

Working with Governments to End Violence Against Women and Children



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A central aim of the FCDO-funded “What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls: Impact at Scale” programme (What Works II) is to build evidence on ethical, accountable, safe and effective pathways to scale VAWG prevention. The Practice-Based Learning (PBL) Series brings together lessons from across the programme on *how* practitioners implement the day-to-day activities needed for effective GBV prevention programmes. These briefs complement the evidence of impact that the programme is producing through robust evaluations. All evidence produced by the programme can be found on our [website](#).

This PBL brief draws on interviews and focus group discussions with grantee and consortium partners of the What Works II team. These practitioners have extensive experience working with governments and the lessons shared in this report are specific to experiences of those working on the What Works II programme.

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Introduction

Violence against women and children (VAWC) is a pervasive global issue, affecting individuals across all regions, socioeconomic groups, and cultural contexts. It is driven by gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, power imbalances, and intergenerational cycles of abuse. In addition to being a major global public health issue, VAWC has far-reaching consequences including reduced educational and economic opportunities and outcomes.¹ The annual fiscal costs of VAWC range from 0.6% to over 2% of GDP, and societal costs can reach 4%–6% or more of GDP.² VAWC also poses a substantial barrier to effective climate action, preventing women’s participation in resilience efforts and decision making.³ Additionally, research demonstrates a statistically significant relationship between levels of VAWC in a community and the security of a state, reflecting common drivers between VAWC and wider militarized violence⁴. This makes violence prevention a critical priority for public health, human rights, sustainable development, climate justice and security.

Addressing VAWC is complex and requires multi-stakeholder engagement. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), particularly women’s rights organisations (WROs), have been at the forefront of efforts to prevent and respond to VAWC. Their deep community roots, contextual knowledge, and locally-driven innovations have been instrumental in advancing gender equality and shaping policy and legal reforms. Women’s rights organizations and feminist movements have played a catalytic role in bringing about systemic change and play a unique part in both sparking action and ensuring accountability from leaders and decision-makers⁵. A large-scale quantitative study of data from 70 countries over four decades, found that autonomous women’s movements are the single most significant factor in influencing progressive policy on violence against women.⁶ Their

influence surpasses that of having more women in the legislature, progressive political parties in power, or improvements in national wealth. The ongoing global shrinking of civic space is contributing to increased attacks on women’s rights activists, groups, and movements challenging gender norms and power dynamics⁷. To achieve systemic, long-term change at scale, collaboration between WROs and national governments is essential. As duty bearers, governments hold the mandate and capacity to institutionalise and sustain violence prevention through policy development, implementation, financing, and norm-shaping leadership.⁸ They also have the capacity to protect and create civic space where WROs can conduct their work challenging norms that perpetuate violence.

This PBL brief consolidates learning from grantee and consortium partners of the What Works II programme on working with governments in VAWC prevention programmes.

Through a process of interviews and validation workshops, representatives from six organisations identified five lessons they consider crucial foundations for working with governments. This brief explores how, in practice, each organisation built these foundations, the activities involved, and how they are overcoming challenges along the way. But first we introduce the partners:

What Works II partners that have contributed to this PBL brief	
The Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP)	CEDOVIP works in partnership with the Government of Uganda to integrate gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response into wetlands restoration programmes across Uganda. Learn more about their work here .
Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM)	MASUM is integrating GBV prevention and response efforts into health systems across rural areas of India. Learn more about their work here .
Pamodzi Kuthetsa Nkhanza (PKN)	PKN is a collaboration between the Women’s Legal Resources Centre (WOLREC), the Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) and Human Rights for Women and Girls with Disabilities (WAG Disability). These organisations are working in Malawi to prevent intimate partner violence and strengthen the capacity of police and justice services to respond safely and ethically. Learn more about their work here .

Projet Jeune Leader (PJL)	PJL is a youth-founded, women-led organisation in Madagascar. They are working with government to integrate gender-transformative comprehensive sexuality education curriculum for adolescents into rural schools. Learn more about their work here .
Right to Play (RTP)	Right To Play is an international non-profit organization that protects, educates, and empowers children through the power of play. For 25 years, they have been helping children in some of the world's most challenging places to learn, stay safe, and thrive. In collaboration with Aahung (a feminist organisation supporting sexual and reproductive health and rights in Pakistan), they are rolling out a play-based life skills education project in public and private schools across Sindh province. Learn more about their work here .
Shirkat Gah	Shirkat Gah is focused on preventing and addressing sexual harassment and violence in the workplace across Pakistan. It takes a multi-faceted approach, strengthening institutions to become survivor-centered, and promoting behavioral change to end VAWG. Learn more about their work here .

Key Lessons

The following five key lessons were identified by partners as crucial foundations for working with governments. While not exhaustive, these insights offer a starting point for other organisations and programmes seeking to engage governments in VAWC prevention. Crucially, they must be adapted to each country's unique context and shaped by its political landscape, governance structures, and socioeconomic conditions.



LESSON 1

Conduct political analysis and develop a strategic approach

Conduct a Gendered Political Economy Analysis (GPEA).

Develop a strategic approach.

LESSON 3

Build and nurture relationships with government

Establish a focal point within government

Identify mutually beneficial opportunities to collaborate



LESSON 2

Build credibility and legitimacy with the government

Develop culturally appropriate framing of programmes



Use evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of the programme model



When selecting your team to coordinate with government, choose people with profiles that strengthen the programme's credibility

LESSON 4

Strengthen government buy-in to the programme

Build early buy-in from senior decision-makers

Create opportunities for sustained government engagement, from co-design to implementation

Stay positive and be solution-oriented



LESSON 5

Embed continuity and sustainability strategies

Formalise government engagement

Develop training and tools to support engagement beyond the programme



Lesson 1: Conduct political analysis and develop a strategic approach

Conducting a political analysis is an essential first step to working with governments. Assessing power dynamics, policy priorities, institutional structures, and potential allies or blockers helps to identify entry points for tailoring engagement. A strategic approach grounded in this analysis enables informed decision-making, guides tactics on building political will, and increases the chances of sustained government commitment to violence prevention.

Conduct a Gendered Political Economy Analysis (GPEA).ⁱ

- **Conduct a GPEA before engaging the government.** CEDOVIP conducted research to understand the mandate of different ministries, their policies, past work and key personnel. This helped them identify which stakeholders to invite into the partnership for maximum impact and informed how they framed the programme. MASUM's analysis identified key gaps and coordination challenges between government departments and service providers. MASUM used this to frame the programme as a solution to the challenges faced by government.
- **Invite GPEA inputs from a government focal person.** PKN invited government officials from the national office of the Ministry of Gender and the National Police Service to participate in participatory sessions to validate the findings of the GPEA. This helped them understand government priorities, how to frame the programme to align with those priorities, and how to establish the best lines of communication with government.
- **Keep your GPEA and advocacy strategy alive.** PJL created an advocacy manager position whose role is to keep their GPEA and advocacy strategy updated. This involves intentional formal and informal interactions with a range of government officials and staying up to date on the latest policy issues. It helps the team understand decision-makers and power dynamics within and between government, their funders and constituents. This helps them tailor their approach to engagement.

Develop a strategic approach.

- **Leverage a "Build Together" approach and cultivate allies in relevant ministries.** MASUM worked in close partnership with representatives from the Ministry of Health

ⁱ A gendered political economy analysis explores how political and economic processes and power relations shape a context, and how gender and other social inequalities intersect to shape the experiences, priorities, power and influence of key stakeholders.

to identify opportunities to provide meaningful support. In partnership with the Ministry, the programme jointly developed, planned and implemented a Health Care Providers (HCPs) training, which was used to build a pool of master trainers within the Ministry. The programme's manual for community health workers was also developed with inputs from government officials to ensure it reflected government priorities and to help build trust with the Ministry.

- **Align the programme's goals with government priorities.** PKN works in close partnership with the Ministry of Gender, aligning their work with the Ministry's commitments and action plans to prevent VAWC. For instance, PKN offered to support the Ministry review and update the "National Plan of Action to Combat Gender Based Violence", ensuring it aligned with global evidence and best practice on VAWC prevention. Offering this kind of support opens doors to future engagement.
- **Invest in intentional and ongoing engagement with the government.** RTP has worked in Pakistan since 2008 and regularly engages with government stakeholders at different levels and in different regions. This early and consistent engagement helped RTP build trusted relationships and secure government buy-in. While developing the play-based life skills education manual, RTP coordinated closely with the Sindh Education and Literacy Department (SELD) and its teacher training wing, the Sindh Teacher Education Development Authority (STEDA), to gather feedback and endorsement before introducing the manual in schools.
- **Identify strategic allies that can support the programme including within the government.** Shirkat Gah, worked with a range of stakeholders who were able to influence government decisions. This included women parliamentarians, representatives from the Women's Departments, the State Bank of Pakistan and Security Exchange Commission of Pakistan. This promoted more effective coordination between the programme, the government, and with banks and private sector organisations. Shirkat Gah has also been working with Trade Unions to push for the implementation of laws to criminalise workplace sexual harassment. The engagement of diverse actors has helped demonstrate the importance of the programme and fostered government buy-in.

Lesson 2: Build credibility and legitimacy with the government

Building credibility and legitimacy is foundational to effective and sustained collaboration with government in VAWC prevention programmes. It requires thoughtful cultural framing, inclusive language, evidence-based advocacy, and trusted relationships.

Develop culturally appropriate framing of programmes

- **Conduct research to inform programme messaging and branding.** PJJ conducts participatory research with relevant government departments, using findings to creatively articulate how the programme links to government priorities.
- **Understand and adjust language to cultural sensitivities.** Shirkat Gah intentionally uses language that is acceptable and comfortable for their audience when discussing violence. For example, they avoid taboo words and phrases such as “sexual harassment” and instead focus on phrases like “diversity, equality and inclusion” (DEI) which are more culturally acceptable. Similarly, RTP carefully frames sensitive topics such as gender and SRHR in ways that ensure government stakeholders are comfortable engaging with the programme. RTP works directly with government ministries, officials, and teachers to co-develop culturally and age appropriate content and framing.

Use evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of the programme model

- **Demonstrate the importance and need for the programme by sharing evidence of the prevalence and impact of violence, and how your programme addresses this.** RTP demonstrated the importance and need for the programme by presenting evidence on the prevalence and pathways of violence in education settings. They then shared findings on the positive impact of play-based learning in reducing these risks. RTP shared evidence generated through What Works I with the government, to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of their model. This helped generate buy-in from government for the continuation of their work through What Works II.
- **Update government on the progress and success of the programme.** PJJ organises school visits for government stakeholders so they can see the curriculum in action. They also developed a magazine for government stakeholders that shares good-news stories and positive testimonies from school leadership, teachers, parents, and students engaging with the curriculum. CEDOVIP shares updates with government through the national committees they participate in through the Ministry of Water and Environment, Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries; and the Uganda National Meteorological Authority. These updates ensure the government understands how addressing VAWC supports their broader work and helps build programme champions within the government.



PATHWAY
TO SCALE

When selecting your team to coordinate with government, choose people with profiles that strengthen the programme's credibility

- **Ensure programme leadership and government liaison roles have prior experience working with government.** Shirkat Gah's leadership and government liaison roles have strong advocacy backgrounds and trusted relationships with government, built prior to the programme. Similarly, some RTP team members have longstanding experience of working with government, which equips them with a strong understanding of how to navigate government systems and fosters respect from government counterparts. PJL ensures that staff who engage with the Ministry of Education have experience as educators who have directly delivered the program.
- **Collaborate with government in the recruitment of key staff.** PKN partnered with the Malawi National Police Service to jointly recruit and embed a technical advisor in the police service to strengthen VAWG prevention and response efforts. The partnership included co-developing the Terms of Reference (TOR) and collaboratively shortlisting and interviewing candidates. This has ensured full acceptance of the advisor and strengthened the relationship with the National Police Service.



Lesson 3: Build and nurture relationships with government

Strong, sustained relationships with government actors are essential for the success and scalability of VAWC prevention programmes. Programmes that understand government structures, policy cycles, and resource constraints, while offering practical, cost-effective solutions, are more likely to gain trust and long-term commitment.

Establish focal points within government

- **Include government focal points in all programme activities.** Shirkat Gah established a strong relationship with the Federal Ombudsperson and Provincial Ombudsperson, working closely with them on the development of key programme initiatives. Similarly, PKN includes their focal point from the Ministry of Gender in all relevant programme activities. This helps facilitate open communication, feedback, and buy-in for the programme.
- **Ensure consistent engagement with focal point(s) at different levels of government.** RTP has designated team members, responsible for engaging at various levels of government. CEDOVIP has built relationships with the secretarial teams of Ministers, who hold diaries and priorities for senior officials. This has helped support Ministerial access for the programme.
- **Begin engaging and building relationships with the government before programme roll out.** RTP has been formally engaging with government counterparts since the What Works 1 programme (2015–2018), where they shared research findings and advocated for scaling play-based social and emotional learning (SEL) into the education system. This engagement contributed to the integration of What Works 1 content and methodology into the Physical Education curriculum — an important step toward institutionalization. Building on this foundation, in preparation for What Works 2, RTP began informal engagement with government stakeholders several months before programme launch. The team introduced the initiative through courtesy visits, invited officials to events, and held informal discussions to familiarize them with the programme. This early groundwork helped strengthen trust and ensure buy-in before formal implementation began.
- **Develop close relationships with a broad network of government "champions".** This can also include participating in broader meetings that the government holds with different stakeholders on ending violence to better understand how your programme is situated in the broader picture of government's efforts to address violence. PJK identified school directors, district superintendents, and regional education authorities with influence within government. They nurtured relationships with these individuals and tailored opportunities for them to be programme champions. This helped strengthen their credibility and reputation within government as a trusted partner. Maintaining these connections is strategic, as

many of these officials later move into higher-level roles within the Ministry of Education. Similarly, MASUM identifies champions for change in the health sector within different levels of government who can advocate for the programme internally.

Identify mutually beneficial opportunities to collaborate

- **Identify opportunities where the programme can support the government with its own priorities.** PKN offered technical support to the Ministry of Gender to coordinate working group meetings on GBV, noting government's mandate to coordinate gender actors in the country with limited budget.
- **Co-host events and co-develop programme content with government partners.** RTP works closely with government partners to promote shared ownership of its initiatives in public schools, finding opportunities to co-host events and participate in design rather than limiting the government's role to administration. A key milestone in this collaboration saw RTP co-develop a physical education curriculum with the Government of Sindh, which was then officially adopted.

Lesson 4: Strengthen government buy in to the programme

Strengthening government buy-in is essential for the long-term co-ownership and success of violence prevention programmes. Recognising government contributions, aligning with national priorities, and co-designing content fosters ownership and trust.

Build early buy-in from senior decision-makers

- **Introduce the programme to relevant decision makers in government as early as possible.** PKN had a dedicated meeting with the Minister of Gender to explain the aims of the programme and its role in complementing the government's work. MASUM sought and secured full approval from the State and District Health Departments prior to the start of the programme.

Credit government for their contribution

- **Consistently emphasise the programme's complementary role to government efforts, including at public events.** It is important to demonstrate how the specific programme fits into the broader ecosystem addressing violence against women and children and how it complements existing efforts. PKN actively engages the Ministry of Gender as the lead for all national and community initiatives on VAWG prevention and response. For instance, the Minister of Gender launched



the PKN programme and ministry focal persons are always invited to the programme's external engagements.

- **Support government to lead on joint activities and communications.** To foster government commitment and ownership, CEDOVIP ensures that communications and invitations for joint events come directly from the Ministry of Water and Environment, Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries; and the Uganda National Meteorological Authority. Additionally, CEDOVIP recognises government's contribution to the programme in all its communications and reports. For example, it includes the government's logo on all programme documents to ensure the government's role is recognised.

Create opportunities for sustained government engagement, from co-design to implementation

- **Design with government, not for government.** CEDOVIP co-designed their programme with national and district government stakeholders, aligning outcomes with broader government priorities. They also established a Programme Management Unit, made up of government ministry representatives and programme staff, which meets biannually to review progress, collaborate and strategise (for example, on developing guidance for gender-transformative climate programming).
- **Use a collaborative approach when engaging with government.** PJI fosters an equitable partnership with government by engaging as trusted peers, avoiding top-down interactions that could undermine trust and mutual respect.
- **Identify opportunities for government to participate in the programme in a way that is visible to the public:** Shirkat Gah invited both the Federal and Provincial Ombudspersons to chair a National Roundtable Meeting through the programme, engaging parliamentarians, the National Commission on Human Rights, the Labor Department, and the National and Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women.

Stay positive and be solution-oriented

- **Take a solution-oriented approach to government engagement.** PJI takes an aspirational, positive and solution-oriented approach that positions them as a partner for finding solutions. For instance, PJI's programme has been successfully replicated in rural, under-resourced schools, which education authorities view as particularly challenging areas to work.



Lesson 5: Embed continuity and sustainability strategies

Ensuring continuity and sustainability from the outset is essential when partnering with government on violence prevention programmes. This can involve formalising engagement through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) to clarify roles, institutionalise relationships, and promote consistency despite staff turnover. Building government capacity through targeted training, cultivating in-system champions, and embedding programme tools and knowledge into government structures also all help sustain impact beyond the project cycle.

Formalise government engagement

- **Sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with government.** All partners who contributed to this PBL brief have signed MoUs with their respective governments to help clarify and formalize expectations, roles and responsibilities. CEDOVIP's MoU designated government focal points, agrees that these focal points will stay in post until the end of the programme, and defines ways of working. Similarly, under PKN's MoU with the National Police Service, the embedded Technical Advisor — who leads an Inspector General-appointed task force to improve survivor support systems — will remain in post for the duration of the programme. Shirkat Gah's MoU with the Punjab Ombudsperson includes commitments to have regular check-in meetings and clear areas of collaboration.
- **Establish formal roles that can continue beyond the programme.** MASUM has appointed a government employee as a focal officer in each health facility they work in. They are responsible for reviewing trainings and maintaining relationships with multisectoral GBV support services. This helps build buy-in, ensures clear ownership and encourages longer-term engagement.

Develop training and tools to support engagement beyond the programme

- **Offer formal and informal training for government stakeholders.** CEDOVIP trains government officials on the root causes of GBV, safe programming, and how to address GBV through other government-led programmes. PKN developed a Gender Transformative Curriculum which trains the next generation of government stakeholders on the importance of gender-transformative approaches, so they can build these into their day-to-day work. This includes practical tools such as handbooks, risk assessments and safety planning tools that can be used across departments supporting survivors. MASUM has supported the government to establish a pool of “master trainers” who can train their staff on GBV prevention.

Overcoming challenges when working with governments

While collaboration with governments is critical to achieving sustainable, system-level change in VAWC prevention, partners across the What Works II programme also highlighted the need to navigate and address the challenges they face. These challenges underscore the need for strategic, adaptable, and contextually responsive approaches when navigating government systems and engaging in long-term institutional change.

Building government ownership while retaining influence

In government partnerships, programmes must navigate the balance between promoting government ownership and preserving organisational influence. What Works II partners addressed this by focusing on building genuine and practical partnerships with government, setting clear expectations on roles and responsibilities at the start of the programme. They also invest in gender transformative capacity strengthening efforts for the government so that as government counterparts take on more responsibilities, they are equipped with the skills to maintain fidelity to the VAWC prevention model.

Managing donor dynamics and inter-institutional relationships

Managing donor dynamics and inter-institutional relationships can be complex, requiring careful navigation. PJL works within a landscape where varying donor priorities can sometimes lead to differing expectations among ministries and civil society actors. To manage this, PJL ensures that they are solution-oriented and contextually relevant, focusing on constructive engagement with all stakeholders.

Managing government bureaucratic processes to align with programme goals and timelines

Bureaucratic government processes, coupled with frequent staff changes, can slow progress and make it difficult to align implementation with programme goals and timelines. This can cause delays in implementation, shift priorities, and require repeated onboarding. To reduce these disruptions, partners have formalised engagement with government through MoUs or equivalent agreements, setting out roles, responsibilities, and expectations. This includes expectations that key government staff remain in post until the end of the programme. While the retention of staff may not occur in practice, including it in an MoU signals the importance of team consistency from the outset. Partners also

work across different levels of government, including with civil servants, who are more likely to stay in post if Ministers change.

Government calendars can also restrict the ability of government counterparts to engage with the programme, causing delays. CEDOVIP works closely with their government focal point to align programme timelines and events with government calendars to maximise their engagement. For example, they avoid asking Ministers to review documents during periods when government officials are busy due to other commitments.

Budgeting to support government participation

Government stakeholders often expect to be recompensed for their participation in programme activities. This might be in the form of payment or it could involve covering conferencing costs for individuals. All the programmes working with government under the What Works II programme have budgeted for government engagement. Meetings, review of documents, programme activities and related processes require financial resources and sufficient time.

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