding or concrete possibilities for fundraising? Will the research organization commit to co-fundraising? Will the community organization's involvement (e.g. staff, resources, space) in the research adequately funded?

¹ Quantitative data are usually collected from questionnaires or surveys where respondents' answers are converted to numeric values; questions and responses are limited to a pre-defined set of options. Qualitative data are usually collected through one-on-one or group discussions or free form written responses where the questions/inquiries are more flexible and can follow the respondent's lead and responses are completely open.



Defining Partnership Principles

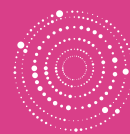
Once you have defined learning objectives, established viability of the research project, and reflected with your teams around key considerations, you can establish a solid foundation for a fruitful collaboration by jointly developing your partnership principles.

Defining shared principles to guide the collaboration can help reduce frustration and strengthen solidarity and respect for differences. Partnerships thrive when there is deliberate attention to address, unpack, and balance power dynamics, just as we aim to do in our VAWG programming. Achieving this balance takes active work from all partners and a willingness to unearth, own and work through explicit and implicit bias. For instance, discussing ‘equity’ will necessarily highlight areas of privilege and power. Building skills and comfort in discussing how inequalities may manifest in the partnership itself—such as pay scales, access to funding, opportunities for travel or authorship, leadership roles, English-language biases, etc.—will pave the way for more transparent conversations throughout the partnership, especially when difficult and sensitive issues emerge.

Partnership principles create an explicit commitment to a shared set of values and ethics that can shape decisions and support accountability. This process is distinct from defining research-related roles and responsibilities (discussed in Section V below). You may choose to draw on existing guidance or develop your own

Box 4. Operationalizing shared principles under SVRI’s South-South capacity building collaboration

SVRI’s mentoring and technical assistance program in East Africa ensured that co-creation was streamlined within all aspects of the capacity building project. By integrating ongoing assessments and mentoring, partners had space to meaningfully grow, realistically adapt VAW prevention programming, and strengthen professional development through the publication and showcasing of knowledge products.



Box 5. Putting partnership principles into practice: Examples from the field

- **Rethinking Research Collaborative outlines** eight principles for developing ‘fair and equitable’ research partnerships: **put poverty first; critically engage with context; challenge assumptions about evidence; adapt and respond; respect diversity; commit to transparency; invest in the relationship; and keep learning.**¹¹
- **Building and sustaining fruitful partnerships between activists and researchers** discusses several principles underlying successful partnerships, such as to “name (and value) the complementary skills each partner brings and understand what is important about project processes and outcomes to each partner” and to avoid “creating a skills hierarchy within the partnership, where research skills are assumed to be more critical than programming expertise, community relationships, and the practical know-how of implementing interventions.”¹²
- **Developing a framework for successful research partnerships in global health** defines seven desirable attributes, that may also be relevant for VAW research partnerships: **common focus; shared values; equity (recognition and respect for different capacities, sharing resources, inclusion); reciprocal/mutual benefits; transparent and consistent communications; leadership (clear delegation of roles and responsibilities); conflict resolution mechanisms.**¹³





(see Box 5 for ideas). The discussion itself can be a helpful first step in applying these principles in practice, as well as creating time and space for regular reflection of how principles are/are not being implemented throughout the partnership.

For VAWG research, grounding the collaboration in feminist principles is essential— focus on ensuring equality, inclusion, and participation, transforming patriarchy, and amplifying the voices of women and girls to eradicate all forms of discrimination and violence.¹⁴

Ultimately, any strong partnership requires accountability, honest communication, flexibility, and an openness to mutual learning—with each other and the communities where we work. It may also be helpful to view relationship building as a valuable output of the partnership.¹⁵ An investment in developing shared principles reflects a commitment to relationship building, the process (rather than just outcomes), and can support amicable resolution when tensions and disputes (inevitably) emerge.

Carrying out the research process

With partnership principles established, you can focus attention on finalizing the research objectives, terms of engagement, deliverables, timescales, allocation of funds and resources—as well as how determining how the research and programming will interact. These decisions depend on your learning questions (e.g., the *type* of knowledge and evidence you expect the research to generate), research methods, and available time and interest for collaboration.

Developing a Formal Agreement

It is important to discuss and document the roles and responsibilities of all partners as well as any other key agreements related to the work. Ideally, these commitments can be documented in a formal agreement. Two main types of agreements include (but are not limited to):

1. **Contract.** A contract is legally enforceable agreement between two or more parties that creates an obligation to engage or not engage in a specific act or action. Before signing any type of contract, teams should understand principles of fair research contracting and commissioning.¹¹
2. **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).** An MoU outlines the roles and responsibilities of each party involved in the research along with areas of shared responsibility.

Whether or not you decide to pursue a contract, it is critical to develop an MoU. A well-developed MoU will enable the partnership to be resilient in navigating complex issues that may arise during the collaboration.

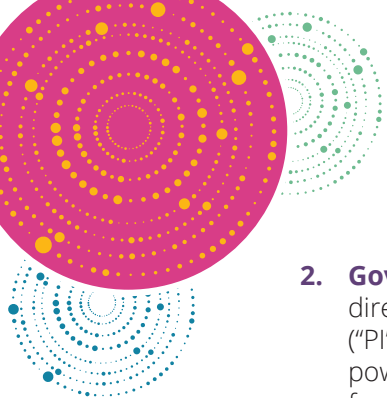
When drafting an MoU, it can be helpful to start with the principles and key learning questions to be addressed through the research (as discussed above).^{11, 16} In addition, consider language around:

1. **Goals.** What is the purpose of the research? This may be quite different for each partner and needs to be explicit from the outset. For an activist organization, a primary goal may be to have data that informs programming on VAW prevention; for a research institute, a goal may be to contribute to the academic literature and increasing a group's publications in peer-reviewed journals. These are not mutually exclusive but clarity on the goal will shape the partnership, resource allocation and outputs, and how the partnership can support and amplify complementary goals and at time, make difficult decisions.

¹¹ To learn more about fair research contracting and commissioning refer to: Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE); COHRED's Research Fairness Initiative, and the Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research Partnership Assessment Toolkit.

¹⁶ Research funding is limited and winning a research bid can be a highly competitive process. Large international agencies are generally better resourced to bid and win research funds. Sustainable use and fair distribution of limited research resources requires acknowledgement of the power differential inherent in getting research funds and a contracting process.





2. Governance and leadership. What formal governance structure is in place to provide direction, manage the partnership and resolve conflicts? The designation Principal Investigator (“PI”) indicates the person at the helm of a research project, who holds decision-making power throughout the process. Organizations are encouraged to consider a co-PI model that formally establishes joint leadership of the project for both research institutions and activist organizations. This is a demonstration of equity.

3. Conflict resolution. How will conflicts be identified, managed, and resolved? How flexible will the partnership be to predict deviations and who will decide on this?

4. Roles and responsibilities. What are the roles and responsibilities of each partner and what will all partners do together? What resources each partner will provide (financial, human resources, equipment etc.) and/or receive? What are gaps that may need to be filled by external partners? For example, there may be an organization who designed the VAWG methodology of focus, that can help with consultations on how to design the study and what implications the design might have on programming.

5. Communication. How will the team ensure regular and effective communication between all members as well as external stakeholders? Create mechanisms for regular discussion and check-ins throughout the partnership to address any emerging issues.

6. Authorship, intellectual property, and data ownership. How will all partners be involved in analysis and interpretation of the data to ensure it is well contextualized? What happens if the results are not favorable? What research and other outputs are needed and for whom? Will all partners review and approve products before they are submitted for publication or distribution? How can partners establish co-ownership of the data and how can they be used at the conclusion of the project? Who will collect and store the data safely? How will written permissions of data use will be granted?

7. Dissemination plan. How will the research findings be communicated to stakeholders, by whom, when, and how? How will both traditional mechanisms for academic dissemination and community or popular audience dissemination be included and equally valued/resourced? For instance, how will the findings be shared with communities? And if findings will be presented at conferences, is there equal funding for researchers and practitioners from LMICs to ensure visibility of all contributions and each perspective?


8. Resources and finances. How will the team make budget-related decisions? How will fairness in financial management and allocation of resources be established? How will fundraising responsibilities be allocated? How much transparency is required from partners in the budgeting process, including institutional and salary costs, as well as funds for professional development? This is an area where power dynamics play a large role and can be implicitly entrenched through opaque processes, lack of transparent discussion and withholding of budgets.

9. Monitoring and evaluation. How will the partnership itself be monitored and evaluated? To what extent did the partnership and process live up to the established principles and values? Is there a procedure for when the research study ends? How will program activities be sustained and/or concluded in a way that minimizes harm to the community?

Box 6. Establishing authorship

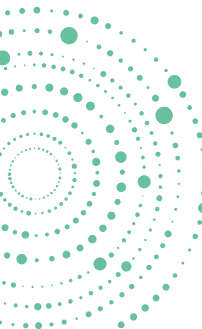


The position of first and last author are often important for researchers' careers, but it is critical to acknowledge all partners' contributions to a product through authorship. Some journals have guidelines for authorship order, and these may be helpful to review to gain an understanding. Partners can discuss the value of co-authorship of knowledge products at the outset and negotiate fair visibility on authorship order on academic articles and popular products.



Whatever formal partnership agreement is used, ensure that dedicated time and resources are available for each party to engage equally and fairly in its development, review, and negotiation.

Conducting Collaborative Research



Activist and research partners bring complementary strengths to the research process. By collaborating on the research design, implementation, interpretation, and dissemination, activist organizations make important contributions, as findings are significantly stronger when rigorous methodologies are brought together with a deep understanding of the program and program context. A highly collaborative ‘co-creative research’ approach is gaining visibility and credibility to increase the usability of findings for policy and practice.

Some key discussion points to establish good collaboration include:


- **Timeline and realistic expectations**

Connect program activities with research activities in a way that makes sense for the type of research method (e.g., in some research studies, program activities should not start before baseline data are collected). The degree of flexibility in programming and research activities should be decided at inception; for example, practitioners may be accustomed to dynamic programming that can be adapted throughout implementation whereas researchers may not expect modifications to be made during the course of an evaluation.

- **Developing research questions, tools, and methods**

Developing research questions, tools, and methods is a joint process, with the activist organization's internal learning objectives serving as a foundation for honing and agreeing on specific research questions between partners. Together, build clarity around which questions the findings can and will explore, and which questions may be outside the scope of the study, as well as what specific research methodology is most feasible and ethical for the communities in which the research is taking place.

To fully understand the impact of a program, it is valuable to use a mixed methods approach from various participants such as program facilitators, community leaders, program



“Our working definition for co-creative research is research that values the expertise and perspectives of those likely to be affected by the work, and those who utilize insights from the work. We distinguish co-creation from other concepts by relating it to the quality of processes and relationships developed through a programme of work, rather than by seeing it as merely a means to an end. Co-creative research, then, is a commitment to the quality of processes being both the means and an end.”¹⁷

-Nichols et al. (2019)




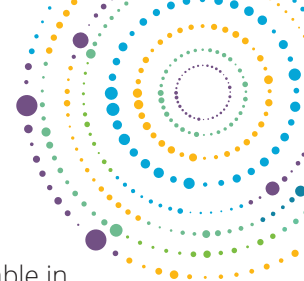
Box 7. Planning Ahead: Considering the possibility of unfavorable results

What if the research finds that the program does not work or seems to do harm? There is potential reputational risk for activist organizations if unfavorable results emerge.

Part of the planning process can include honest conversation about this possibility and consider what partners are willing/not willing to do, including regarding donors' expectations.

Additionally, it can be helpful to frame the research with staff and funders as learning—no matter what the final report says—right from the start.





participants, etc.¹⁸ Integrating practice-based knowledge into the research plan is valuable in order to obtain a holistic and nuanced view of the program.^{IV}

Quantitative data collection tools should be based on existing measures that are reliable and valid,^V and that are carefully adapted to the study/research at hand. Pre-test and modify tools prior to data collection to confirm that they are informing the research question(s) and that concepts have been accurately and sensitively translated into local languages. Data collection tools are strengthened through a participatory process, often initiated by the research partner with inputs from the program team and pretested for community feedback.



● **Obtaining Research Ethics Approval**

It is essential that both researchers and activist organizations conduct their work in ways that are ethical and safe for all involved, including community members and staff. This means maximizing the benefits to all and doing no harm. Often research studies develop protocols^{VI} to ensure the ethical and safe conduct of the research and these (together with the research proposal) are reviewed by an ethics committee. However even if a formal ethics board review^{VII} is not required—for instance if the data collection is intended solely for programming purposes and not intended to produce learning for the broader field—it is important that all data collection adhere to established guidelines^{VIII} for ethical VAWG work. Any VAWG programming and research must always safeguard women and children.



● **Data collection**

Data collection plans should be feasible and ethical such that no one (activist, researcher, or community member) is physically or psychologically harmed because of the study, and that data are accurate and checked for quality and stored safely. Large scale studies often bring data management challenges of storage, access and sharing of data across partners. Identifying (and costing) a central data management system provides organization and accessibility and keeps data safely stored (i.e., no compromises of confidentiality and no data loss). Ideally, all partners can participate in recruiting and training data collectors (e.g., enumerators, interviewers or data managers). Work closely with communities to build understanding and acceptance of the research activities and develop a feedback mechanism for communities and all stakeholders involved in research.¹⁹

● **Data analysis and interpretation**

Partners should discuss the quantitative and/or qualitative data analysis and interpretation plan to ensure that findings will be contextualized and clearly presented. While past experience may suggest that programming is beneficial to individuals and communities, research results may reveal otherwise for a variety of reasons, including: timing of the study, poor evaluation design, inappropriate data collection tools, measurement errors, or limited understanding of context. Negative findings may also be an accurate assessment of an ineffective program—even if this contradicts program monitoring data or anecdotal impressions (sometimes organizations have a skewed view of their program impact based on unrepresentative experiences, or community members may feel pressure to provide positive reviews to the program team). To build a comprehensive and accurate analysis, collect multiple forms of data on several dimensions of the outcome/s of interest and triangulate. Programs can have different impacts on different people and these nuances help understand program outcomes. Ultimately even if the results are not favorable, while this can be difficult for activist organizations and communities, there is

^{IV} For description of various types of research studies: http://raisingvoices.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/08/Raising_Voices_Primer_English.pdf

^V Reliability and validity tell us how well a method measures what you want it to measure.

^{VI} A protocol is a document that describes the research process, including key objectives, study design, and methodology

^{VII} An ethics review board is a committee that reviews research methods and protocols to ensure they are ethical.

^{VIII} Examples of guidelines on ethical VAWG work include: Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists; Ethical and safety recommendations for intervention research on violence against women; SVRI Safety and Ethical Recommendations for Research on the Perpetration of Sexual Violence.



still value in the learning process, the relationships developed, the opportunity to innovate and strengthen programming, as well as translate the knowledge into actionable recommendations for other practitioners, donors, and stakeholders so that future programming can be stronger.



Box 8. Sharing from the SASA! Study

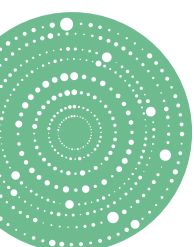
Experimental evaluation designs (where data is collected from ‘intervention’ communities receiving the program and ‘control’ or ‘comparison’ communities) aim to attribute any observed impacts to the program itself. However, this approach requires tightly controlled processes that can affect programming. For example, when conducting an RCT of SASA! —a community mobilization approach to preventing violence against women—the requirement to have clearly delineated ‘control’ and ‘intervention’ communities limited aspects of the program. For

example, activities with religious leaders and the mass media were eliminated due to the risk of ‘contamination’ (i.e., control communities possibly being exposed to the program). SASA! community activists were also told where they could work, which was important for the research but counterintuitive to the approach, which relies on the widespread flow of ideas. For community-mobilization programs, it is helpful to consider these trade-offs between the demands or research rigor and the opportunities for program diffusion and organic activism.

● Outputs, Dissemination and Uptake of Findings

Developing a joint dissemination and uptake plan for the research process and findings that meets the needs and interests of both partners should outline to whom, how and when results from the research will be presented before the research starts (and specified in the MoU, as noted above). It can be problematic for an activist organization to wait years for an academic journal article to be published before disseminating findings through other outputs to their communities and funders, as well as using findings for policy advocacy and driving social change. All knowledge products (e.g., academic articles, blogs, briefs, guidance notes, presentations, infographics, videos, social media or other media pieces, etc.) generated throughout the research process should be developed together so that learnings are accurate, accessible, appropriate, and contextualized. Ownerships of the products/works should be clearly spelt out at the outset including use of logos, names, and archiving. During dissemination, partners can also identify new research questions to pursue collectively or individually, as well as document lessons, interpretations, and uptake of lessons among audiences introduced to your research.

Conclusion



When carried out with care and dignity, research partnerships between activist organizations and research organizations can strengthen two-way knowledge exchanges, improve programming and policies, and make meaningful contributions to the field of VAWG. While the research process may be daunting, we are excited to see the emergence of more equitable partnerships and thought leadership in the ethics of co-creating feminist research. Creativity and flexibility to build a partnership that amplifies the strengths of all will allow for important learning and strides to be made that will ultimately help us to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls.



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