

Nurturing & Elevating Practice-Based Learning

Overview

Practice-based learning is at the heart of Raising Voices' work, embedded in all that we do to prevent violence against women and children. Our first methodology, **Mobilizing Communities to Prevent Domestic Violence** (2003), was based on experimentation and learning around what does, and does not, work to catalyze change in communities. **SASA!** and the **Good School Toolkit** were later created in the same way—over time, through an iterative process of learning together with schools, communities, and our partners. We believe that this commitment to learning has played a critical role in developing relevant and impactful violence prevention methodologies.

Box 1: What is practice-based learning?

Raising Voices understands practice-based learning as the cumulative journey of intentional learning over time, informed by insights gained from direct experiences, observations, stories, informal reflections, monitoring processes, and more.

At its core, practice-based learning centers the experience and expertise of activists and practitioners as we develop, implement, and support violence prevention programming. This is distinct from research studies and other endeavors that aim to analyze, evaluate, or assess work from an external perspective, often led by individuals who are not embedded in the programming itself. In addition, we use the language of *learning* rather than *knowledge* to emphasize process over product. Learning is a continuous, generative, and organic process, distinct from practice-based 'knowledge' (sometimes called 'practitioner knowledge') that can emerge as a result.

Why practice-based learning?

Elevating practice-based learning is a political stance that explicitly values grounded expertise, or the intimate understanding of what it takes to create and deliver violence prevention programming. Far too often, we find that knowledge generated outside of academia and research institutes is undervalued and invisible when discussing 'evidence' in the field. Furthermore, mainstream funding structures tend to put a strong emphasis on monitoring and evaluation (M&E), which frequently directs organizational learning around measurable outputs, rather than a more holistic understanding of the program and its progress. In this context, academic research and technical M&E approaches are considered the most rigorous and meaningful, reproducing hierarchies of power that the larger vision of violence prevention seeks to dismantle. Actively engaging in practice-based learning helps puncture these knowledge hierarchies by celebrating and centering activists' diverse skillsets and perspectives.

While studies led or co-led by research institutes have been pivotal in generating evidence around what works to prevent violence, practice-based learning is equally essential; it is through practice-based learning that innovation grows. Practice-based learning also ensures a more comprehensive, timely, and contextual global knowledge base that supports transformative programs, healthy organizations, and vibrant movements to prevent violence against women and children. We are encouraged by the growing number of voices advocating for the need to validate diverse approaches to knowledge generation, including the: African Women’s Development Fund, Coalition for Good Schools, Community for Understanding Scale Up, Prevention Collaborative, Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI), and UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, among others. In the spirit of amplifying these collective efforts, this learning paper shares our experiences of nurturing and elevating practice-based learning at Raising Voices. We also suggest actions for other activist organizations to consider in deepening their own organizational learning culture.

Our Experience

Over the past decade, Raising Voices has strengthened our commitment to practice-based learning and to creating an organizational culture that supports, shares, and integrates learning for transformative violence prevention programming (see Figure 1).



Naming and formalizing 'Learning' as a core pillar of our strategy

In our **2012-2016 Strategic Plan**, we defined three areas of work at Raising Voices: Practice, Learning, and Influencing. Our expectation was for each area to be dependent on, and contribute toward, all the others, creating a virtuous cycle that supports quality violence prevention in our communities and within the field more broadly. Learning, which involves being experimental and self-critical, became a core part of our organizational identity, with the expectation that learning is the collective responsibility of all members of staff (not just the 'M&E experts' or research leads). This organizational commitment pushed us to be much more systematic around our learning processes and, importantly, signaled our aspiration to meaningfully contribute thought leadership and new knowledge for the field of violence prevention.

In reality, becoming a learning organization did not happen overnight and, in many ways, remains a work in progress ten years later. Embracing a learning mindset is not easy; it implies asking difficult questions, risk taking, experimentation, and even failure—all aspects that can be uncomfortable or even scary for many of us given norms around 'performance' and 'success.' Taking a systematic approach to learning also requires space for reflection, synthesis, documentation, and exchange—activities that are often considered outside the main scope of work for activists and practitioners. So, while the importance of learning for Raising Voices was clearly established in our strategy, considerable and ongoing leadership, support, and structure has been required to nurture practice-based learning across the organization.

Investing in a Learning Team

Another significant step was investing in a team with the explicit mandate of strengthening our learning culture and supporting all staff in understanding the roles and actions involved (as individuals, teams, and organizationally). In 2014, we brought on board a Learning Coordinator and created our first-ever, dedicated 5-person Learning Team. During the first few years we facilitated several all-staff processes to unpack what it means to adopt a feminist approach to learning (see Box 2). Alongside these efforts, the Learning Team experimented with different ideas for how Raising Voices could better catalyze learning at all levels of our work—trying out creative spaces such as 'Fail Fairs,' 'Learning Circles,' 'Program Learning Initiatives,' and more (several of which are still thriving today). As the custodians of our organizational learning framework, the Learning Team also plays a pivotal role in coordinating bi-annual 'Reflect and Act' sessions where we synthesize progress toward team-specific objectives, share across the organization, collectively draw out meaning, and identify the concrete changes needed to facilitate a vibrant learning-to-action cycle. Beyond supporting practice-based learning, the Learning Team also collaborates with values-aligned researchers to answer questions of emerging importance for our work which require additional support and research expertise.

Box 2: A feminist approach to learning

Raising Voices created these principles (2018) to help ground all our learning efforts in a feminist analysis. Our learning will:

Challenge existing hierarchies around 'what counts' as evidence. Our learning is best supported through a variety of approaches (including informal stories and organic processes) that can reflect the nuances and often non-linear characteristics of social change.

Prioritize women's voices and experiences in learning around VAW prevention. **Prioritize children's voices and experiences** in learning around VAC prevention. Doing so requires us to consider timing, safety, mobility, and location for meaningful engagement in learning activities. In addition, it requires skillful listening and tuning our ear to context and subtext.

Strive to do no harm. We recognize that gender transformative programming can spark backlash. Therefore, it is critical to create learning tools that can consider (and document) unintended consequences and create spaces to pause, reflect, and adapt based on what is happening in communities. We also provide referral information to formal and/or informal support services for anyone experiencing (or at risk of) violence.

Put people first. This includes upholding people's dignity during every phase of learning and requires that we think critically about the impact learning activities may have on staff as well as community members, including how findings will be shared with the community, integrated, and acted upon. In this way, we can better ensure that *transformative and responsive programming* is always the end-goal.

Enable leadership of community members. Just as in feminist programming, feminist learning activities promote leadership and meaningful roles for those nearest to the injustices the work seeks to address.

Advocating for the uptake of practice-based learning

Our efforts to elevate practice-based learning extend beyond Raising Voices. In 2016, we developed a working definition of practice-based learning which has also influenced and informed the discourse taking shape across diverse organizations. We also dedicate significant organizational energy to creating and sharing resources that can demonstrate the value of practice-based learning for the broader field of violence prevention. These resources aim to be practical, credible, and widely accessible, particularly for activist organizations. For example, we launched our ongoing 'Learning from Practice' series in 2015, which includes a formalized structure and peer review process with at least two external experts. Though time intensive, developing these resources brings rigor and clarity to our practice-based learning and ensures that this emerging knowledge is acknowledged, documented, and applied—at Raising Voices and beyond. A related area we are working toward is supporting partners to embrace an organizational learning culture and better systematize and share their own practice-based learning; this partner engagement enriches our own approaches to practice-based learning as well.

Key Learning

1. Embracing learning as an organizational identity is empowering.

As discussed above, elevating learning as a key strategic focus has added an important dimension to our organizational identity. We have seen how this shift has impacted our team, with staff gaining confidence in their ability to carry out prevention programming, to bring thought leadership and innovation to the work, and to connect and contribute to the broader prevention ecosystem. Elevating learning has also enabled more interconnected thinking between our other areas of work, with Practice informing Learning, and Learning informing both our Influencing and Practice. Such dynamics have helped bring our strategy to life, and make it relevant to all teams at Raising Voices.

At the same time, we have experienced challenges, and it has taken time to clearly establish the Learning Team's role within the organization. For example, we noticed that some program staff preferred to direct all learning activities to the Learning Team, and, ironically, learning started to become *more* siloed. And at times the Learning Team still feels pulled between competing organizational priorities, with both the VAW and VAC Teams developing a full learning agenda of their own, each needing substantial time and energy.

It requires intentional discussions, setting boundaries, and support from leadership to ensure learning activities are coordinated by a dedicated team, and yet responsibility and opportunity for learning is collectively held by all.

2. Differentiating between practice-based learning and research strengthens both.

Practice-based learning is an intentional and ongoing process that allows us to evolve, grow, and strengthen our work. Defining practice-based learning as a distinct approach to knowledge generation helps us balance organizational energy and better determine when external research partnerships would be most useful and worth the investment of time and resources. Thus, practice-based learning provides space for us to create 'fit for purpose' learning for ourselves. And when we do pursue research partnerships, we collaborate as intellectual partners throughout the process—from developing key questions, to interpretation and analysis of data, to dissemination efforts. From our grounded perspective, we scrutinize assumptions with an eye toward the practical applicability of findings and collaboratively work to ensure that the research is accessible to Raising Voices staff, activists and communities overall. (For more detail about what we've learned through our research collaborations and how we strive to infuse practice-based learning throughout the process, see our paper [Growing as an Activist Organization through Evaluation Research](#).)

3. Recognizing and valuing distinct roles within the learning process is critical.

As noted above, practice-based learning is an inclusive framework that embraces and builds upon diverse approaches—from informal reflections to more structured data gathering processes. Often there is a perceived hierarchy of expertise, even within activist organizations, where those who are more comfortable writing in English are seen as knowledge 'producers.' Yet in the process of practice-based learning, every step is critical—from program development to facilitation, community engagement, feedback, refinement, analysis, writing, design, and dissemination—and each skill set is valuable and necessary. There is ongoing work within Raising Voices to recognize and celebrate all involved, not just those who focus on analysis or creating the piece for dissemination. To further this aim, we dedicate time to supporting staff who feel passionate about growing their skills and recognize their contributions throughout the learning cycle.

4. Actioning practice-based learning requires an intentional mindset and ample flexibility.

One of the intentions of practice-based learning is to remain close to the programming, so that necessary changes can be actioned in real time. Doing so often requires us to pivot, revise, and rework what was initially planned, including adjusting activities and content. This kind of adaptive programming calls for deep listening, agility, and the stamina necessary to change course (see Box 3 for an example of actioning practice-based learning).

An added complication in our work is that many funders may insist on detailed plans at the outset of a new program and impose rigid expectations to deliver against these benchmarks. Thus seeking out (or advocating for) donors who recognize the importance of flexibility, experimentation, and learning is also critical. We acknowledge that programming that is strictly planned, implemented, and later assessed is, in many ways, much easier to deliver—it can run on autopilot. And yet, this linear structure undermines the agility that is so often the hallmark of quality and safe programming that is responsive to the evolving needs of communities.

Box 3: Pivoting with SASA! in Kampala

When we were first working with the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) to implement SASA!, we had placed a strong focus on shifting gender roles at the household level. This approach aligned with the global literature at the time (around 2006), emphasizing the importance of spouses sharing household duties as a key lever for gender norm change. However, in practice, we found that this intention was creating more conflict among couples and hijacking deeper discussions around how power was being held and used within relationships. CEDOVIP and Raising Voices staff identified this learning through careful observation and reflection, and discussed the implications at length. Over several months we decided to focus on listening to community members' needs and hopes for their intimate relationships, and slowly we adjusted our materials to better align with what we heard. This resulted in a key pivot in our programming to focus on core relationship values, such as mutual respect, care, and feeling valued (rather than redistributing household roles).

To integrate this shift, we rewrote considerable content, tested the new materials, and iteratively made further refinements along the way. What emerged was more powerful and productive conversations to talk through what couples expected from one another and how they behaved. This was practice-based learning in action. While it required additional time, flexibility, and staff that were willing to embrace change, it proved essential for safe and impactful SASA! programming (read more about our experiences in the Passages Project resource '[Equity, Ethics and Social Change: Real-life Case Studies Charting A Way Forward.](#)'

5. Diverse strategies and skillsets are needed to disseminate practice-based learning.

The sharing of practice-based learning requires distinct modalities to demonstrate credibility and relevance for different audiences. For instance, publishing popular materials (including blogs, illustrations, popular reports, etc.) may work well to share with activist organizations; academic articles¹ and policy briefs may be necessary to reach policy and funding decision-makers; and

1 While many academic journals are focused on publishing research studies, more and more we have found a receptiveness to publishing practice-based learning. See, for example, two Raising Voices publications that articulate learning from our direct experiences with SASA! and the Good School Toolkit: [Preventing violence against children at schools in resource-poor environments: Operational culture as an overarching entry point](#) and [SASA! Together: An evolution of the SASA! approach to prevent violence against women.](#)

illustrations and/or multi-media pieces may be best suited to engage communities. Writing and creating for such diverse outlets and audiences requires an extensive skillset, including areas of expertise not commonly prioritized for full-time staff, such as academic writing, illustration, graphic design, media communications, etc. As such, a willingness to dedicate organizational bandwidth and resources to internal skill building and creative partnerships is often necessary. We have also experienced that the process of developing popular materials or events for disseminating practice-based learning—such as social media tiles, videos and animations, virtual and in-person exchanges and events, etc.—can be motivating and energizing for staff. Participating in this kind of content creation can foster a deeper sense of accomplishment and ownership of our materials, which further fuels our desire to share them, thereby increasing uptake. Another important byproduct of developing these materials has been further shaping our visual identity as an activist organization. In these ways, the process of sharing practice-based learning can be creative and generative in itself.

Actions for Strengthening Practice-based Learning

In contrast to the many toolkits, books, and manuals on research methods, there is little existing guidance around how to elevate and nurture practice-based learning within activist organizations. Doing this well requires more than one-off initiatives. Further work is needed across the field of violence prevention to develop tools and platforms for practice-based learning. Below are some practical ideas to create an intentional organizational culture where practice-based learning can thrive:

- **Create regular spaces to prioritize practice-based learning.** Activities which provide a strong foundation for practice-based learning—such as recurring staff spaces for collective reflection and synthesis—are critical. These activities could be formalized (for example, by including them in staff and team work plans) and regularized to make learning systematic, facilitate knowledge creation, and deepen curiosity. Predictable, periodic learning processes that all teams contribute to and participate in signals that everyone has a voice and role to play in learning.
- **Nurture a learning mindset.** Inculcating a learning mindset requires creating a culture where staff feel comfortable and motivated to ask critical questions about their work and efforts in the broader field. This is immensely difficult and goes against the grain of the mainstream performance-based culture. However, with time, role modeling, and reinforcing messages, it is possible to create a safer space for questioning and learning. Organizational leadership can support this by demonstrating an open mind, approaching moments of failure as essential opportunities for growth, encouraging risk-taking, and rewarding innovation. In addition, creating opportunities for staff to hone diverse skills around critical thinking, analysis, writing, and communications can strengthen learning and professional development. Encouraging all staff to develop individual learning plans can boost accountability and promote more ownership of learning as a collective responsibility.
- **Learn from others.** As activists, we can get so deeply involved in our own efforts that we spend less time learning about others' work (through reading, conversing, visiting, etc.). Ideally, practice-based learning acknowledges, and is situated within, the broader knowledge base on violence prevention. Finding the space and cultivating the interest and discipline to stay abreast of new knowledge brings nuance to learning initiatives. By engaging with others' work, adapting principles from other disciplines, and interrogating ideas, we can better ensure that our thinking remains vibrant and relevant. Staying aware of and engaged with current work in the field also prevents reinventing the wheel and provides opportunities to connect with others and find synergies.

- **Create a learning vision.** Identifying the priority questions that can be answered through practice-based learning is helpful in securing and optimizing resources. This requires emphasizing learning from the outset of programming rather than as an afterthought. While there must always be space for spontaneous learning, having an organizational learning framework and a clear focus for learning initiatives helps maintain alignment with the overall organizational mission and avoids learning teams becoming diverted or overwhelmed.
- **Allocate a learning budget.** Advancing a learning vision requires dedicated human and financial resources, and many activist organizations already find their resources stretched thin. Collective advocacy to funders about the importance of practice-based learning is critical, emphasizing the ways in which practice-based learning can enhance programming, strengthen accountability to communities, and ensure that the grounded insights generated by activist organizations are represented within the broader knowledge base.
- **Develop a rigorous process of vetting insights.** To generate rich and useful knowledge, practice-based learning must involve a rigorous process of analyzing and interrogating emerging insights, while remaining grounded in direct programming experiences. This kind of rigor is distinct from that applied to academic research and other methodologies, however no less essential. Dynamic and active learning takes shape when an initial idea is consolidated and/or upheld by multiple sources over time, including the diverse experiences of different staff and activists, feedback from community members and/or partners, monitoring processes, observations, etc. This collective process of deliberation and scrutiny serves as a vetting process to ensure that knowledge emerging from practice is rigorously developed and appropriately attuned to the context. In addition, prior to sharing practice-based learning with the broader field, technical reviews from external colleagues engaging on similar work are critical. These necessary and often overlooked steps elevate the quality and uptake of practice-based learning, building the collective global knowledge base on violence prevention.

Interested in Learning More?

Check out these resources for more on practice-based learning in the field of violence prevention:

- **Raising Voices** has produced a series of 8 papers in our **Learning from Practice** series.
- **African Women's Development Fund** has created an introductory guide on **Generating Knowledge and Evidence on the Prevention of Violence Against Women** for African women's organizations.
- **The Prevention Collaborative** offers several resources on practice-based knowledge, including a **Position Paper** and guidance on **Approaches to Capture and Apply Practice-Based Knowledge**.
- **UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women** has published a 10-part series on **Elevating Practice-Based Learning on Pathways to Prevention**.
- **The SVRI's podcast Episode 2: Practice-based Knowledge** shares more about what practice-based knowledge is, why it's so important in the efforts to improve our prevention programming, and how it helps tell a more inclusive story about VAW prevention.



The Learning from Practice Series is a collection of articles that synthesize perspectives and activism emerging from Raising Voices' experience in preventing violence against women and children.

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