



UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

DEVELOPMENT FUTURES SERIES

April 2024

UNDP Global Policy Network Brief

Putting a Stop to Gender Violence through Community Action:

The Experience of a Network of Women Leaders in Peru

by Mixy Paredes Armas and Sarah Fisher¹

This policy brief describes the creation of the Women Leaders Network in Villa El Salvador, Lima, Peru, and how it serves as a successful model for transformation and structural change for gender equality. This network has been able to unify existing and rising women leaders around a common cause, addressing gender-based violence (GBV), while maintaining an intersectional approach. Once unified, the women pushed the local government to create a permanent task force for preventing and responding to GBV in which the women leaders and representatives of the local government, judiciary, police, healthcare and others participate. The objective of this brief is to share the successes and lessons learned of the methodology used to inform and encourage the creation of women leaders networks in other contexts and harness grassroots partnerships to influence local responses to GBV and other pressing issues affecting women.

Violence and its community response

Prior to the pandemic, 58 percent of women in Peru had experienced violence at the hands of a spouse or partner at some point in their lives, and 30 percent of women had experienced physical violence at the hands of their partner in the past year; an overwhelming majority of these women (71 percent) did not seek formal help.² The 2019 Peruvian National Survey of Social Relations indicated that 59 percent of Peruvians tolerate violence against women, normalizing it, allowing it, encouraging it or simply not acting when they see it

in different contexts.³ The district of Villa El Salvador (VES) in Lima, Peru, has the second highest rate of GBV in the country.⁴ In VES, 75 percent of women have experienced some kind of violence in their life, and 48 percent have experienced it in the last year.⁵ Every woman in VES knows at least one woman affected by GBV.⁶ Female family members, neighbors and acquaintances are often the first people that victims turn to for help.⁷ In 2018 alone, GBV cost VES US\$72.9 million—four times the amount that the municipal government spent on

public works in 2016 and 53 percent of the total spending of the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations nationwide.⁸

Peru was struck especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, resulting in the highest case-fatality ratio and deaths per capita in the world.⁹ This public health crisis led the government to enact strict lockdowns to slow the spread of COVID-19, resulting in significant economic and health consequences for women. In Peru, women are overrepresented in the jobs most impacted by the pandemic, including informal, part-time, independent and service-sector employment.¹⁰ As their income decreased, women's economic dependency and vulnerability increased. Notably, many women were also trapped at home with their aggressors during the mandatory lockdowns. The Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP) registered a 97 percent increase in calls to its GBV helpline from 2019 to 2020.¹¹

In Peru, Law N.°30364¹² (2015) and the National Plan against Gender-Based Violence¹³ 2016–2021 mandate the creation of GBV task forces at the

local, provincial, regional and national levels to prevent, sanction and eliminate GBV through the use of tools including action plans and protocols. Unfortunately, few local districts in Peru have yet to implement GBV task forces, and fewer yet count with the participation of the number of women required to fulfill the task forces' maximum potential. Only the district of VES has promoted a greater number of women with an active role in the participatory construction of local management tools, such as the local action plan and protocol. While the VES has a vibrant and active history of community organizing, the various women's groups had not united around the common theme of addressing GBV—each group worked on other key issues impacting women, such as environmental, educational and economic factors. In this context, there was not a united voice expressing the perspectives of women in the community in relation to the local government and other institutions. The women leaders network approach provided two significant structural changes by creating an organizing space for women focused on GBV and establishing a GBV task force that goes above and beyond what is required by law.

Transformational Change

The pilot programme in VES was part of the global project 'Ending Gender-based Violence and Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals,' which is coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Based on the successful results obtained, UNDP has formalized a partnership with three local governments that seeks to replicate the intervention.

This pilot programme achieved several significant structural changes to the landscape in VES that have transformed power relationships and contributed to greater gender equality. To lay the groundwork for all of the other changes, the programme established the foundational structure of the Women Leaders Network. As outlined in the steps in the following section, this involves bringing together key stakeholders from various grassroots women's organizations, conflict resolution,¹⁴ constructing a common identity around the prevention of and response to GBV, empowering the women leaders to create their own rules of engagement and maintaining regular meetings. This novel structure of a network of women leaders allowed the women of VES to unite as never before around a common cause that impacts them all.

Based on the successful formation of the Women Leaders Network, the women of VES were able to formally engage with the local government with a united voice and strong proposals for solutions to the GBV problems in their community. One of their key demands was the creation of a permanent local GBV task force in accordance with Peruvian law, fulfilling one of the crucial structural changes brought about by the pilot programme. It is the responsibility of municipalities to officially establish and convene a GBV task force to include key stakeholders such as the judiciary, police, healthcare, NGOs and others. The women leaders network encouraged the local government to form the Local GBV Task Force and then asserted the right to participate actively by holding several seats. This permanent Local GBV Task Force is charged with creating biennial local action plans and joint local action protocols.

After the formation of the Local GBV Task Force in 2019, the Women Leaders Network participated actively in the creation of the first-ever VES GBV Local Action Plan and Joint Local Action Protocols for 2021–2022. The biennial local action plan outlines activities for the prevention of and response to GBV, such as youth workshops on GBV prevention, a door-to-door violence prevention campaign, free legal assistance, participatory budgeting, events on

key dates like the International Day of Women and the monitoring and evaluation of activities. The Joint Local Action Protocol (the first created nationwide) is a guide with procedures to be followed by state entities to address cases of GBV, such as providing a private space for reporting, training staff on GBV, avoiding revictimization, taking immediate protective action in the face of violence and informing all victims of their rights. With these formal structures in place, the Women Leaders Network has new mechanisms to hold the local government accountable for addressing GBV and gender equality. The active involvement of women leaders in the creation of the Local GBV Task Force and its key policy documents also represents a transformational change in power dynamics between organized women and local government, as the women's concerns and proposals are now heard and respected.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Women Leaders Network was able to pivot to a virtual space and increase its focus on mental health and mutual support groups for the women as both economic instability and GBV increased drastically. Women who previously had very limited digital literacy were trained in the use of WhatsApp and Zoom as organizing spaces—tools and digital structures that they will be able to use in all of their efforts moving forward. As the social isolation, economic shutdowns and community mortality rates of the pandemic took their toll, the women asked for and received training in psycho-emotional first aid, self-care, mental health, mutual support and creative writing. With these new tools in their toolbelts, they were able to provide emergency support to their community and continue with their work combating GBV.

Overcoming GBV in the community

Over a three-year timeframe, UNDP worked hand-in-hand with the local government, national Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations, national police, justice system, health system, nonprofit organizations and women's organizations to create, support and provide training for the Justa Women Leaders Network in Villa El Salvador. From this experience, the following concrete steps have been derived as key to establishing cohesive and sustainable women leaders networks. These steps are directed at stakeholders interested in creating such a network.

STEP 1: Map existing networks/actors, identify leaders, conduct needs assessment

This is an opportunity to identify the greatest needs and challenges regarding GBV in the community and also pinpoint existing institutions and resources. This step can be completed by UNDP, other international development partners or an academic consultant, in collaboration with the community.

STEP 2: Invite organizations and women leaders to participate

Presenting the project to local government, NGOs and other stakeholders is key in establishing an understanding of the project goals and encouraging active participation. UNDP or other international development partners can play a central role in convening various actors and presenting the model.

STEP 3: Conflict resolution and collaboration

Many of these stakeholders are leaders in their own right and may not be used to working together. It is important to establish horizontal participation and safe spaces.

STEP 4: Construct a common identity for the network

There will likely be significant diversity in the women represented, but they all have things in common such as their regional identity and a desire to reduce GBV.

STEP 5: Formalize an organizing space

Establish the women leaders network as an organizing space—whether or not that includes official registration. The women should create their own rules of engagement and select their own leadership.

STEP 6: Sustain active spaces for meetings and activities

Establish a consistent meeting schedule and regular activities to keep participants engaged.

STEP 7: Support the emotional well-being of women leaders

GBV is a difficult topic to address, especially when many of the women themselves have been victims. Ensure that the leaders feel safe to express their emotions, have healthy outlets and practice self-

care. Partner with local mental health organizations when possible.

STEP 8: Recognize different leadership styles

Each woman leader is likely to have different strengths and leadership styles. Encourage women to build on their strengths as well as train in new areas. Leadership trainings can be led by UNDP, other development partners or local organizations.

STEP 9: Encourage the active participation of women not only in the discussion but also in the development of proposals

Many of the women have experienced GBV first- or second hand—they are aware of many of the barriers facing women in their community. They can also be the greatest source of potential solutions if given the opportunity to develop proposals to prevent and respond to GBV via community engagement and/or local government policy, such as through a local action plan and protocol.

STEP 10: Prepare women to participate in official spaces with state authorities

Official spaces can be intimidating, especially if previous political participation is minimal. Explaining how different types of meetings and official spaces work is key to ensuring effective participation.

Recommendations

Concerning global trends such as backsliding on women's rights, shrinking civil society spaces and increased polarization make engaging local government and community in GBV prevention efforts increasingly important. Creating women leaders networks to address GBV at the local level is a promising model for transformation and structural changes for gender equality. Development practitioners can play a key role in developing such organizing spaces and government infrastructure by working in close partnership with local government, national agencies, nonprofit organizations, private businesses and women's groups. A neutral facilitator and convener can formally bring together disparate women leaders and local stakeholders to address a common issue: gender-based violence. One of the key lessons learned from the pilot is to include mental health support alongside trainings

STEP 11: Promote community participation in meetings between government authorities and civil society (bridging social capital)

Establish or strengthen the institution of the local GBV task force and ensure that the women leaders are included. UNDP or other development partners can work closely with local government to officially establish a GBV task force and participate as a member alongside the women leaders.

STEP 12: Create strategic partnerships

A comprehensive communications strategy can raise awareness of GBV prevention and responses. Partner with local media outlets, private businesses, NGOs and other strategic partners to increase engagement and potentially bring in more resources.

STEP 13: Work towards sustainability

Seek to create permanent institutions, long-term plans and ongoing funding for project sustainability. This could include formally registering the women leaders network as an entity or applying for grant funding.

All of these steps are explained in detail in the *Justa Guidance Note (Cuadernillo metodológico in Spanish)*.¹⁵

and meetings. Local organizations that specialize in various fields, such as mental health, can provide culturally appropriate trainings while development practitioners can supplement when local capacity is lacking.

This paper recommends that this women leaders network model be adapted to other contexts in order to promote equitable, gender-responsive development at the local level. Development practitioners and women's rights advocates can adapt the steps outlined in the methodology to their local context while maintaining the two-pronged approach of creating a women leaders network and developing local government infrastructure to address GBV. The resulting organizing spaces and accountability measures have proven to be resilient in crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key insights for the operationalization of UNDP's Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2025

In order to operationalize UNDP's Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2025, specifically the theme of transformation and structural changes for gender equality, UNDP plays a key role as a facilitator and convener. By facilitating the creation of a women leaders network, UNDP can help women community leaders unite over a common cause and construct policy solutions. UNDP can also serve as an intermediary between the women leaders network and the local government while their working relationship is being formed.

Additionally, UNDP can add value by connecting women leaders and other key stakeholders to important capacity-building trainings. In Peru, UNDP has organized key trainings on GBV, masculinities and other gender equality themes for the community with local organizations. UNDP has also helped train the women leaders in conflict resolution, creating safe spaces, accompanying GBV victims in accessing services and providing mental health first aid to those in crisis. Working directly with the local governments and GBV task forces, UNDP has exposed local leaders to the COMBOS methodology¹⁶ for creating theories of change and strategies for addressing GBV. Increasing local capacity allows for programme sustainability after UNDP's three-year intervention comes to a close.

Endnotes

- 1 Sarah Fisher is a Fulbright Public Policy Fellow in Peru, email: sarah13fisher@gmail.com; Mixy Paredes Armas is a lead analyst of the UNDP Gender Unit and Project Coordinator at UNDP Peru, email: mixy.paredes@undp.org.
Acknowledgments: The authors deeply thank the women leaders of the Justa Network in Villa El Salvador, whose commitment and action against gender violence is present now and will be long into the future. Their experience, leadership and empathy have accompanied and inspired us at all times. Through this document, we make an attempt to ensure that their transformative voices are heard. The authors would also like to thank the Peru Fulbright Commission. Many thanks also go to Diego Antoni, former UNDP Policy Specialist on Gender, Governance, Crisis Prevention and Recovery, Alexandra Wilde, UNDP Senior Governance Expert and Jessica Zimmerman, former UNDP Project Specialist.
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- 14 In order to address a number of long-standing fractures among the women leaders, it was decided to start by forming a network where the rules and forms of intervention and action were designed through participatory processes with new agreement, such as collective processes for meetings, and construction of new spaces for exchange. The women leaders expressed that they highly valued this process, which allowed them to join forces against GBV.
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