# Creating and maintaining a culture of self and collective care at Roising Voices

775

# Introduction

Working to prevent and address violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) brings with it inherent stressors. Practitioners, researchers and activists may listen to stories of pain and trauma, as well as be exposed to highly distressing situations (Billing, Gevers and Dartnall, 2021). As part of the <u>Sexual Violence Research Initiative's</u> (SVRI) committed work to addressing vicarious trauma and building a caring and kind field - most recently through the <u>We Care project</u> - the organisation has partnered with <u>Raising Voices</u> to explore how they strive to institutionalise self and collective care.

This case study shares examples of how Raising Voices defines self and collective care, what these concepts look like in practice, and how they try to build and maintain cultures of care with staff and within their partnerships with communities and other organisations. We explore the ways in which practices of care are infused into the work space and programming and the impact that a culture of care can have on individuals, the organisation and the ways in which VAW and VAC prevention work gets done. Transforming unequal power relations is a central component of Raising Voices' approach to all of their work, including self and collective care. Cultivating cultures of care over the past two decades has involved tensions, difficulties, trade-offs, and successes. The case study highlights the ways in which Raising Voices is not immune to challenges and mistakes as well as what has worked well for the team along this ongoing journey.

Institutionalising self and collective care into organisations working to prevent and address VAW and VAC is not a one-size-fits all endeavour. What works well for an organisation like Raising Voices might contrast with what is required for another institution located in a different context, where the work-related stressors, staff needs, and resources available might differ. Nevertheless, we hope that this case study will be a useful resource for practitioners, researchers, and others in a wide variety of institutions including civil society and academia, and especially those in low- and middle-income countries. The insights also provide useful guidance for funders on what is needed to resource and sustain meaningful self and collective care in organisations working to prevent and respond to VAW and VAC.

### How the case study was developed

This case study is a collaboration between Raising Voices and the SVRI. A series of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions informed its development. Interviewees included 14 Raising Voices staff members from a diversity of teams and positions in the organisation and two representatives from Raising Voices partner organisations.

### **About Raising Voices**

Established in 2000, Raising Voices is a feminist non-profit organisation based in Kampala, Uganda, working towards preventing VAW and VAC. They aim to do this through three inter-related programme areas: practice, learning and influencing. The work across these three areas focuses upon transforming unequal power relations between women and men, girls and boys and adults and children. The organisation understands violence as an abuse of power – not just at individual levels, but also at the level of norms, systems and structures. This analysis permeates all of Raising Voices' work.

Raising Voices has approximately 35 staff members – the majority are Ugandans, based in Uganda. A small number of staff members (both full and part-time) work remotely from diverse regions including southern Africa, Latin America, Europe and the US.



# A journey towards care

Since its inception, Raising Voices has strived to build a values-based culture driven by social justice principles and a deep commitment to activism (Raising Voices, 2015). The organisational approach to care has evolved over the years: self and collective care have always been valued, though in the early days of the organisation, staff did not use the language of 'self or collective care' and instead infused the ideas through staff development, a culture of kindness and a deep commitment to 'starting with ourselves' as part of the change they wished to see in the world.

The seeds of the organisation's approach to care came in part from a strong commitment towards valuing people and understanding the importance of allowing people to bring their full selves to work. Staff in the organisation see themselves as activists with the responsibility to live the values they promote in communities. This means they see personal change and growth as part of their commitment to a wider political struggle.

'We are activists. We are also striving to embody our values, to live with justice, equality and compassion. We are not just trying to change things 'out there'. We start with ourselves and see ourselves as part of the struggle. We can't do that if we aren't bringing all of ourselves to work.' - Raising Voices staff member

This has meant dedicating significant time throughout the life of the organisation to values clarification, collective visioning and deep listening to staff's lived experiences. The creation of safe spaces which encourage staff to share, reflect and discuss has been an essential component of this process. Part of valuing people has involved welcoming and celebrating each and every person's full humanity, rather than viewing staff as 'tools' or 'instruments' to get the work done, and trying to make organisational decisions that promote, rather than undermine staff wellbeing.

#### 'At Raising Voices I know that I'm seen by the organisation first as a human being, then as a staff member.' - Raising Voices staff member

Valuing relationships has also been central to the way the organisation has sought to cultivate a positive and caring organisational culture. Part of this has involved ensuring staff members are able to nurture their own relationships – for example, enabling staff to take time off work to see their child graduate, to visit a sick relative or to attend a funeral. The importance of relationship building has extended to the communities Raising Voices works with and the partners they engage. As we will explore further in this case study, the organisation has cultivated an approach to partnership and community engagement in which everyone deserves the same levels of respect and inclusivity as Raising Voices staff themselves.

This people-centred focus persists today and is expressed in the Raising Voices' organisational value 'Putting People First'. Through trial and error and a lot of collective effort by all in the organisation, a distinct organisational culture has emerged in which care as an expression of activism is nurtured, elevated and demonstrated through day-to-day interactions that show care and kindness, regular retreats, wellbeing sessions, all-staff check-ins and safe spaces which encourage critical reflection and staff feedback.

### What does self and collective care mean to Raising Voices?

In Raising Voices, institutionalising care starts with intentionally supporting and encouraging staff to honour their own self-care and providing them with spaces to do so. Self-care means the following things to the members of staff who contributed to the development of this case study:

- Self-compassion and acknowledgement of the importance of balancing wellbeing alongside organisational commitments and responsibilities to the communities the organisation works with and for
- Taking responsibility for personal wellbeing and holding oneself accountable for staying well with the understanding that, while the organisation plays a role in supporting people's wellbeing, ultimately self-care requires individual effort and energy
- Understanding personal needs and limits
- Attending to emotional, physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing, and understanding how each of us can be impacted when we are exposed to trauma not just through our work, but also in our lives in general
- Building in time for regular self-reflection e.g., pausing to check in with oneself during the work day

The organisational understanding of self-care has relational components. Staff in Raising Voices repeatedly said, although taking individual responsibility for self-care is vital, self-care cannot only be left to individuals. This is where the notion of collective care comes in – described as a practice that reinforces an individual's ability to care for themselves.

#### 'The best way we can practise self-care and take care of ourselves, is to surround ourselves with people who care about us.' - Raising Voices staff member

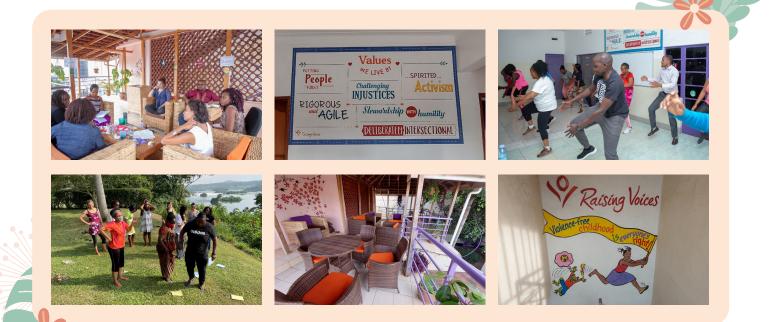
Raising Voices staff repeatedly describe a sense of interconnectedness – the idea that when one staff member is suffering, everyone is affected. In patriarchal societies, caring and care roles have fallen to women and girls. Raising Voices has strived to create a culture in which everyone – regardless of their gender – has a role to play in organisational care and in supporting others to practise self-care. Those who contributed to this case study understand collective care in the following ways:

- Holding oneself and each other accountable for prioritising one's own wellbeing. Some staff spoke about the importance of taking responsibility for one's own self-care because it affects the wellbeing of the entire collective *'When I don't care for myself, it affects my colleagues.' - Raising Voices staff member*
- Seeing wellbeing as a shared responsibility
- The reciprocal nature of caring was acknowledged when people shared the ways in which benefiting from collective care in the organisation meant that there may be times that you need to 'give back' to the organisation. Reciprocity and collective care might mean, for example, stepping in to help when a team member is away on compassionate leave
- Providing support to those who are exposed to trauma, not just as a result of the work they do, but also because of their personal histories. Support can take the form of psychosocial counselling with an external counsellor which can be requested by any staff member if needed
- Building relationships with colleagues, partner organisations and communities with respect, compassion and kindness. Kindness is viewed by some in the organisation as a political stance in a world characterised by so much disconnect and carelessness, kindness can become a radical act
- Compassionate and respectful communication with others and acknowledging that at times of crisis, regular empathetic communication is vital to supporting staff wellbeing
- Proactive rather than reactive approach is the idea that it is important to practise collective care on an ongoing basis rather than waiting for something bad to happen and then responding

• Embedding care into organisational policies, practices and systems – this includes provision for maternity leave, flexible working arrangements and compassionate leave

5

- Integrated into programming rather than separate from it
- Celebratory! Care is extended and shared through happy moments, for example, to celebrate when a staff member has a new baby or if someone gets married
- Cultivating beauty in the organisational environment from the understanding that surroundings can positively or adversely impact one's wellbeing. The organisation embraces colourful décor, feminist illustrations and cultivates a beautiful garden for staff to enjoy



#### Finding time for fun

Prioritising fun is a critical part of the way that Raising Voices practises collective care. Making collective wellbeing activities fun can be a way of encouraging those who might be resistant to take part. This is done through arranging family days out at the beach, hip-hop and Zumba sessions, warm-up games and intentionally reminding each other to bring humour and pleasure into the working day.

### The power of framing

Careful thought has gone into how Raising Voices frames the concept of self and collective care. There is often a need to counter any preconceptions people might have about these terms being commercialised, foreign concepts that involve spending excessive amounts of money on luxuries or "treats". While the processes, events, and organisational dedication of time off and resources for self and collective care cost money, kindness is a mindset – a way of seeing and approaching people, the work, and the opportunities and challenges in each day – that doesn't cost money but needs intentionality behind it. The most accessible care strategy of showing up with kindness everyday, even when hard, is a disciplined and intentional practice, and a personal decision independent of financial resources. This approach democratises self and collective care and makes it collective rather than only something the organisation does for or gives to staff. It's also about what staff do for and give to each other. The practice of kindness is something that staff are politically committed to that holds them accountable to being caring and co-creating a caring space.

6

Raising Voices frames self and collective care in the following ways:

- Self and collective care can involve the power of small things done regularly

   meaning they do not require large sums of money or time. They can involve checking
   in with oneself and each other, taking time to greet others rather than going directly to
   our desks in the morning, having conversations with colleagues about non-work related
   issues, sharing lunch and a laugh together, sharing books and reading recommendations,
   making the work space comfortable and welcoming, creating spaces to discuss self and
   collective care, or co-directors sending cards with personalised messages to each staff
   member at the end of the year.
- Self and collective care is a matter of integrity and an ethical imperative. It acknowledges that violence prevention work can be traumatising and draining, and that staff need a safe environment and caring support structures as part of a do-no-harm approach.
- Self and collective care is central to Raising Voices' mission. If the organisation is working to rebalance unequal power relations in its programming and is asking communities to question their own relationships to power, then staff need to start with themselves and build their awareness of how we all struggle with power in terms of how we use/misuse it. This means analysing individual relationships to power and how they impact upon our ability to care for ourselves and each other.
- Self and collective care strengthen the movement to end violence against women and violence against children. Practices of care generate the resilience and stamina to sustain the work in the long term, and promote a spirit of generosity and goodwill to others.

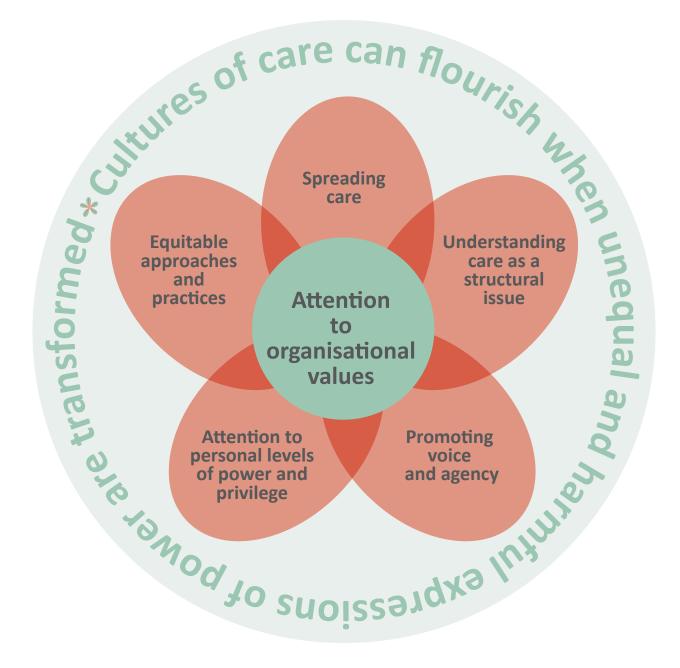
# Conceptual Framework: Power, equity, and self and collective care

Just as confronting power inequalities is central to the way that Raising Voices approaches its violence prevention work, an attention to power relations and power dynamics is key to how the organisation tries to promote and institutionalise care and wellbeing.

Cultivating positive expressions of power – in which power is exercised democratically, transparently and with accountability – is a foundational part of the way in which Raising Voices approaches the issue of self and collective care. The following conceptual framework in Diagram 1 highlights the ways in which harnessing positive, equitable forms of power plays a role in institutionalising self and collective care. This framework highlights that in contexts where unequal power dynamics have been addressed, practices of care are more likely to flourish.



# **DIAGRAM 1: Role of power relations and power dynamics in organisational care**



### Attention to organisational values

Positive expressions of power are able to come into being through Raising Voices' attention to co-developing organisational values with staff. Time and energy is spent to make sure everyone understands the values and how to put them into action, their relevance to the organisational mission, as well as how to draw upon them when it comes to making decisions. Discussions about values start at the interview stage, are foregrounded in staff inductions/orientations and it is the collective responsibility of everyone in the organisation to ensure newer staff members are able to understand the importance of organisational values.



### **Spreading care**

The organisation understands how unequal distributions of power and the ways in which people are affected by social systems based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, etc. mean that self and collective care are not accessible to all. Care is viewed as something that must be redistributed or cascaded to those who most need it. Extending care in this way is seen as a social justice issue.

'If we need care as people who work for Raising Voices, then what about our partners or the communities we work with? It's our responsibility to make sure we share the types of care that we are able to access more widely.' - Raising Voices staff member

'If something Raising Voices gives me benefits me, I need to find a way to make sure it benefits others. And if something is hurting me, I need to speak out before it hurts others'. - Raising Voices staff member

### Understanding lack of access to care as a structural issue

As African feminists have long argued (Horn, 2020), the root causes of the trauma and distress faced by those working to address violence against women are structural in nature and a result of persistent forms of exclusion. Raising Voices has understood the importance of responding to people's structural exclusion. For example, the organisation does not require staff members to hold Masters degrees or PhDs, with the understanding that job candidates – especially women or those from marginalised groups – may not have had access to post-graduate educational opportunities.

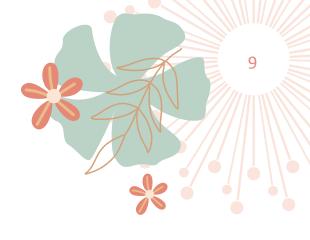
### Safety, voice and agency

Safe spaces are often an important part of ensuring a culture of collective care in a group or organisation (Billing, Gevers and Dartnall, 2021). A safe space is one in which a group of people come together where every member feels able to share openly and freely without fear of reprisal, censure, criticism, harassment, punishment, or harm (immediately or at any time after). A safe culture can help people to find their voice and exercise agency. Raising Voices staff, regardless of their seniority in the organisation, often speak about their ability to share feedback with their colleagues, including members of different teams 'without fear of reprisals' and with a sense that their feedback will be taken seriously and responded to. The link with staff members' sense of agency and voice and their wellbeing was clear. One member of staff who did not hold a senior leadership position said: 'Our voice matters. I play a role in organisational decisions. I can make decisions. That's a good feeling.'

### Attention to power and privilege

As an activist organisation, Raising Voices encourages staff to see themselves within and part of the struggle for social justice. With this frame, everyone in the organisation is encouraged to explore their own relationship to power and privilege and keep working hard to disrupt hierarchical ways of working and being.

'When we are in the office, the leadership team are encouraged not to just sit with other senior staff members. They understand the importance of engaging with everyone as peers – whether it's the cleaner or the security guard or the technical advisor. We see the value and full humanity in each and every person.' - Raising Voices staff member



Likewise, staff members try to consider their behaviour and their relative levels of power and privilege when working with communities. One person said: 'We don't show up [in a community] in a big fancy car, we don't sit on a chair when the community members are sitting on the floor, we don't make insulting comments about the lack of infrastructure in a particular community...' The organisation is constantly striving to model or demonstrate the values of equality and care that its programming strives to address.

### **Equitable practices**

The wellbeing benefits that are available to one staff member are accessible to all. For example, everyone can request psychological support or counselling if they feel they could benefit from it – not just those whose work directly involves engaging with survivors of violence. Everyone in the office is given a snack every morning – so people feel taken care of. All staff members receive an organisational contribution towards burial costs or a new baby or receive time off work to visit sick colleagues and to buy them a small get-well-soon gift.

*'Our partners stay in the same accommodation as we do when we are on work trips. Equity is really important to us.' Raising Voices staff member* 



Integrating care practices into policies, procedures and systems

Institutionalising self and collective care into Raising Voices has involved developing and implementing what some in the organisation call 'heart-based policies' – namely, written and unwritten policies and procedures that are aligned with the organisation's values and aim to support holistic physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. Staff in the organisation described how the organisation's policies and procedures both reinforce and reflect the organisation's values and support a sense of 'safety' among staff, who feel supported and 'held in care' by the presence and implementation of the policies. Raising Voices works hard to ensure care is resourced, and have been fortunate to partner with values-aligned funders. These policies and procedures, dependent on funds available, include:

- Generous leave policies, including annual leave, maternity leave, compassionate leave and leave for mental health needs. Staff are encouraged to take all the leave that they are entitled to rather than rolling it over.
- Discouragement of self-sacrifice.
- Week-long staff orientations/inductions that aim to ensure incoming staff start to understand the culture of the organisation and the commitment to proactive, regular self and collective care (not just their work responsibilities!). The induction content is standardised, though is adapted according to the role.
- Flexible working arrangements including flexitime for instances when staff might have to attend to personal issues, or feel tired or overwhelmed by work
- A sabbatical policy available to enable longer-term staff the opportunity to rest and recuperate.
- A staff savings scheme to support financial health.
- Showing up for staff in difficult circumstances, where possible, including during the Covid-19 pandemic and making contributions towards burial costs.
- Regularising staff development sessions where staff members discuss topics like self-care, work-life balance and scheduling regular staff retreats – at the organisation-wide level and within teams. Retreats will often be facilitated by staff members internally, though sometimes external support is needed for wellbeing activities.





While Raising Voices has been very fortunate to have supportive funders, the leadership team are extremely careful about what benefits are provided to staff, ensuring that the organisation is not 'overly' benefitting and that they are ethical stewards of resources. They understand that they must not lose sight of the fact that they are working in service of women and children in very poor communities. They strive to ensure policies are fair – not just to staff, but also to the communities and to their funding partners.

#### **Resourcing care policies and practices**

Raising Voices is privileged to have supportive, longer-term and core funders that allow some flexibility and autonomy in decisions relating to use of funds. These funders are primarily foundations and women's funds who recognize the importance of staff development and wellbeing. Budget lines are built into funding proposals for staff wellbeing and staff development – many of Raising Voices' funders share its commitment to self and collective care and allow resource allocation to this area of work.

The organisation develops five-year strategies to outline how it will work towards realising its vision – and they seek donors who are amenable to funding this longer-term approach. They acknowledge that typically shorter-term, project-based funding does not allow the flexibility required to meaningfully resource care policies and practices.

Because self and collective care are integrated into its programmatic approaches and methodologies, such as <u>SASA! Together</u>, additional funding is not always required.

### Role of leaders in supporting an environment of care

Raising Voices has a small Leadership Team – currently in transition to a team of 4 directors – where collective decisions are made on behalf of the whole. They meet collectively twice monthly to discuss key strategic issues and the health and well-being of the organization. The Leadership Team are committed to non-hierarchical ways of working and shared leadership. All staff are encouraged to develop and demonstrate leadership, and all are custodians of Raising Voices' values. All staff, particularly leaders, are encouraged to be aware of how they use their power – including by avoiding wielding power over others and, instead, acting in ways that can be supportive of staff's sense of agency, autonomy and wellbeing. This involves:

#### CREATING SPACE FOR STAFF GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND AGENCY.

This means being given space to carry out work that excites and interests, being supported to develop one's skills and being allowed to make mistakes along the way. Leaders also play a role in allocating tasks equitably – ensuring that inequalities are not reproduced according to the gender or seniority of staff in the ways that tasks are assigned.

#### STRIVING FOR BALANCE.

Leaders are constantly trying to balance their commitments to staff with making sure the organisation remains accountable to its mission, the women and children they work with and for, as well as its funders. This requires constant work and responding to challenges and tensions as they arise.

#### FOSTERING SAFETY.

All staff are responsible for creating a climate in which staff feel able to share feedback without fear of reprisal and for creating a culture of open doors – where any member of staff, regardless of their gender, level of seniority in the organisation, class, etc. is able to have their voice heard.

# SEEING THE WHOLE PERSON

Valuing the full humanity of staff members, including show an interest in their lives outside of work and treating them in a non-extractive way. This might mean balancing tensions between organisational work priorities and the need to honour staff care. It also means understanding how support needs for staff wellbeing might differ according to people's gender, class, ethnicity and other social relations of power.

#### MAKING ORGANISATIONAL VALUES VISIBLE.

All staff, and leaders in particular, play a critical role in regularly referring to organisational values, articulating they are important and role modelling putting them into action such as by being transparent about how values influence the ways in which decisions are made.

# NON-HIERARCHICAL COMMUNICATION.

All staff in the organisation are encouraged to avoid using terms like 'boss' or 'Madam' towards people in senior positions. While some people may find this approach disrespectful at first, as they settle into the organisational culture, they start to understand why it is important to do this and hope that this challenges traditional ideas of organisational structure and demonstrates a different way of thinking about hierarchy.



### Intensifying care practices during Covid-19

Many staff members and their families were directly affected by the different waves of the pandemic. Decisive action was taken in several ways to put the <u>organisational value of Putting People First</u> into practice. Some of this was facilitated by the decision of a few Raising Voices donors to provide the organisation with additional emergency funding during the pandemic, whereas other measures did not rely on additional external funding. Staff workloads were reduced, flexible working provisions were increased (for example, the organisation moved to simplified monthly workplans which gave people a chance to review and adapt more regularly) and individual and group counselling was offered. The organisation made an intentional decision to shift the way in which it evaluates its work and to redefine what success looks like, with the understanding that expectations for programme delivery could not be the same as before. Where possible, workplans were scaled back and more time was given to enable people to meet their deliverables.

Internal communication increased during this period. WhatsApp groups were used for regular checkins with staff and the leadership team regularly shared comforting audio messages. Access to these messages was facilitated for all staff – from security guards to interns. Covid-19 care packages were offered to all staff who caught the virus. These included healthy food items because people may have found it difficult to leave home due to quarantine and self-isolation. Staff were also assisted with logistics in medical emergencies (e.g., ambulances or finding space at hospitals) and given extended sick or compassionate leave when they or family members were ill. Financial support was provided at the onset of lockdown so staff could stock up on foodstuffs, as well as at other moments during the pandemic to acknowledge the significant financial burden of the pandemic.

# **Covid-19 Urgent Action Fund**

Due to social distancing restrictions, the Covid-19 pandemic has been a time when some people felt less able to provide care as well as to receive it. Raising Voices took the unprecedented decision to put cash (donated by funders) into the hands of their staff and partners to enable them to provide support to their families and communities. This was an unusual step for the organisation, given that it does not usually deliver aid or frontline services. All staff were allowed to request funding from this urgent action fund to support their communities – giving people agency at a time when so many felt they had little control and little ability to help those around them who were in dire need of support. Raising Voices extended this financial assistance to people in the community where the organisation is based - for example, the women selling chickens and food on the street outside the office, the regular boda-boda drivers, street cleaners, and other long-time service providers. They also shared financial resources with sister organisations who had less flexible funding and shared that support with community members who were involved in SASA! programming in Kampala, as well as with teachers and resource people throughout Uganda working on the organisation's This was an expression of the organisation's feminist values of solidarity and sisterhood.

# Integrating care into programming

Raising Voices' approach to self and collective care is holistic and not limited to the confines of the organisation and its staff. The organisation has been infusing care into its programming and the ways in which it engages with community activists and partner organisations for many years.

For example, as part of the organisation's Good Schools programme, Raising Voices works with schools, community organisations, parents, local leaders and policy makers to prevent violence against children in schools. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Raising Voices Good Schools team started to speak about mental health and self-care as part of its work with school teachers – including providing examples of how teachers can integrate moments of self-care into the school day for themselves, their colleagues and the children in their classes. When they noticed teachers taking on extra jobs during the pandemic and becoming overwhelmed, staff regularly checked in with them to enquire about their health and wellbeing via WhatsApp groups. Likewise, the Good Schools team has worked with District Education Officers and District Inspectors of Schools to explore what tailored support and care to teachers and students might look like. The organisation offered counselling services to Good School partners, highlighting the importance of mental health support for school personnel and students as they return in the coming year.

This work takes time and patience – at first teachers struggled to engage with the concept of selfcare, viewing it as a foreign concept. The Good Schools team have had to make the point that selfcare is not a luxury activity, and that it will help teachers to be more effective. One staff member shared that there are early signs that supporting teachers to focus on their own self-care has started to improve teacher-student relationships.

Care is also integrated into the ways in which the organisation engages with communities and activists. Self-care is part of community meetings and training workshops – in the form of making sure that meeting venues are comfortable, with cushions and snacks, and that agendas allow space and time to rest.

Striving for beauty is also important to the way that the organisation engages with partners and communities – community art, posters and communication materials are colourful, playful and designed to stimulate pleasure and fun.



'Raising Voices is a place that treats its community members with the same respect and inclusivity it does its staff. These porous boundaries between staff and community, the consistent respect for people... and the trust in people's ability to use their own logic and experiences... is transformative' - Raising Voices staff member (Raising Voices, 2015)

## **Caring for researchers**

Raising Voices understands that researchers working in the field of violence against women and violence against children are often required to listen to – or are exposed to – highly traumatic personal accounts of violence, which can take a considerable emotional toll (Coles, Dartnall et al. 2014). The organisation makes sure that its research teams and long-term study participants have access to counsellors and referrals for a range of mental health and violence response services.

# Caring partnerships

Representatives of partner organisations who contributed to this case study spoke about partnerships with Raising Voices being characterised by friendship, as well as by principles of reciprocity, equity and a commitment to building collective power.

Tina Musuya is the former Executive Director of the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP), an organisation that started life as a special project housed by Raising Voices before it expanded its work and became an independent organisation. She spoke about the two organisations being 'sisters' and having a unique relationship characterised by open communication.

'We always knew in our partnership we could talk about anything and tell each other anything – the good and the bad... There was always space for negotiation and sharing feelings. If one of us needed more from the partnership we knew we could always ask. We celebrated birthdays together and held family days in which we would invite our families along for special celebrations.' - Tina Musuya, former Executive Director of CEDOVIP

Both organisations share office space and over the years have shared resources such as meeting rooms and equipment. They regularly engage in collective wellbeing activities. These have included Zumba classes, yoga sessions, taking walks and jogging. Reciprocity has been central to their relationship – Tina Musuya describes times in the past when each organisation would step in to support the other when there were issues, such as staff gaps or funding challenges. Likewise, each organisation has contributed to key strategic processes including co-creating organisational values together so there is values alignment between each organisation.

### **Building collective power**

Practices of care have helped to build trust and collective power in Raising Voices' partnership. Tina Musuya describes a time when CEDOVIP and Raising Voices teamed up to approach a donor they felt was treating them badly and pushing them to deliver more than they were able to. Together, their voices were stronger. Knowing that they have each other's backs – even when there might be negative consequences – is a demonstration of solidarity, care and respect for each other.



Harriet Adong is the Executive Director of Foundation for Integrated Rural Development (FIRD), a women-led NGO in northern Uganda that works to prevent violence against women and children, as well as promotes sexual and reproductive health and rights, livelihoods and education for women and girls. The organisation has partnered with Raising Voices since 2014 on a variety of donor-funded projects and programmes. Harriet Adong describes a relationship in which her full humanity and that of her staff has always been recognised and valued, and says what she most values about the partnership is the way she is treated with respect, equity and kindness.

'I have never felt any pressure in this partnership – which is not the case for all partnerships. We work very flexibly with each other and accommodate each other's needs. We treat each other as human beings, not machines. For Raising Voices, collective care means thinking about and respecting my organisation as an institution but also as a group of individuals... There is an acknowledgement from Raising Voices that we are equals – we are all changemakers.' - Harriet Adong, Executive Director of FIRD

### Adapting care practices during Covid-19

FIRD did not have access to emergency funds to support organisational sustainability during the pandemic. Raising Voices helped FIRD to sustain its work through provision of a small grant (financed through emergency support provided by its funders), as well as by providing financial support for staff members and their families.

'Raising Voices' passion to think and care about their partners is very moving... During the pandemic, even though schools were closed, and we couldn't implement our projects, they encouraged us to continue to pay the staff their salaries even though they weren't officially working. That meant I didn't lose my staff members.' - Harriet Adong, Executive Director of FIRD

# Impact of Raising Voices' approach to care

Raising Voices is clear that they don't see the value in honouring self and collective care in order to optimise staff productivity or for instrumental reasons – instead they believe that it is possible to do rigorous, high-quality work while still taking care of staff. Indeed, care itself is an integral part of the way the work is done. Below, we explore the ways in which the organisation's approach to care has an impact at the level of individual staff members, the organisation itself and the work it does more widely.



# INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL IMPACTS

# ORGANISATIONAL-LEVEL IMPACTS

IMPACTS FOR PROGRAMMING AND THE WIDER VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN FIELD Some staff described how care practices in the organisation have contributed to their own personal transformation. They disclose that they have had the chance to heal from past traumas. Healing has been achieved through their own self-care practices and self-commitment to healing. However, the psychosocial support provided by Raising Voices, the presence of safe spaces and the organisational culture itself, has created a supportive environment in which they have felt able to start to process trauma.

The links between care and a sense of safety were mentioned by some staff members. Feeling safe has enabled people to feel they can take risks and make mistakes. One person said: 'When you feel able to take risks and make mistakes without fear, you can grow so much more as an individual.' Risk-taking can be important for cultivating innovation – and has played a role in supporting programmatic achievements (see Impacts for Programming, below).

Several staff members gave examples of how they feel more accountable to the organisation, its mission and vision as a result of the way wellbeing was approached. One said, 'No-one is forcing you to work as hard as you can or give your very best, but you want to because the organisation has shown such a high level of care for you.' Another said, 'Work is more important to me than before. I feel a sense of responsibility to the organisation and want to do my best for it. The way care shows up in the organisation is very motivating.'



# INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL IMPACTS

# ORGANISATIONAL-LEVEL IMPACTS

IMPACTS FOR PROGRAMMING AND THE WIDER VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN FIELD A focus on self and collective care at Raising Voices encompasses support for staff development and creating opportunities for people to engage in areas of work they feel passionate about. Staff members spoke about how this contributes to higher levels of staff retention and a strengthened sense of loyalty to and belonging with Raising Voices. Staff tend to remain in touch after they have moved on in their careers and there are examples of people who continue to champion the organisation and its work even though they are no longer employed there.

A strong focus on equity in the organisation has helped people to re-think how organisations can be run in a different way and how programming can be carried out on a more caring, equitable basis. For example, people have reconsidered traditional notions of what hierarchy might look like and how leaders might behave or use their power.

Several staff members mentioned that the approach to self and collective care at Raising Voices has increased their ability to deliver on their goals, compared to their experiences in other organisations:

'Because I do my work with a settled mind, I can relax and really focus on my work. There is definitely enhanced delivery.' - Raising Voices staff member.

'When one person's wellbeing becomes everyone's responsibility, you find that people's performance improves.' - Raising Voices staff member.



# INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL IMPACTS

# ORGANISATIONAL-LEVEL IMPACTS

IMPACTS FOR PROGRAMMING AND THE WIDER VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN FIELD Staff spoke about how the organisational approach to care enabled them to be more innovative in the way they approached their programmes work.

'Innovation requires a sense of stability and space in our brains to be able to think outside of the box. We are able to be innovative at Raising Voices in a way that I wasn't able to be elsewhere. This has an impact on our programmatic achievements.' - Raising Voices staff member

Others shared how the organisational approach to care has helped to spur activism in support of violence prevention at the individual, organisational and community level – which can have broader positive effects for the wider sector and support the sustainability of the work longer-term.

Raising Voices strives to integrate care and kindness throughout our programming and partnerships. For example:

- SASA! Together and the Good School Toolkit include specific activities for self- and collective care which ensures staff of partner organizations, communities and schools are exposed to these ideas.
- <u>The GBV Prevention Network</u> (coordinated by Raising Voices) has made self- and collective care a hallmark of its engagements with members from regular social media campaigns the central theme for the 2021 "16 Days" campaign was <u>"16 Days of Rest:</u> <u>Our Collective Resistance"</u> to the intimate spaces of Reflect & Re-energize processes in member countries.
- Raising Voices staff conduct themselves in global partnerships leading with kindness and valuing people before products. A recent stakeholder survey conducted by Raising Voices illustrates some impact of these efforts "Every email, every process, every publication from Raising Voices makes us feel like sisters." (participant, stakeholder survey)



# Challenges and tensions

Institutionalising self and collective care in an organisation like Raising Voices is not without its challenges and tensions. Here are some of the issues that staff and leaders grapple with.

### Struggles with reciprocity and personal accountability

There is an anxiety among some staff that the organisational culture and generosity could be exploited by those who don't fully buy into it or understand the importance of reciprocity – i.e., the sense that if the organisation provides support to staff, staff are also responsible for being flexible towards meeting the needs of the organisation. Expectations from staff that the organisation can 'fix' all of their issues can sometimes be high. In reality, Raising Voices, as any workplace, is working within constraints and commitments that means the organisation cannot and should not be responsible for meeting all the expectations or hopes of staff. In a workplace where staff are used to feeling cared for, this can be difficult for some to accept. Any decision about organisational provision of care to staff that involves financial resources must be carefully thought through – ultimately the funding Raising Voices receives is in service of its mission and this needs to be balanced with other priorities, including staff wellbeing needs.

Furthermore, a high degree of self-accountability is important for creating a culture in which self and collective care can thrive. Supporting staff to build a muscle of personal accountability – in which they take ownership of their role in maintaining their individual wellbeing as well as contributing to a culture and practice of collective care – can take ongoing discussion, support and time.

# Maintaining equity in a fluid context

Power dynamics are not static – they shift in ways that can make ensuring equitable practice complicated. For example, the organisation has given people the opportunity to occasionally work from home – yet not everyone has the space or an enabling environment in which to do so. Meanwhile, some staff members need to maintain a presence in the office more often than people in roles that facilitate them working mostly remotely. So what may seem as a positive accommodation for self-care can raise issues of inequity.

Structural and contextual factors may also complicate things. Some staff members mentioned that post-pandemic dynamics such as rising inflation and cost of living increases need to be addressed by the organisation. Rapid changes in the external environment means that staff expectations may be high and the ability of the organisation to meet those expectations may be limited.

# Mindset shifts take time and patience

Bringing people into an organisational culture in which there is care for staff members' personal lives, rather than a singular focus on an individual's role within the work sphere and their level of productivity, can feel uncomfortable for some people. There might be scepticism or mistrust at first and some discomfort about sharing more personal aspects of one's life at work. Shifting people's mindsets takes time, patience and ongoing discussion to really bring people on board.

### Limits of feedback

Staff at Raising Voices repeatedly shared the ways in which they feel able to share feedback openly and safely. At the same time, there are also staff reservations that it might be harder to challenge an organisation that cares for its staff's wellbeing so comprehensively from a reluctance to seem 'ungrateful' or to be seen as undermining what is generally viewed as a positive organisational culture.



### **Overcommitment and holding boundaries**

Some staff shared how the organisation's approach to caring for its employees' wellbeing might have a counterintuitive impact on people's ability to set healthy boundaries for themselves.

'When you are loved and cared for by an organisation in such a generous way, you feel to you need to give the organisation more and more. I end up working very late – I know some of us want to work beyond the organisation's expectations. This can have unintended consequences.' Raising Voices staff member

#### How do we grow a culture?

Organisational cultures can be difficult to scale. If the organisation grows, new strategies may be required. One staff member explains, 'Raising Voices is still a relatively small organisation with an intimate feel... Individuals are currently given lots of tailored accommodation for their own wellbeing needs. But this can become difficult as and if the organisation grows. What is possible now might not be achievable in the future.'

# Conclusions

Raising Voices' approach to institutionalising self and collective care has been over two decades in the making – and is still a work in progress. It has involved periods of trial and error, constant review, reflection and adaptation, as well as a willingness to engage with the tensions and challenges that a commitment to this area of work brings. The organisation has managed to build a caring culture first and foremost by paying attention to how people treat each other – with kindness, equality and dignity. To quote a Raising Voices staff member, while financial resources are important (for example, during extraordinary times such as the Covid-19 pandemic), so much of self and collective care is about 'the power of small things'. A thoughtful gesture, compassionate words, giving space to others in a meeting, stepping up to support a colleague who is struggling, are all actions that can go a long way towards building a culture of care.

A commitment to the importance of self and collective care infuses all of Raising Voices work and is not solely something that benefits its own staff. An ethos of care is integrated into its programming, the ways in which it engages partners and how it collaborates with communities. Raising Voices willingness to support staff wellbeing is carefully balanced with its responsibilities to the women and children in the communities in which it works, Raising Voices partners and its funders. Mirroring the attention to power dynamics embedded in its programming to prevent VAW and VAC, cultivating positive expressions of power is a central part of the way the organisation has strived to embed self and collective care into all aspects of their work. Working on issues relating to power is not always straightforward, resistance-free or comfortable – and it never ends, there is constant need for selfreflection, consideration and deepening the work.

Despite the challenges, the energy the organisation has put into building and maintaining a culture of care has had positive impacts on individuals, the organisation and its programmatic work, demonstrating that it is possible – with time and effort – to do rigorous and quality work to prevent VAW and VAC, while still taking care of staff wellbeing. Raising Voices is committed to continuing along this journey with an openness to learning from the challenges – and with a determination to be guided by principles of kindness, equality and compassion.



# References

Billing, L., Gevers, A. & Dartnall, E. (2021). We Care: Evidence Review. Sexual Violence Research Initiative: Pretoria, South Africa.

Horn, J. (2020) Decolonising emotional well-being and mental health in development: African feminist innovations, Gender & Development, 28:1, 85-98

Raising Voices. (2015) Creating an organizational culture for social justice activism. Learning from Practice Series, No. 1: Organisational Perspectives. Raising Voices: Kampala, Uganda.

Raising Voices. (2022) Stakeholder Survey: 5-year Strategy Review. Raising Voices: Kampala, Uganda.

# Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the team at Raising Voices for being open to share their self and collective care journey and learnings.

### Special gratitude and appreciation to the contributors to this piece:

Harriet Adong Tina Musuya Milly Nalutaaya Yvonne Laruni Hassan Muluusi Gladys Nanyanga Hedwig Tushemerirwe Dennis Okello Ronald Kafuuma Lucky Kobugabe Wilson Kasaija Tvisha Nevatia Angel Mirembe Claire Leisegang

This report – but not the work it describes – was made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of SVRI and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Authors: Leila Billing, Natsnet Ghebrebrhan, Lori Michau, Aník Gevers

Suggested citation: Billing, L., Ghebrebrhan, N., Michau, L., & Gevers, A. (2022). *Creating and maintaining a culture of self and collective care at Raising Voices*. Sexual Violence Research Initiative: Pretoria, South Africa.



Raising Voices





