**SYNTHESIS** | **Brief 1**

# Progressing on the unfinished business: women and girls' rights in SRHR

2021

## Box 1

Overview of case studies and synthesis briefs *(SoAW action learning process)*

| **Case studies** | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | *The value of civil society alliances in realising women and girls' Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights* | IPPF Africa Region |
| | *YWCA advocacy towards the eradication of Female Genital Mutilation in Kenya* | YWCA Kenya |
| | *Journalists networked across Africa for increased SRHR coverage in the media* | IPPF Africa Region |
| | *Faith leadership of civil society collaboration towards adoption of the EAC SRHR Bill* | Faith to Action Network |
| | *How African First Ladies spearheaded the successful launch of a continent-wide campaign to prevent HIV and AIDS in childhood* | OAFLAD |
| | *Institutional change towards the integration of population and development issues in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)* | All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and Faith to Action Network |
| **Synthesis briefs** | | |
| | *Progressing on the unfinished business* | KIT Royal Tropical Institute |
| | *Coalition-building and multilevel connections* | KIT Royal Tropical Institute |
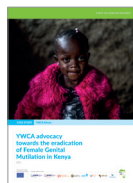
# Progressing on the unfinished business: women and girls' rights in SRHR

**Health and bodily integrity lie at the heart of well-being for all. Women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are critical elements of health and bodily integrity. The State of African Women campaign advocated for progressing on the unfinished business on women and girls' health and bodily integrity. The main objective of the State of African Women (SoAW) campaign is to contribute to securing, realizing and extending women's rights enshrined in African Union (AU) policies in African countries. The campaign seeks to influence both legal and social norms change towards women and girls' rights in SRHR, at continental, regional, national and sub-national levels, through a stronger voice and meaningful participation of civil society in decision-making. This synthesis brief reflects on the strategies pursued by this campaign to safeguard gains made and to advance progress in women and girls' rights in SRHR.**

The synthesis brief is based on six case studies that were formulated as part of an action learning process with the consortium partners.[1] The case studies are prepared by: IPPF Africa Region, YWCA Kenya, Faith to Action Network and the OAFLAD (see Box 1, overview of case studies).

The case studies form the basis of two synthesis briefs: one on *'Progressing on the unfinished business'*, and another one on *'Coalition-building and multilevel connections'*. Both synthesis briefs seek to pull out strategies and joint learning across the diverse advocacy processes that are presented in the six case studies.

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[1]  Between 2018 and 2020 KIT facilitated an action-learning trajectory with the SOAWC partners. The aim of the trajectory was to 1) build capacities of consortium partners, CSOs and champions to critically interrogate their advocacy actions, and reflect on achievements and challenges; 2) to recalibrate advocacy activities, and 3) to document experiences and lessons learned from advocacy initiatives. The trajectory consisted of four phases: 1) an action learning skills building workshop (2018); 2) an action learning planning workshop (2018); 3) the implementation of action learning plans through data collection, reflection and documentation (2019) and 4) a writeshop to prepare case studies (2019). Throughout the trajectory, collective learning questions and recurrent themes were identified that formed the basis for two synthesis briefs. The process of developing the synthesis briefs during 2020 has been inductive and interactive, and involved both researchers, advocacy officers and staff from participating CSOs. As a result of the action learning trajectory 6 case studies were produced and 2 synthesis briefs.

# Unfinished business, contestations and resistance

The State of African Women campaign unfolded at a time that was marked by 15th anniversary of the Maputo Protocol (adopted in 2003) and the five-year review of the Addis Ababa Declaration on Population and Development (adopted in 2014). These provided an excellent opportunity to appreciate progress made and to identify where to accelerate on the unfinished business.

The SoAW campaign seized the opportunities these anniversaries and reviews offered to advance the realization of women and girls' rights in SRHR. At the heart of the State of African Women campaign are four core rights areas (see also Figure 1)[2]:

1. Gender-based violence against women (GVAW)
2. Harmful practices (in particular child marriage and female genital mutilation, FGM)
3. Reproductive rights and sexual and reproductive health (RR and SRH)
4. HIV and AIDS

**Box 2**
African and international commitments on women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights

| | |
|---|---|
| Protocol to the African Charter on Human's and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol, 2003) | 15th anniversary in 2018 |
| Addis Ababa Declaration on Population and Development (2014) | 5-year review in 2019 |
| International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) | 25-year review in 2019 |
| Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) | 25 years in 2020 |

**Figure 1.**
The four core rights area of this report, with the cross-cutting issues

# CORE RIGHTS AREAS



| GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN | HARMFUL PRACTICES | REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS & SRH | HIV AND AIDS |

## CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

| Peace and security | Education and training | Participation in political and decision-making processes | Marginalised and vulnerable groups of women and girls |

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2    Alongside the four core rights areas, the SoAW campaign and SoAW reports took into account four cross-cutting issues: 1) peace and security; 2) education and training; 3) participation of women in political and decision-making processes; and 4) marginalised and vulnerable groups of women and girls (in particular adolescent girls and young women, elderly women, women with disabilities, women in distress, and individuals marginalised on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, SOGIE).

The State of African Women report - and subsequent regional reports[3] drawn from it - takes stock on progress and challenges in African countries in these four core rights areas. The Maputo Protocol, the Addis Ababa Declaration and the International Conference on Population and Development are landmark achievements that articulate continental commitments to women and girls' rights in SRHR. Since their adoption, progress has been made on many rights areas, in many countries, and at international, continental, regional, national and sub-national level to realize women and girls' rights. Yet, there is unfinished business that needs to be addressed, both in terms of content and of process.

In terms of **content**, part of the unfinished business concerns specific rights that are not being met, or to rights that are subject to contestation and resistance.[4] Such challenges and contestations have manifested themselves around child marriage, FGM, marital rape, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, unsafe abortion, limitations to full, free and informed consent, or the criminalization of transmission of HIV, to mention only a few. In addition, unfinished business also concerns to neglect and violation of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of specific marginalized groups. Continental commitments on the rights of women apply to all women, yet certain groups of women and girls face more challenges and restrictions. These can be adolescent, young and unmarried women, as well as women with disability, or elderly women. These can also relate to the realization of the human rights of lesbian, bisexual or transgender women, of female sex workers and of other so-called key populations.

In terms of **process**, unfinished business manifests itself in the extent to which continental commitments have been domesticated in national (and regional) laws and policies, that is the extent to which countries have gone through and completed the legal and policy reform process to bring their national frameworks in line with the commitments they agreed to continentally. Further legal and policy reform is needed to address weaknesses in these national frameworks, or loopholes and inconsistencies. Domestication also requires translating laws and policies into appropriate budgets, monitoring mechanisms, and operationalized guidelines. It often requires further harmonization of legal and policy frameworks, either a national or regional levels (for instance in the Regional Economic Communities). Along all these steps of the legal and policy processes, progress can and needs to be made, and resistance and contestations can come up. In several instances, unfinished business in legal and policy terms concerns the introduction of actually retrogressive laws or policies, that go against the agreed commitments. A final and critical 'process' aspect is the space for civil society engagement in progressing on legal and policy reform, as well as strengthening and monitoring of implementation.

This Synthesis Brief draws on the six case studies to reflect on how the SoAW partners and their champions sought to progress on unfinished business. This reflection and synthesis is guided by two key questions:

1. How to safeguard gains and advocate for critical gaps in the agenda and landscape on women and girls' rights in SRHR?
2. How to engage with contestations and resistance?

This Brief continues with a brief overview of aspects of unfinished business and resistance in the six case studies. It then presents four strategies to engage with that, based on concrete examples and illustrations from the case studies. The Brief ends with lessons learned and concluding remarks.

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3    There are two regional SoAW reports: for EAC and for ECOWAS. For each a fact sheet summarizing key points is available.
   • Lodenstein, Elsbet, Anouka van Eerdewijk, Mariam Kamunyu & Marlies Visser (2019). The State of African Women: Regional Report - The East African Community (EAC). Nairobi/Amsterdam: SOAWC project, IPPF & KIT.
   • Lodenstein, Elsbet, Anouka van Eerdewijk, Rainatou Sow & Marlies Visser (2020). La condition des femmes Africaines: Rapport Régional – Communauté économique des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEDEAO). Nairobi/Amsterdam: SOAWC project, IPPF & KIT.
4    See *State of African Women report* for a comprehensive analysis, and its chapter 2 for a presentation of key findings and conclusions.

# Overview of unfinished business and resistance in the case studies

The State of African Women campaign is firmly situated with this broader landscape of unfinished business and engaging with resistance and contestations. The six case studies that this synthesis brief speaks to seek to make progress on unfinished business in different ways, and encounter manifestations of contestation and resistance in various forms.

In the case of YWCA's advocacy towards **eradication of FGM in Kenya**, unfinished business was multifaceted. The 2011 Prohibition of FGM Act was a significant legal reform, but more work was needed to consolidate it and to make it translate to full impact on the ground. Firstly, social norm change, especially at community and county level, is needed to shift cultural, religious and social norms and practices supportive of FGM. Secondly, the legal reform process also entailed unfinished business, with the law not being comprehensively binding, and having loopholes; it also was weakly enforced, and survivors of FGM have limited access to justice. Thirdly, FGM proponents have emerged that seek to legalize FGM, and actively contest and resist the legal gains won so far.

The **journalist network** engages with unfinished business on women and girls' SRHR by intentionally targeting public opinion, with the **media** - in its multiple forms - being a critical lever in both policy and legal reform, and social norm change. With increased and more objective SRHR reporting, the journalist network fills gaps in knowledge and awareness, among the general public and in particular among policy makers and decision-makers. The journalist reporting also seeks to open up space for voiceless and marginalized groups to speak out on their realities. The journalists' work meets with resistance among mainstream media – for instance from newsroom editors -, of decision-makers or opinion leaders in powerful positions, and in negative responses more generally towards journalists working on progressive or sensitive topics.

The case study, written by IPPF AR, on **civil society alliances in the ICPD+25 process**, lays out the State of African Women campaign's advocacy strategy in order to safeguard the gains made in advocacy and African continental commitments since the mid-1990s. It looks at maintaining a social and human rights perspective on SRH issues, and safeguarding SRHR for all, as well as the importance of protecting and expanding space for civil society organisations. The case study highlights multilevel advocacy along the policy continuum, combined with strengthening a broad-based civil society alliance as core strategies. The campaign actively engaged with contestations and resistance – both among civil society organisations and with decision-makers and policy-makers - by stimulating dialogue, building knowledge and strengthening capacities, i.e. through technical support. One of the contestations manifested itself in attempts of opposition groups to re-open negotiations on existing language and water down these commitments. Another one is the more or less intentional misinterpretation of policies at national levels, or the (intentional or unintentional) fragmenting of rights over various ministries resulting in a lack of holistic and comprehensive approaches and frameworks. In

both continental and national level negotiations, the campaign focused on moving forward in implementing that what is already agreed upon.

The **EALA case of the SRHR Bill** provides insight into how faith leadership contributed to the re-tabling, redrafting and eventually the adoption of the SRHR Bill of the East Africa Community (EAC). The SRHR Bill leverages the binding nature of regionally adopted laws in EAC to advance and harmonize legal reform in EAC countries. The Bill risked getting lost in translation, partly partly due to contestations from governmental and civil society voices on an earlier version of the Bill. Resistance and backlash in the region has surfaced in pressure to reverse SRH policies, for example the banning of CSE in Ugandan schools, the halting of the Kenyan bill on sexuality education and access to contraceptives in schools, and the Tanzanian president's declaration to not allow pregnant students to return to schools. The case study documents how faith leadership deployed a range of strategies to convene civil society organisations in the region and articulate a common CSO agenda, and to increase acceptance of and neutralize resistance to the Bill.

The **Free to Shine campaign** was launched in 2018, under co-leadership of the Organization of African First Ladies for Development (OAFLAD) and the African Union. It seeks to make progress by addressing mother-to-child transmission of HIV; this vertical transmission of HIV causes the majority of new infections in children, and needs to be addressed in order to fully eliminate AIDS in 2030. This case study describes the process of advocacy and concerted effort that lead to the development of the campaign and its acceptance and adoption by stakeholders and communities at the continental, national and local levels. As 'mothers of the nation', First Ladies can play a vital role in building awareness as well as political commitment for effective AIDS responses. Their moral authority can be leveraged to mobilize communities as well as governments towards joint decision-making and stronger synergies.

The case study on institutional change in the **All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)** sheds light on how the potential of faith institutions can be stimulated to support norm change towards reproductive health and sustainable development. Churches and faith institutions have considerable potential to leverage for transformative change, considering their influence in society and their wide grassroots networks. Progress was sought through a set of interlinked and multilevel strategies addressing institutional change within the AACC itself, supporting faith leaders to speak to population, reproductive health and development issues in a variety of platforms, and supporting them in speaking in these with their constituencies. Among the contestations to address, were misconceptions around family planning within the faith community. AACC and its partner Faith to Action Network engaged with that through a combination of strategies, including providing data, statistics and analysis on the issues, clarifying interpretation of relevant bible scriptures, and accompaniment of faith leaders to speak at national, regional or continental platforms and meetings.

# Strategies

To advance legal and policy reform on women and girls' rights to SRHR, the advocacy work of the State of African Women campaign and its key partners and champions pursued a combination of strategies. With respect to the content of progressing on unfinished business, these are:

- Awareness raising and reconstructing the narrative (strategy 1)

- Engaging with resistance, contestations and backlash (strategy 2)

With respect to the process of legal and policy reform, these are:

- Safeguarding representation and access to decision-making spaces (strategy 3)

- Working with allies and joining forces (strategy 4).

# Strategy 1: Awareness raising and reconstructing the narrative

In advancing progress and furthering the unfinished business, **awareness raising** of a broad constituency of stakeholders and partners is of critical significance. This entails awareness raising of different aspects, including:

- Articulating existing commitments in continental, regional, international and national legal and policy frameworks, in particular the AADPD, ICPD, Maputo Protocol, African Charter, CEDAW and the Beijing conference (FWCW).

- Collecting and presenting evidence regarding progress and backlog in legal and policy reform, domestication and implementation of continental and international commitments, and weaknesses and loopholes in legal and policy framework. This also includes identification of (attempted) reversals in laws and policies. This is for instance done via policy tracking tools, and the State of African Women report and related briefs.

- Bringing the realities and challenges of women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights to the front and on the agenda. This includes both real life testimonies, as well as analysis of key indicators on prevalence and quality of SRHR services, and evidence on women and girls' challenges and on violations of their rights.

- Identifying and leveraging multiple sources in support of women and girls' SRHR, also on contested issues. These sources include provisions in the Maputo Protocol (and related General Comments), as well as clarified interpretations of religious texts or AACC-level resolutions, and high-level leadership and commitment of for instance First Ladies.

In raising awareness, constructing the narrative is of key importance. Firstly, this framing emphasized the significance of existing commitments as well as of progress that has been made; this forms the basis of articulating the direction of further change: where do want to reach, why is that important and what are necessary and priority steps to get there? Secondly, because progress on unfinished business is part of a long process, already encompassing multiple decades of commitments, legal and policy reform, and contestations and negotiations, CSOs need to constantly adapt and frame their messages and demands in relation to emerging priorities that feature on the agendas of national and intergovernmental institutions. This means linking SRHR issues to themes as migration, humanitarian responses or, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic that have been prominent on these agendas. Thematic focus on migration or humanitarian settings allows for highlighting the SRHR needs and rights of women and girls in vulnerable and marginalized settings, and contribute to realizing the international ambition to 'leave no one behind'. Thirdly, the narrative and messaging need to respond to resistance and backlash around strongly contested issues, such as certain rights violations – including FGM, child marriage, or violence on the basis of Sexual Orientation of Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) - being considered part of African culture or the right to culture.

**Capacity strengthening** of change agents, (potential) champions and also decision-makers themselves is an important and often pursued activity in this regard. The YWCA focused on strengthening capacity of young women champions, actively engaging at community level. The journalist network invested largely in capacity building of journalists, in combination with linking them to national organisations to invite reporting on real life stories. In the Free to Shine campaign, the OAFLAD secretariat provides technical assistance, on an on-going basis and in its brokering capacity, to a variety of AU, multilateral and governmental stakeholders and partners.

The AADPD+5 and ICPD+25 processes entailed capacity strengthening workshops during continental and regional intergovernmental meetings, on the ins and outs of these policy and negotiation processes and their linkages with national level decision-making and policy and legal reform. These targeted civil society organisations as well as parliamentarians or journalists. In the EALA SRHR Bill process, both informal interactions and formal events provided opportunities to Faith to Action Network and its CSO partners to sensitize EALA parliamentarians and technical staff on the SRHR Bill and the underlying issues that needed further attention.

## Strategy 2: Engaging with resistance, contestations and backlash

Contestations around women and girls' rights in SRHR are often specific to particular issues, and might differ per context, forum, institution and constituency. Engaging with resistance and backlash requires sensitivity to and understanding of the particularities and context-specificity of who resists what norms and practices on the basis of what grounds and beliefs. It can also benefit from strong knowledge on foundational human rights values, including dignity and freedom of the person.

These can provide a basis to building a shared vision around ending discrimination of women and girls, and with that change disrespectful and inequitable gender relations.[5] Understanding the context specificity of contestations, and their relation to women's health, dignity and bodily integrity - which are fundamental human rights – provide an important perspective on engaging with resistance and backlash.

Box 3 presents the provisions in the Maputo protocol on harmful practices and the right to positive cultural context.

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**Box 3: Harmful practices and right to culture**

The Maputo Protocol defines **harmful practices** as *'all behaviour, attitudes and/or practices which negatively affect the fundamental rights of women and girls, such as their right to life, health, dignity, education and physical integrity'* (Art. 1). Harmful practices include a wide range of non-therapeutic practices that constitute a form of discrimination that disproportionately affects women and girls. They are often based on cultural or socio-conventional norms and deeply rooted in gender inequalities and discriminatory values.

In addition to the prohibition and elimination of all harmful practices, the Maputo Protocol provides that 'women shall have the right to live in a *positive cultural context'* (Art. 17.1). This is qualified in its Preamble that refers to 'the preservation of *African values based on the principles of equality, peace, freedom, dignity justice, solidarity and democracy'*. Art. 17 also articulates women's right 'to *participate in all levels in the determination of cultural policies'*. As such, the Protocol identifies shifts in gender-discriminatory cultural values that are impeding women and girls' enjoyment of their rights, as well as women and girls' socio-economic rights and their right to participate in political decision-making as being of equal value in ending harmful practices.[6]

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5    State of African Women report, Key Findings 2018 (p. 7-9).
6    State of African Women report, Key Findings, 2018 (p. 46-47)

Strategies that intentionally engage with resistance and contestations include:

- **Ensuring *diversity* in coalitions** with diverse actors and stakeholders. By building a broad-based coalition, space is opened up for strengthening trust, understanding and joint orientation on shared priorities. This was indeed the foundation of the State of African Women consortium and campaign itself, but also for instance clearly visible in the EALA Regional Task Force. (More detailed discussed on coalition-building in the Synthesis Brief 2, on Coalition-Building and Multilevel Connections).

- **Extensive processes of *consultation*,** as a point in case that process matters. The EAC SRHR Bill encompasses multiple EAC level consultations, with different groups of stakeholders (including civil society, technical staff, external stakeholders, EALA MPs), as well as national level public hearings. The policy continuum in the ICPD+25 processes visualizes the importance of various consultations at multiple levels and their many interconnections. The institutional change process in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) itself, towards a Population and Development Strategy, also entailed a series of interlinked meetings, workshops, consultations, and assemblies.

- **Mobilizing *positive voices*** to speak out. This can be positive faith voices speaking out in support of promotion of women and girls' health, dignity and bodily integrity. This is prominent in both the AACC case - in which faith leaders commit to and speak out within their churches as well as in international fora -, and in the EALA SRHR Bill case - where faith leaders are mobilized during national hearings and regional events and for a to support the re-tabling and adoption of the SRHR Bill. Positive voices not only counter resistance and regressive argumentations and frames, but also inspire others that change is possible and that they can be part of positive change.

- Engaging with representatives and institutions of cultural, community and faith institutions. In the FGM campaign of YWCA in Kenya, youth champions the champions engage with the so-called ***custodians of culture*** (community leaders, elders and circumcisers), to jointly raise awareness and promote change at community level.

Successful responses to backlash and resistance recognize that legal reform brings about and needs to be accompanied with changes in **social norms and practices**; yet, for social norms to shift, more is needed than 'only' legal reform. Successful strategies need to find a balance between building understanding and trust, through exchange and dialogues, and 'holding the line'. In faith based and community level settings as well as formal (inter)government spaces, significant progress can be made by addressing **misinterpretations**, and responding to **knowledge gaps and misleading information**. Dialogue and increased understanding contributes to negotiating and finding shared values and language. In faith-based and community settings, supportive references to existing policy documents as well as to important religious texts can be of particular relevance. In governmental settings, existing continental and international commitments can be leveraged in response to resistance and backlash, especially when accompanied by analysis of progress and setbacks in policy and legal reform. The journalist network gains specific significance, because of how improved SRHR reporting in the media can address knowledge gaps and misinterpretations among both the general public and key decision-makers at multiple levels.

In addition to exploring space to move forward, strategies in response to backlash and resistance also need to know which hard-won gains are not up for discussion and negotiation. In the **retrogressive** pro-FGM court case, this entailed a coordinated and broad-based response to prepare a counter response, and mobilize diverse constituencies in support of approval of the amended 2011 Act. In some cases, reversal and resistant voices can offer an opportunity to expose loopholes in hard won gains and legal reforms, and leverage these to further strengthen legal and policy frameworks and their implementation.

In the ICPD+25 process, resistance manifested itself in attempts to review both progress on the AADPD as well as its actual text. Opening up the agreed text to re-negotiation risked removal or considerable watering down of existing commitments. this entailed not going along with the proposed review of fundamentalist actors of ICPD commitments. This called for considerable efforts to ensure that the AADPD+5 review focused on progress in implementation, and an emphasis on **operationalizing** agreed commitments into strategies and plans that are accompanied with resources and monitoring framework.

## Strategy 3: Leveraging networks and access to spaces

Access to decision-making fora and spaces is a key prerequisite and, simultaneously, an on-going contestation for CSO advocacy. The role of CSOs in decision-making can never be taken for granted, and is often under pressure from different angles. The advocacy strategies in the six case studies sought to safeguard access to and representation in decision-making spaces through shaping and building broad-based alliances collaborating on **longer-term advocacy strategies and roadmaps.**

The advocacy strategy of State of African Women campaign as a whole, as presented in the ICPD+25 case study, was long-term and encompassing. It explored and multiplied linkages between a set of processes along a **policy continuum encompassing different levels:** continental, international, regional and national. These included the ICPD+25 review and its African AADPD+5 process, as well as the fifteenth celebration of the Maputo Protocol, in the context of the AU's Agenda 2063 and it's formulation of an Common African Position on Population and Development (CAP). The policy continuum also encompassed technical committees and task forces, as well as national level consultations on for instance the AADPD+5 review.

With its broad-based nature, the State of African Women consortium was able to **leverage access and the networks** of a variety of partners to different fora. The SoAW campaign leveraged the observer status of IPPF to the UN and AU, as well as Faith to Action Network's relationship with the All African Council of Churches which also has observer status. OAFLAD is uniquely positioned to leverage the moral authority and high-level leadership of African First Ladies, at both national levels and in international fora, including around AU Summits. Being considered as 'mothers of their nations', First Ladies have a moral authority that can resonate in both policy processes and community norms. YWCA's unique position offers the strengths of connecting the continental and international negotiations to grassroots mobilizing and advocacy, and to bring young women's voices and realities to decision-making spaces at national and community level. The European partners in the consortium offered opportunities to advocate at EU level.

In the EALA case study, the establishment and re-activation of the Civil Society Task Force for Enactment of Regional Legislation on SRHR in East Africa was an important step. The regional steering team of this Task Force, and Faith to Action Network as one of the two co-chairs, developed a CSO **roadmap** bringing together activities across different stakeholder groups. This fed into the development of a roadmap of the GPC towards enactment of the SRHR Bill. The longer-term engagement, close collaboration and joint roadmap shaped and safeguarded re-tabling and enactment of the Bill, including the process to get there and the role of civil society in that.

Whereas formal relations are important in these processes, the case studies underline the importance of **informal relations and back-office lobbying as well.** Faith to Action Network, and the regional steering team of this Task Force, built and maintained relations with EALA's General Purpose Committee, and partnership with important partners, such as the UNFPA and the EAC Health Department. Already in an early phase, informal relations and back office advocacy with EALA technical staff and parliamentarians was key to gaining better insight into the EALA processes, and also on the calendar and timing of respective events. Also in the AADPD+5 and ICPD+25 processes, informal relations with key stakeholders, including AU representatives and staff, UNFPA, national delegations and CSO actors, provided important. They contribute to building trust, developing shared understanding, and to gaining relevant information on decision-making that help target energy and focus.

# Strategy 4: Working with allies and joining forces

The promotion, expansion and realization of women and girls' rights to SRHR requires a complex set of changes in legal and policy frameworks, in shifts in social norms, and in actual implementation of laws and policies. This can only be realized when progressive voices join forces and work with allies.

A first aspect in this is reaching out to and engaging with a broader set of allies, often 'unusual suspects'. Broad-based alliances represent larger constituencies and multiple voices. When joining forces around shared priorities and agenda, they can be very powerful. Even when not in full agreement on issues or priorities, they can coordinate their actions and messages to support each other's causes and strategies, and avoid being disempowered by 'divide and rule' strategies of opponents. At a minimum, broad alliances allow for joint coordination and for agreeing on and defending 'bare minimum' positions. For such broad alliances to effectively and jointly make progress on unfinished business, it is important to convene and agree on shared priorities and recommendations; CSO position papers serve as important points of reference for strong collaboration.

Joining forces with allies is effective at all levels of advocacy. At the community level, youth champions - in the anti-FGM campaign of YWCA in Kenya - engage in intergenerational dialogues, where younger and older generations exchange and find solutions to challenges of young people in SRHR. These lead to statements and positions of communities and their leaders to sub-national representatives, as well as media declarations of community leaders on the abandonment of FGM. The journalist network itself is an example of broadening allies, and mobilizing journalists and media within the context of broader advocacy strategies. Over time, the journalists themselves are realizing their need to engage with news room editors as potential allies, as part of a deepening of their activities to enhance objective SRHR reporting.

At the continental and international level, OAFLAD and African First Ladies build partnerships and join forces with the AU, multilateral agencies and national governments. Similarly, CSOs like IPPF convene other CSOs to jointly agree on a common framework and position paper that can serve as a basis for joint advocacy and messaging. The broad nature of the SoAW consortium itself offered a basis to facilitate and stimulate interactions between groups that not always engage with each other: journalists, young people, parliamentarians, government and intergovernmental representatives, faith leaders, and women's rights and SRHR activists. Much of the faith-based work of Faith to Action Network leverages the potential of mobilizing the silent middle to engage and speak out in support of values promoting women and girls' health, dignity and bodily integrity. This middle group can represent large, sometimes less outspoken or vocal constituencies; engaging with and mobilizing this majority voice, or voices, is a potentially successful strategy for promoting change.

A second important element of successful strategies to work with allies is that the building and maintenance of these relationships requires a long-term engagement. Allies do not become allies in one-off interactions and short-term collaborations. It is over time, and with continued attention for partnership building, that relationship are knit and consolidated. Exchange contributes to building confidence and trust, and also nurtures shared understanding. It is these dimensions that can shift affiliations and grow commitment to a common cause. The AADPD+5 process, embedded in the longer process of the ICPD+25 process, is a point in case, where longer-term objectives that have significance within the 'bigger picture' can guide collaboration and create a view of shared or common interests. A longer-term engagement and orientation also helps to rise above oneself and put issues and different views in perspective. Longer-term collaborations and coalitions are also of key value, because policy processes are often dynamic, with delays as well as unexpected opportunities. Joint allies can more easily navigate and take advantage of these dynamics, and might possess more flexibility in adapting messages and recommendations to circumstances and contexts.

# Lessons learned and concluding insights

In conclusion, this Synthesis Brief highlights five lessons learned in light of the questions it posed on progressing on the unfinished business in women and girls' rights in SRHR.

A first lesson learned is the importance of seeing and agreeing on the long-term objectives of advocacy to advance progress and realize women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. The focus in this is on implementation and moving forward. Both the domestication and implementation of the landmark African commitments on women and girls' rights in these areas are *multilevel and long-term legal and policy processes*, that each entail multiple steps. It also means that ending discrimination of women and girls, and advancing and realizing their human rights, freedom and dignity are part of challenging existing *inequalities and gender norms* in which this dignity and their freedoms are ignored, denied or violated. Each step in the formulation, operationalization, budgeting, implementation and monitoring of policy and legal frameworks engages with such gender norms and power dynamics. In keeping the eye on the ball and also accepting that the transformative change is a long-term process, advocacy processes and legal and policy reform can and need to consider the pacing of change. Allowing time for change to happen, and have allies and stakeholders on board is important. So is keeping track that progress is not diluted or reversed along the way.

A second lesson pertains to having a solid understanding of what is at stake. This means that it is important to have a **holistic and comprehensive** understanding of women and girls' rights in SRHR. This means that sexual and reproductive health are an integral part of people's health, and that attaining and maintaining health implies respecting and promoting fundamental human rights of women and girls. It also means that sexual and reproductive health and rights are integrally linked to the elimination of discrimination of women, and to respectful and equitable gender relations.[7] A comprehensive approach in advocating for women and girls' SRHR is more successful when legal and policy negotiations are linked to the realities of women, girls, men and boys on the ground, for example by sharing testimonies, presenting data and evidence, consistent policy tracking, and by objective SRHR coverage in the media. It is particularly important to bring forward and responding to the most pressing and urgent issues, for instance in the context of conflict and war, humanitarian crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, or forced displacement.

Thirdly, engage with your audience and **tailor your advocacy** messages and activities to the decision-makers and power holders you are targeting. Understand their perspective, their realities, their values and concerns, and then make yourself relevant to them. Knowing what to ask and how to ask it, is critical for several reasons. To start with, tailoring your messages will contribute to decision-makers actually hearing and understanding what you are trying to get across, in a way that makes sense to them. This also means figuring out what makes decision-makers 'tick'. What data and evidence do they need? But also, how do SRHR issues affect those decision-makers themselves, in their own lives and realities? And what are important values and beliefs to them, that are supportive and can be leveraged in advancing women and girls' rights in SRHR? Figuring this out then also means that understanding where contestations, diverging views or resistance come from, and what they are about. Many of the case studies speak to the importance of understanding and engaging with contestations and resistance, by nurturing dialogue and finding common ground in long-term objectives.

A fourth insight is that the strategy of the State of African Women campaign to strongly **link capacity strengthening and advocacy** actions works well. Capacity strengthening was targeted at selected champions and change agents, including young women, journalists, parliamentarians, and SRHR advocates. Such activities with champions often took place in the context of advocacy processes and events, where champions could immediately benefit from and make use of what they had gained and learned. Interestingly and importantly, capacity strengthening was also tailored to decision-makers that were targeted in advocacy strategies, in workshops as well as through the provision of various forms of technical assistance. It has proven successful to present advocacy asks to government and decision-makers and simultaneously address and fill knowledge or capacity gaps.

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7    For a more elaborate articulation of this comprehensive and holistic understanding, see State of African Women report (2018, Full Report, pages 24-26). https://rightbyher.org/resource/rapport-sur-la-condition-des-femmes-africaines-rapport-regional-cedeao/

A fifth and closely related lesson is to find and nurture allies, stakeholders and champions, among diverse constituencies, leaders and decision-makers. In civil society, among political and traditional leaders at national and community levels, among faith leaders in large as well as community level faith institutions, among young people, among First Ladies and other important moral authorities, among decision-makers, politicians, parliamentarians at sub-national, national, regional and continental levels, among journalists working in a variety of media channels. They can be positive voices and forces for change towards the realization of women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. For real change to happen, and to sustain, a broad range of stakeholders needs to be mobilized to join forces and move progress forward. These can also include 'unusual suspects', or stakeholders that initially misunderstand or mistrust each other.

The sixth and final lessons learned is that for these collaborations and partnership to become and be meaningful, trust and shared understanding are key. That means nurturing dialogue and conversations, and supporting allies with information, evidence, and assistance. Building that kind of trust-based relations only evolve in long-term engagements and collaborations, where allies get to know, understand and trust each other. And where they can also complement each other, with resources and networks. And where they build joint understanding and joint action for change, especially in an approach that is issue-based and goal oriented. In that joint engagement, agreed set of recommendations and messages can be put and pushed forward to address critical gaps and advance on unfinished business.

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