



Implementing SASA! in Ethiopia

Learning Brief

Background

SASA! is an evidence-based, community mobilization approach developed by Raising Voices, for mobilizing communities to prevent Violence against women (VAW) and HIV. It is organized into four phases to help transform community norms, beliefs and behaviors related to VAW and HIV. Community members explore power and how power dynamics between men and women can change positively over time. The ideas in **SASA!** engage individuals from all walks of life building the critical mass in a community with the purpose of creating social norm change to prevent VAW and ensure safety, equality and freedom to women. **SASA!** is an acronym that depicts the four stages of change in the **SASA!** approach: Start, Awareness, Support and Action. **SASA!** also means 'Now' in Kiswahili (meaning, now is the time to prevent violence against women').

In Ethiopia, Raising Voices partners with the **Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP)** to implement **SASA!** CSSP is a capacity development programme designed to support Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to promote the protection and fulfilment of the rights of women, men, young people, persons with disabilities, boys and girls, including hard to reach groups. CSSP is a phase-based programme whereby the first phase of the programme, i.e., CSSP1 was implemented from 2012 to 2017 while CSSP2 is being implemented from 2018 until August 2023.

In the beginning of 2013, CSSP1 approached Raising Voices to introduce **SASA!** to Ethiopia where government policies on gender equality and violence against women and girls are strong, but implementation and enforcement have not met expectations. This is because the structural causes of violence are very deep in society and require a range of different approaches which help both women and men to reflect and act on unjust power relationships.

Box 1- Program Strategies and Activities

The program implemented several activities which draw from the four **SASA!** strategies.

Local Activism

- Community Dramas
- Poem and Music
- Public Events (especially during March 8 and 16 days of activism)
- Coffee Ceremonies

Communication Material

- Power Posters
- Community Posters
- Comics
- Picture Cards
- Info Sheets

Media and Advocacy

- Community/FM Radio
- School Mini-Media
- Film developed by AAWA for CSSP1

Training

- Community action groups and community activists
- Media people
- Stakeholders and service providers (healthm police, etc)



In 2014 CSSP partnered with four organizations to implement SASA! However due to administration challenges with one CSO, implementation moved forward with three partners: Addis Ababa Women's Association (AAWA), Oromia Women's Association (ORWA), Women's Association of Tigray (WAT). All three are registered non-governmental gender-based associations i.e., with constituencies in each level of government structure and have strong working relationships with government structures at all levels.

Lessons from SASA! implementation in Ethiopia

In 2022, CSSP2 and Raising Voices commissioned a qualitative study to capture lessons from 7 years of SASA! implementation. The study focused on the experiences of AAWA and ORWA because it was not possible to involve WAT due to the conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia. This learning brief shares some of the key findings of the learning exercise. Four kebeles from Oromia and Addis Ababa were selected as the study sites and data was collected using individual and group in-depth interviews and FGDs with leaders and staff of partner organizations, community leaders, government officials and service providers, SASA! committee members, community activists (CAs) and community watch groups and SASA! stakeholders. A total of 12 interviews and 6 FGDs were conducted.



SASA! training session.

Findings

Community perception and significant changes

The study found that SASA! is well received by both community members and other important SASA! stakeholders (such as local government officials, community leaders etc.) and enjoys a good reputation across the board. SASA!'s good reputation goes beyond the *woredas* (districts) where it is currently implemented; neighboring communities and stakeholders are requesting for SASA!'s expansion.

Study participants shared that SASA! has brought about many positive changes in their communities, including decline in the rate of VAW, decline in child marriages, shifts in perception towards violence and how it relates to power relations between women and men, changes in attitude towards division of labor within households, enhanced role of women in household decision making and increase in the number of girls going to school. Below we describe these perceived impacts in more detail.

CAs used traditional spaces and events to reach out to their communities with SASA!'s message. These include community and religious gatherings like coffee ceremonies¹, funerals, wakes, *Idir*², and gatherings in local pubs. The most important of these SASA! activities were the regular coffee ceremonies frequented mostly by women, but also by some men, which provided a safer space, especially for women, to discuss sensitive issues that they otherwise would not have been able to raise.





Poster discussion during coffee ceremony.

The importance of coffee ceremonies was described by one CA as follows:



“...Wide range of ideas are exchanged in coffee ceremonies than when we meet individually, including household issues and domestic abuses. We have more chance to take on additional topics when we gather at a large number like coffee ceremony. Coffee ceremony is helping women to come forward and speak their mind” (FGD with CAs in Addis Ababa).

Among the perceived **impacts** that coffee ceremonies have had is the **increased reporting of VAW cases** to community watch groups and police who frequently participate in the coffee ceremonies. According to CAs, the involvement of police officers and community watch groups in these ceremonies has encouraged some women to come forward with their cases. In such cases, the presence of law enforcement or watch group members is taken as assurance that the women will not suffer harm for reporting their case. Given the involvement of these actors, it is critical for a program like SASA! to equip CAs with the basics of a survivor centered approach and enabling them to be fully aware of available referral pathways. This has been an important learning: even though the primary emphasis is on violence prevention, CAs must develop basic response skills to help ensure that women who seek help receive survivor-centered care.

The open discussions that take place during coffee ceremonies encourage women to reach out individually to CAs about the problems they are facing in their relationships, providing CAs with additional opportunities to provide support to women in need through referrals. The following story highlights the **changes** CAs have witnessed in providing support to survivors of VAW.



“...Women who do not want other people to know their case approach us individually. For example, there was this woman whose husband used to threaten to kill her. She was afraid that he would do it one day, when she came and asked to spend the night at my place one time. I made sure to take her to a safe house the next day” (FGD with CAs in Addis Ababa).

According to informants, the community engagements undertaken by CAs have registered good results in **challenging entrenched gender norms**. Improvement has been registered in the number of men participants in coffee ceremonies. Study informants shared stories of husbands who have undergone personal transformation in their views regarding gender norms and roles as reflected in their attitude and action towards household tasks traditionally considered as “women’s work” and household decision making.





After undergoing personal transformation with SASA! several men were reported to have taken up roles as CAs. For example, in Debre Libanos, 7 out of the 15 CAs in the *woreda* (district) are men (**Interview with government official, Debre Libanos**).

Another **significant change** that the program facilitated is the introduction of women in *Shimgilina*³, an important institution traditionally reserved for men. The involvement of CAs in *Shimgilina* has brought a structural shift by involving women as “*Shimgiles*”.



“Previously, it was prohibited for women to go for Shimgilina. But now women go with men for such programmes. This is because we have understood that women are equal with men” (FGD with CAs, Addis Ababa).

The study found that, in addition to the awareness creation and reflection activities, the support that SASA! provides to survivors of VAW has contributed to important changes at community level. The fact that the programme’s support structure is based on collaboration with community members who have been trained and encouraged to vigilantly look out for and report cases of VAW was repeatedly cited as a positive aspect of the program.



“Before SASA! we used to try to resolve violence through reconciliation between the perpetrators and the survivors. But now we work to understand and prevent the root causes of violence and solve issues. We also give priority to ensuring that survivors receive the help they require” (FGD with CAs in Addis Ababa).

An important **change** that study participants attributed to SASA! interventions is the transformation of community attitudes towards rape and other forms of VAW. Previously, rape was seen as “bringing shame on the family” and rape cases went either unreported or were handled discretely through mediation. As the following quote shows, SASA! has had a major influence on transforming such attitudes resulting in more reporting of rape cases.



“One major success is the change in the culture surrounding rape. Previously, when a woman was raped, the family used to cover it up to protect the reputation. However, after SASA! that stopped and rape incidents are reported to police” (Interview with government official, Debre Libanos).

Similarly, a staff of AAWA stated that the two *woredas* (districts) in Addis were selected as SASA! implementation sites higher prevalence of VAW. He cited a study conducted by the Women and Children’s Affairs Bureau following SASA! implementation which showed a significant decline in VAW in the two *woredas* (districts) which he attributed to the attitudinal and behavioral changes that was brought about by SASA!

SASA! has also **impacted** community activists. CAs involved in the programme reported their experience as being transformative. The trainings they received encouraged them to be self-critical in addition to capacitating them to become change agents in their communities.



“I have learned a lot from SASA! I have come to realize many things about myself that I did not know before. I have got insight about family, children, violence and much more. My time with SASA! has been very fruitful that it helped me to know and teach others. I’m so glad that I got the chance to learn and share what I have known to those who are near me” (FGD with CAs in Debre Libanos).

Partner organizations (AAWA & ORWA) and other stakeholders such as governmental bodies service providers also reported to having benefited from the trainings and technical support provided by SASA! resulting in enhanced institutional capacity to deal with VAW, including improved shelter policies, improved collaboration with and between *woreda* and *kebele*-level structures, and better learning and experience sharing between *woredas*.

One noteworthy shortcoming of the programme, however, is the limited role that Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) have played both as CAs and participants. One project staff reported the issue of participation of persons with disabilities was not considered when the programme started and





was only raised later. In addition to the fact that the issue of PWDs was overlooked at the beginning, other reasons such as lack of infrastructure and mobility devices such as wheelchairs which prevent PWDs from attending trainings and awareness raising sessions were also mentioned as reasons for the limited participation of PWDs in SASA!

Adapting SASA! materials

SASA! materials such as posters and brochures are widely used by CAs during their activities. The study revealed unanimous agreement on the usefulness and relevance of these materials. The materials were translated from English into Amharic and Afaan Oromo by programme staff and then reviewed by community representatives and activists. This adaptation process was critical to ensuring that the materials were accessible to community members and resonated with the cultural context.

Posters and infosheet/comics were widely used by CAs in their work and are well recognized by communities. Communities responded well to the materials and engaged with them because they depict situations and issues that the audiences are familiar with and reflect their day to day lives. The situational and topical sensitivity of the materials spark conversations among audiences enabling CAs to grab the attention of their audiences and facilitate deep discussions about gender-power balance, gender roles, VAW etc. CAs and stakeholders are unanimous in their praise for the materials and their utility and relevance as shown in the following quote:



“I love the brochures and posters because our society is mostly illiterate and can’t read but they can look at the pictures and understand the messages easily” (Interview with government official, Debre Libanos).

Respondents also provided recommendations on how to improve certain aspects of the materials. These include:

- making the materials more friendly for persons with visual and mental impairments such as making them available in braille or voice recordings.
- using videos especially of success stories in training sessions to enhance the programme’s appeal; and
- laminating posters to make them water resistant which is especially necessary during the rainy season.

Learning from challenges-Suspensions

SASA! programme faced suspensions three times-twice due to issues related to programme timeline and funding and once due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Programme Suspensions

The first programme related suspension occurred when CSSP1 came to an end in August 2017 and until CSSP2 commenced in May 2019. According to implementing partners, the suspension was anticipated to last for 3 months but it was more than a year. The programme was suspended again when CSSP2 finished its initial implementation period in August 2021. The suspension lasted 8 months after which a no cost extension phase was granted.

The most immediate impact of the programme related suspensions was the interruption of regular activities that were dependent on programme funding and staff retention. Implementing partners were also unable to pay the small monthly stipends for CAs. The suspension also impacted the support that CAs could offer to survivors of VAW since certain types of support such as transportation to shelters or health centers, or expenses related to their stay in shelters (e.g., food) require financing.

Most of the participants in the study alluded to a loss of momentum gained before the suspensions and a negative impact on the level of the community’s engagement with SASA! and CAs’ motivation to work due to weakening of follow-up, reporting and support mechanisms.





“Since the whole idea is to transform society’s long-lived norms and culture, they require continuous discussions, teachings and follow ups. So, when programmes like this face suspensions, people will forget learnings and get back to business as usual and that led to loss of momentum” (Interview with government official, Debre Libanos).


Programme interruptions were communicated differently in the two programming sites. In Addis Ababa, it was reported that AAWA called CAs to a meeting in which they informed participants of the programme’s suspension and handed out certificates of participation in recognition of their work. In Debre Libanos, there was no official communication of suspension but CAs reported that they deduced that the programme must have been suspended when their monthly stipends, the activities (e.g., coffee ceremonies) and booklet supplies stopped. Stakeholders, however, reported that they were informed of the suspension by ORWA (partner) staffs in Debre Libanos.

“First, we prepared a certificate for all the partakers in recognition of their participation... they were very thankful for the knowledge and experience they got.” (Interview with Partner Staff, Addis Ababa).

In both locations, there was limited communication between SASA! teams, on the one hand, and CAs and stakeholders on the other during the programme interruptions. Some SASA! staff interacted and exchanged information with CAs through irregular phone calls. Formal monitoring and follow up was also suspended for the duration of the suspension.

COVID-19 Suspensions


In April 2020, the government of Ethiopia declared a State of Emergency (SOE) to counter and control the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impacts. The SOE prohibited meetings of 4 or more persons for any religious, political, social, or other purposes. The SOE Proclamation penalized the violation of these restrictions and measures with fine and imprisonment which deterred people from doing business as usual. This meant that CAs could no longer hold or attend community gatherings for their awareness raising activities. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies’ (especially the police) preoccupation with enforcing SoE measures and suspension of the operation of courts under the SoE undermined the support that the programme offered to survivors of VAW at a time when such support was most needed.



“Our major challenge was the COVID-19 outbreak. Because all our jobs are related to gatherings, we could not meet people and keep on creating awareness. International studies show that violence against women and girls has increased rapidly during the pandemic; but we were unable to provide the required support” (Interview with Partner Staff, Addis Ababa).

Coping with Suspensions

Despite the repeated interruptions, most respondents reported that CAs continued doing their best to engage communities and provide support to survivors of violence all be it in a sporadic and a reactive rather than proactive manner. CAs endeavored to mitigate the effects of the programme and COVID-19 suspensions by adopting new ways of working and trying to raise funds from alternative sources. During the COVID-19 SoE, for example, CAs in Addis Ababa conducted door to door visits to communicate short messages regarding SASA! support structures. AAWA printed and distributed key messages without accompanying pictures to minimize cost of printing. In some instances, CAs resorted to using their own resources to cope up with the impact of programme related suspensions that had budget implications.



“When the budget was suspended, students (that are members of SASA! school clubs) used the money they saved to buy things they need for the meetings (bread, coffee, and other things). The CAs also used their money they saved to buy coffee and bread and continued their activities” (Interview with government official, Debre Libanos).

CAs also came up with innovative solutions to overcome the restrictions on gathering imposed by the COVID-19 SOE. In one of the *woredas* in Addis Ababa, for example, CAs and community watch group members launched a Telegram channel to enable remote reporting of VAW cases. This is also part of the endeavor to use the media to overcome restrictions to gatherings posed by COVID-19 related SOE.



Resumption

Resumptions after the said suspensions were reported to be relatively smooth. This was a result of the prior communication regarding resumption, the provision of refresher trainings and the fact that such were cascaded down to all levels, and joint planning activities. This could serve as a learning for future programming in the unfortunate instance the suspensions might be faced.

Why did SASA! have this impact?

The positive reputation that SASA! enjoys in communities and its **impact** stems from the fact that the programme systematically set out to select as CAs those individuals who already have a level of respect and trust within the communities. Most of the CAs were active members of their communities involved in different social committees and well known even before SASA! started. The participatory approach for selection of CAs provided communities an opportunity to have a say.

CA's community embeddedness was a major factor in enabling them to continue their work during the suspensions. CAs are embedded in their communities and were involved in different structures such as women's associations even before SASA! CAs dedication to the SASA! cause and the relevance of the issues it addresses to themselves personally and to their communities were also stressed as major factors for CAs efforts to continue with their work during suspensions. CAs also made multiple reference to the oath they took when they were trained as CAs as a factor that contributed to their desire to continue with their work during suspensions. The dedication and vigilance demonstrated especially by CAs reflects a sense of ownership towards the program which is absent in what might be referred to as "donor driven programs".



"The teachings of SASA! were about issues that were really prevalent in our community, so the lessons kind of stuck... SASA! was able to be sustained because it worked on our minds and hearts about issues that were really relevant to us" (FGD with Community Activists, Debre Libanos).

Other contributing factors include the fact that partner organizations had strong constituencies at different levels of governance with prior experience working on violence against women, support provided to SASA! by all levels of government, commitment of CAs and SASA!'s innovative messaging methods and approaches (e.g., the use of powerful imagery in posters, and brochures, school plays and poetry).

Going forward: Opportunities for further consideration

The study found that partners and stakeholders agree on the need to sustain SASA!'s community level impacts. Study respondents forwarded several recommendations to continue with SASA! and even scale it up, including providing additional trainings to CAs so they can continue working beyond the current project period, implementing self-funding projects, scaling up/expanding SASA! by multiplying sources of funding, and soliciting further government support to ensure continuity and institutionalizing SASA! in the work of governmental stakeholders. There are also a few examples of stakeholders trying to expand SASA! into neighboring communities, albeit in an informal manner. These efforts have not been successful due to the "mismatch" between the phase and the activities that are supposed to be undertaken in that phase as per SASA! programme. Additionally, the study found that there are currently no clear plans to sustain SASA! beyond the current project period. This is inconsistent with the prevailing practice requiring all CSSP2 partners to have a sustainability plan for their projects.

In the light of the research findings, the following issues were highlighted as needing further consideration for future programming:

- Understand the critical importance of partner identification on programme success and design appropriate strategies to identify the most relevant partners,
- Conduct situational analysis of the communities and contextualize SASA! materials accordingly to protect the fidelity of approach and to identify deep-rooted norms and how to transform them,





- Ensure that SASA! materials are accessible and available for use by PWDs through, for example, earmarking a budget for disability and other social inclusion aspects of a project, and involve PWDs at all stages of the project starting from its design to enhance PWDs participation both as implementers and target communities,
- Recognize the need to create a safe environment for women to discuss their issues and especially in the case of survivors of violence, to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of spaces used to facilitate discussions (e.g., providing training to CAs on survivor centered approach available referral pathways),
- Reduce the livelihood of suspension or interruption of programing, when this is not possible develop a clear strategy on proactive and early communication of suspensions and design mitigation strategies together with partners and stakeholders,
- Communicate programme resumption and refresher trainings to CAs important in ensuring smooth resumption following suspensions,
- Consider providing institutional support to sustain institutional level impacts as well as strengthen their capacity on data gathering, analysis and management,
- Future programs should consider rigorous impact assessment study that, for example, compares SASA! and non-SASA! woredas to empirically ascertain which community level impacts were due to SASA! interventions,
- Design strategies to sustain SASA! impact beyond project period.

Lastly, it is important to note the following points before setting out to implement SASA! in the future:

- SASA! like any other phase based intervention, requires resources because social norms change takes time; so, future programme implementers need to make sure that they have the staff, time, and budget to follow the full four phases over a period of 3-5 years.
- Donors need to consider safe exits to funding to prevent programme suspensions and loss of momentum.
- To ensure SASA! brings the intended outcome and proper implementation, SASA! should always be implemented with technical assistance from Raising Voices and programmes like CSSP2.

Endnotes

- 1 Coffee Ceremonies are culturally established forum for community discussions and conflict resolution in Ethiopia. Usually, the coffee is served in three rounds which takes up to 3 hours. Although coffee ceremonies are frequented by women, men also participate in these sessions.
- 2 *Idirs* are traditional social networks found in every community and perform important tasks related to death and burial of their members including performing burial ceremonies, comforting the deceased's relatives, and also offering financial assistance to the immediate family.
- 3 *Shimgilina* is a process by which a group of reputable male members of the community visit a family's house for two main purposes. One is for mediating disputes (non-violent) between family members. The second purpose is to ask the family of a woman for her hand in marriage by representing the bride and his family. It is the second type of *shimgilina* that is referred to above.

Suggested citation: Tsinu, A. (2023), Implementing SASA! In Ethiopia, CSSP & Raising Voices