

CSO POLICY ADVOCACY ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

INTRODUCTION

This document summarises findings from research on civil society organisations' (CSOs) experience in GBV policy influencing in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The research was commissioned by Vietnam's Gender-Based Violence Network (GBVNet) with support from the Australian aid program and was conducted between November 2015 and January 2016. It consisted of a desk review and key informant interviews with CSOs in each country.

In the countries examined, CSOs actively engage in the development and implementation of policies and laws to prevent and respond to GBV. Efforts include advocating for policy development and revision, participation in implementation of laws and policies, and monitoring and evaluation of relevant national laws, policies and programs.

By providing support and covering gaps in policy implementation, CSOs have an important role as service providers, often providing shelter, legal services, counselling, and other support, or linking survivors to services. CSOs often support survivors to access justice or provide a platform for survivors to directly or indirectly speak out about their concerns.

As major GBV laws have been developed, CSOs in each country worked to influence these laws. CSOs promote the voice of GBV survivors to policy-makers and have first-hand knowledge on GBV through practice in the field. Policy-makers can benefit from this knowledge to develop policy that responds appropriately to the needs of survivors of GBV. Without input from CSOs, policies on GBV may not address the real issues or needs of survivors. This can result in delaying or preventing survivors' access to justice and other support services, and victim-shaming survivors.

Experience in all countries shows that there are **two main requirements for successful GBV policy influencing**:

1. a **long-term commitment** to policy advocacy as it takes time, and
2. use of a **combination of advocacy strategies**. Common strategies used in the Mekong region are *Evidence Building, Involving Leaders, Building Partnerships, Capacity Building and Working with Mass Media*.

CSO SUCCESS IN POLICY INFLUENCING

Long-term commitment: Successful policy influencing is a long process that requires a long-term commitment. In each country studied, GBV laws commonly took up to 10 to 15 years to be passed. This is important to note as advocacy strategies are being developed.

Evidence-building: Evidence building for advocacy can take many forms. It includes population-based prevalence studies, qualitative research on attitudes or practices, small scale research on a particular niche area and evidence from practitioners or from survivors based on their own experiences. Such evidence is valuable in highlighting issues to governments, and in building government authorities' understanding of issues faced by survivors and gaps in the law.

Involving leaders: CSOs have found creative ways to work with leaders in the policy-making area. This involves fostering trusting relationships, building capacity and information sharing. Using these mechanisms, CSOs can become trusted guides in developing government policy on GBV.

Building partnerships: Working in partnership is critical for successful policy advocacy. Partnerships can be between CSOs at the national or international level and between CSOs, UN agencies, development partners or the private sector. Partnerships strengthen the voice of CSOs, and also provide some support when CSOs are vulnerable in difficult operational environments.

Capacity building: In all countries researched, CSOs undertake capacity building of government authorities and consider it critical in creating an environment which supports the passage of improved laws. Capacity building efforts have been most successful when the government is seen as a partner. All CSOs identified strong support from government for their capacity building efforts.

Working with mass media: Media strategies are an important component of advocacy. Media attention can raise awareness and build support for policy changes. Media can also influence social norms that tolerate violence; promoting positive images in media can serve as a significant prevention tool.

CHALLENGES

In all countries studied, CSOs face challenges in advocating for laws and policies to prevent and respond to GBV. These include the **legal environment** in which they operate, **funding** and **organizational capacity**. CSOs have had more success at advocating for policies related to GBV in the home than in public spaces and have found that **'one-off' advocacy initiatives rarely work**.

The enabling environment for CSO operation is challenging in all countries. While CSOs generally have positive relationships with government counterparts around GBV, difficult operating environments limit their willingness to advocate strongly. It is positive that CSOs provided examples of being recognised by government counterparts as experts on GBV.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A supportive enabling environment for CSOs to operate and participate in policy dialogue on GBV is critical. CSOs, development partners, multilateral organisations and donors should continue to monitor and advocate for national policies that **promote an open process for civil society engagement**.
2. CSO advocacy is imperative to promoting the voice of survivors and expanding the laws and policies to cover issues of GBV survivors. This requires **funding and prioritisation**. Development partners, governments and foundations should provide funding to support these efforts, particularly for targeted advocacy strategies that meet the needs of GBV survivors.
3. There is no 'one size fits all' advocacy strategy. CSOs should develop clear advocacy priorities based on evidence. A mapping of the environment in their particular country will help determine what strategies will work. A **thoughtful, planned strategy** is required for success. CSOs must continue to have a long term view on advocacy and not expect individual meetings, partnerships or events to be successful. Small wins will build toward big wins.
4. Building **relationships with government authorities** responsible for the development of laws and policies is critical. This should include identifying key actors, and key change-makers for targeting. Both formal and informal methods should be used.
5. **Networks or partnerships** are important for successful advocacy. Advocacy can be strengthened when multiple organizations work together in a structured way to influence change around shared concerns. Within these coalitions, priorities must be set and a common direction agreed upon which utilizes the strengths of each partner. Partnerships should include a variety of CSOs; national and international organizations, community based groups, civil society networks, and trade unions all bring different strengths and capacities required for successful advocacy.
6. CSOs must **monitor the implementation** of current laws more systematically. This can form the evidence base for advocacy for improvements as gaps are identified. Each CSO likely has data from their own work on women's experiences. Developing systems to formally collect this information will be critical to making changes and can be used in place of formal research.
7. CSOs should provide opportunities and platforms for the diverse **voices of GBV survivors to be heard** publicly. This can be a powerful tool in raising awareness of particular issues.
8. CSOs must **promote policies that are human rights based** and protect specifically the rights of women. It is not good enough to have a law, it must protect women and not further disadvantage or victimize them.