

**Strategies for success**  
Access to Justice  
for Women



# Project countries

## Sierra Leone

### Project locations

Mbundorbu in Bo District, Ngo Town in Kono District and Kathirie in Bombali District

### Implementing partners

Community Organisation for Mobilisation and Empowerment in Sierra Leone; Women's Centre for Good Governance and Human Rights; Kono Women's Rights Network

## Somaliland

### Project locations

Marodijeex in Hargeisa, Togdheer in Burao and Sanaag in Erigavo

### Implementing partners

Women for Action, Advocacy and Progress Organisation; Solidarity Community Development Organization

## Uganda

### Project locations

Ayer, Aber, Ogur and Amach sub-counties, Lira District

### Implementing partners

Facilitation for Peace and Development; Uganda Federation of Women Lawyers; National Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS

## Liberia

### Project locations

Polar and ELRZ, Grand Gedeh County

### Implementing partners

Tiyatien Health; Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (replacing the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia)

## Nigeria

### Project locations

Ezza Ugwuomu, Umalor, Mmaku, Nnewe and Ehamufu in Enugu and Mista Ali/Jengre, Ganawuri, Gwong and Sarki in Jos

Project interventions were led and implemented by Women for Women International, Nigeria

## Burundi

### Project locations

Ruyigi, Karusi and Rutana

### Implementing partners

Society for Women Against AIDS in Africa; Association des Femmes Juristes; Collectif des associations et ONGs féminines du Burundi; Dushirehamwe; Forces Unies des Femmes de Ruyigi; Horaniteka; Femmes Urumuri; Synergie des Partenaires pour la Promotion des Droits de la Femme; Association de Défense des Droits de la Femme

## DRC

### Project locations

Goma, Nyiragongo and Rutshuru in North Kivu and Kadutu section of Bukavu Town and Kabare territory in South Kivu

### Implementing partners

Association des Facilitateurs pour le Développement Intégré; Actions pour le Développement Intégré au Kivu; Association des Mamans pour la Promotion des Veuves et Enfants Orphelins de Rutshuru; Union Pour La Vie et Contre Le SIDA; Initiative des Femmes pour la Redynamisation des Atouts de Développement Endogène

The designations employed on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of ActionAid concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

# Acronyms

AJW	Access to Justice for Women
AA	ActionAid
AAB	ActionAid Burundi
AAIDRC	ActionAid International Democratic Republic of Congo
AAIS	ActionAid International Somaliland
AAISL	ActionAid International Sierra Leone
AAIU	ActionAid International Uganda
AAL	ActionAid Liberia
CBO	Community-based organisation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil society organisation
Danida	Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs
DFID	Department for International Development / UK aid (UK)
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FIDA Uganda	Uganda Federation of Women Lawyers
FSU	Family Support Unit (Sierra Leone)
GBV	Gender-based violence
HRC	Human Rights Commission (Nigeria)
LCC	Local Council Courts (Uganda)
LNAP	Liberia National Action Plan
MLP	Men's Learning Programme (Nigeria)
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo
PVA	Participatory Vulnerability Analysis
REFLECT	Regenerated Freirian Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques
SCDO	Solidarity Community Development Organization (Somaliland)
SERUKA	Supporting Survivors of Violence Against Women (Burundi)
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SLP	Sierra Leone Police
STAR	Societies Tackling AIDS through Rights
SWAA	Society for Women against AIDS in Africa (Burundi)
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNFPA	UN Population Fund
VAW	Violence against women
WAAPO	Women for Action, Advocacy and Progress Organisation (Somaliland)
WfWI Nigeria	Women for Women International Nigeria
WLWHA	Women living with HIV and AIDS
WONGOSOL	Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia

# Introduction

In early 2009, ActionAid (AA) and Women for Women International Nigeria (WfWI Nigeria) embarked on a two-year, multi-country initiative entitled "Access to Justice for Women" (AJW). Funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID)/UK aid and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Danida), the project focused on ensuring and increasing women's access to justice in conflict and post-conflict environments and was implemented in seven African states: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somaliland and Uganda. It was designed to build on the success of a Danida-funded project implemented by ActionAid in Burundi, Sierra Leone and the DRC from 2007-2009 which provided support for survivors of violence against women (VAW) and introduced strategies to reduce gender-related violence in humanitarian emergencies.

This publication is intended as a reference tool for other organisations working on AJW issues, specifically those that are designing and implementing AJW projects. It outlines some of the key strategies and tactics employed in the seven project countries to increase women's access to justice, and analyses their respective successes and shortcomings. Findings are broken up by strategy, into the following sections:

## Section 1

Strengthening formal and informal justice systems

## Section 2

Empowering women for decision-making and governance

## Section 3

Policy and advocacy for women's access to justice

## Section 4

Partnership approaches and engaging with multiple stakeholders

## Section 5

Engaging with men

## Section 6

Promoting systems and structures for sustainability

## Access to Justice for Women; an inspiring and innovative project

The overall goal of the AJW project was to improve the security and safety of marginalised women in conflict and post-conflict countries. Specifically, the project aimed to build demand for justice by enhancing the capacity of women affected by violence to advocate for access to justice, and to increase the supply of justice for women by promoting pro-women government policies, judicial system reform and changes in cultural practices at national, local and community levels.

The project was conceptualised in line with ActionAid's human rights based approach which emphasises the three core pillars of solidarity, empowerment and campaigning. A partnership approach was employed to capitalise on the expertise and community knowledge of local organisations. Men and women in the project communities were engaged as active participants at all stages of the project design and implementation in recognition of their individual and collective potential to bring about sustainable change.

The rationale for working on both the supply and demand sides of justice was that justice can only be secured by taking into account the perspectives of both duty bearers responsible for delivering justice (supply side) and people living in poverty and exclusion seeking justice (demand side). Many initiatives focusing on access to justice place great emphasis on the input or supply side alone (police, courts,



Traditional courts – like this one in Yamandu, Sierra Leone – are often more accessible to rural women, but can be biased in their verdicts as a result of their reliance on uncoded laws

Photo: ActionAid

infrastructure, etc). They tend to overlook the demand side (women and their wants and needs) and do very little to educate women about their rights. This approach ultimately undermines the true nature of justice. As such, the project was designed on the premise that any attempts to reform the justice sectors in the project countries needed to be inclusive, and required the active engagement of judicial institutions (both formal and informal) as well as interest groups such as women's organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Within the project countries, geographical areas of intervention were chosen based upon ActionAid and WFWI Nigeria's existing project areas, links with partner organisations, and an analysis of the local context regarding women's access to justice. Baseline studies conducted across the project countries provided a strong understanding of the legal rights context for women and analysed existing legislation/regulations regarding sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). ActionAid's human rights based approach was used by project partners to identify capacity gaps for women in terms of claiming their rights and for duty bearers in terms of meeting their obligations to protect and promote the rights of women seeking redress.

Interventions targeting the supply side of justice focused on strengthening the knowledge of relevant laws and policies aimed at protecting women, as well as changing entrenched negative attitudes among personnel within the formal and informal justice systems (judiciary, police, government officials, as well as traditional

## Key achievements in the AJW project target communities

- ActionAid Somaliland reported a significant average increase from 25% to 60% in the number of women gaining positive verdicts through the formal and informal systems.
- ActionAid Liberia saw a 20% increase in the number of women who reported receiving assistance from the formal justice system.
- In Liberia, support was secured from eight law makers to make amendments to the country's discriminatory inheritance law, which made it difficult for women to own and inherit property.
- In Somaliland, the AJW project supported implementation of the National Gender Policy to address gender equality and promote women's empowerment.
- In Nigeria, 60% of women said they felt safe from physical and sexual violence, compared to 52% prior to the AJW project.
- In Sierra Leone, 32% of women reported that they felt unsafe from violence in the private sphere, a substantial decrease from 57% of women who reported feeling unsafe prior to the project.

and religious leaders and officials). The project saw a number of improvements in officials' responses to, and support for, women. There was a change in attitudes and behaviour, a more prompt response to cases of violence against women, and a gradual increase in favourable verdicts awarded to women within both the formal and informal justice systems.

On the demand side of this project, participatory methodologies ensured a "bottom-up" approach which placed women at the centre of implementation. Women's groups were formed at the community level to build collective momentum to respond to cases of women's rights violations and pursue justice. In countries where women's groups already existed but lacked capacity, training and awareness raising initiatives were undertaken to strengthen their ability to support women to take their cases through the formal or informal justice systems. Both project partners and women's groups served as effective pressure groups on the supply side for effective law enforcement and judicial systems. These efforts helped to improve the legal landscape in terms of women's rights. With the effective presence of women's groups in communities and improvements in the justice system, women reported an increased sense of security and safety.

## Access to justice in conflict and post-conflict contexts

Unequal power relations result in the denial of basic rights and poverty for millions of women globally. Poverty and marginalisation combine to deprive women of choices, opportunities, access to basic resources and a voice in decision-making. Within conflict-affected countries, access to justice is further inhibited by war-devastated governmental infrastructure and increased violence. Judicial institutions often lack sensitivity about the experiences of women during or after periods of conflict, and treat violations of women's rights as a low priority in comparison with other crimes.

At the same time, women are unable or unwilling to pursue justice due to lack of resources and knowledge, cultural norms and psychosocial stress. High costs, discriminatory laws and practices, complicated and lengthy procedures, indifferent and abusive behaviour of judicial staff and lack of access to legal services are highlighted as some of the main bottlenecks.

## Section 1 Strengthening formal and informal justice systems

From the start, the project recognised the importance of working simultaneously with the formal and informal justice systems, since both play key roles in delivering justice for women.

The community-based mechanisms provided by the informal justice system are often more accessible to poor and disadvantaged women than formal justice systems, and have the potential to provide speedy, affordable and meaningful redress. They tend to address a wide range of issues, including: personal security and local crime; protection of land, property and livestock; resolution of family and community disputes; and protection of entitlements. However, in the majority of the seven project countries, decision-making in the informal justice system is based on consultation rather than codified laws. This mainly falls under the authority of local, tribal or religious leaders, either individually or in groups, meaning verdicts can be subjective, and are often biased against women. The formal justice system, on the other hand, is built on legal frameworks which often fail to address women's unique legal problems. A lack of requisite skills, knowledge and competence around women's rights, coupled with insufficient funding and human resources, means the ability of formal justice structures to deliver effectively on their mandate is hugely compromised.

The project worked with the formal and informal justice systems in all seven countries, engaging the judiciary, police, social workers, prison officials, community elders, paralegals, traditional and religious leaders and representatives from key government ministries. The goal

### Critical success factors

- ♀ **Increasing awareness and understanding of women's rights:** addressing the knowledge and skills-gaps of personnel involved in delivering justice increases understanding of women's rights, which in turn can help change attitudes and behaviour, resulting in improved services for women
- ♀ **Working with, rather than against, the informal justice system:** recognising the critical role of informal justice – often the preferred option for women, particularly those in remote areas – and strengthening its capacity to deliver fair justice for women
- ♀ **Promoting coordination of actors responding to VAW:** collaboration amongst service providers can help facilitate comprehensive legal, medical and psychosocial support for survivors of violence

was to strengthen the capacity of these stakeholders to improve their response to cases of women's rights violations. The project recognised that increasing women's access to justice also requires political will, resources and investment, as well as structural, behavioural and culture change that can only be brought about through advocacy initiatives.

ActionAid (AA) and partner organisations worked to address these issues by:

- strengthening the capacity of various state actors to provide justice for survivors of gender-based violence
- by creating and strengthening national and international laws and instruments to protect women, and by providing improved investigative and prosecutorial services.
- raising awareness of women's rights and women's access to justice amongst those responsible for delivering justice through informal justice systems and mobilising women to advocate for the representation of women in informal courts.
- analysing and working to strengthen the linkages between stakeholders responding to violence in order to improve coordination and holistic service delivery.
- including the informal justice system in AJW interventions through efforts to strengthen alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, which increased their capacity to address injustices against women in a holistic and meaningful way. Initiating and participating in lobbying and advocacy campaigns for the enactment, implementation and enforcement of laws and policies to protect women.
- holding duty bearers accountable for the provision of services through policy work at local, national and regional levels.

Although strategies were put in place to work with governments, there remains a lack of strong commitment from governments across all project countries to provide adequate judicial facilities for women, including logistical support and trained and qualified officials. The limited enforcement of laws and policies still presents major challenges to women in achieving positive verdicts from cases in the formal justice system, which continues to be dominated by men. Frequent changes in government personnel in relevant ministries throughout the duration of the AJW project had a significant impact on both operational and policy work.

In the informal justice system, the continued reliance on uncodified laws that are typically biased in favour of men presents huge challenges in terms of inconsistency in verdicts across similar cases. Additionally, whilst the AJW project achieved some success in changing attitudes and behaviour, it is clear that addressing deeply-entrenched cultural beliefs and practices will take longer than the project's two-year duration.

## Justice in Action

### The formal justice system: engaging the police in Sierra Leone

The Family Support Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) is charged with addressing gender-based violence (GBV). Initially created by the SLP as a Domestic Violence Unit in April 1999 in response to the surge in crimes against women and children in the post-war context, in 2007, the FSU became a separate unit of the SLP. Cases of GBV are reported to FSUs, which then investigate allegations, collect evidence, provide survivors with support services and prosecute cases.

However, since FSU branches were established across the country, they have made few in-roads in addressing women's rights violations. Research by the Justice Sector Reform Programme in 2007 to 2008 highlighted a clear lack of knowledge and training in investigative and prosecutorial skills, particularly relating to women's rights cases, and violence against women. In addition, there was a lack of coordination among stakeholders and a lack of confidence in the ability of FSUs to address women's rights cases. As a result, VAW cases often stalled at early stages in the justice process. ActionAid International Sierra Leone (AAISL) and its partners set up a task force to identify areas for improvement and a process for delivering support.

#### Addressing the knowledge gap:

The task force developed a training manual on women's rights and legal provisions, including practical guidance about how to identify and address women's rights violations. The manual was developed through a collaborative process with numerous stakeholders. A trainers' workshop was then conducted with personnel from the police training school, and the manual was shared with all 42 FSU branches.

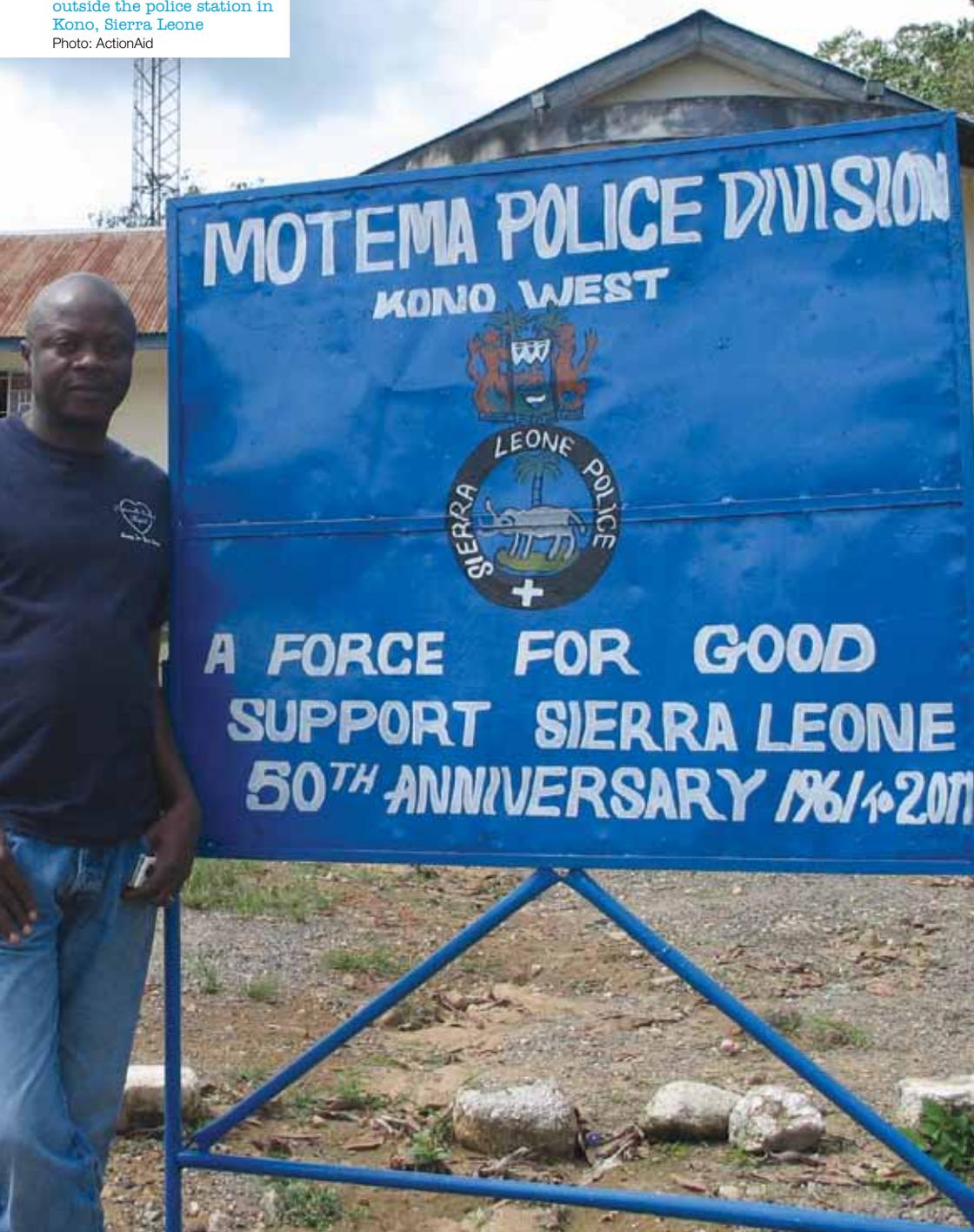
#### Addressing the skills gap:

Two training courses were held for 55 FSU officers and police prosecutors to address investigative and prosecutorial skill gaps. The training included modules on correctly charging, investigating, monitoring and prosecuting cases.

A number of complementary systems and processes were also put in place to support the FSU in delivering justice. In addition, the project fostered collaboration between police and court monitors.

Over the project period, a total of 30 cases were heard in the formal system and six cases in the informal system. Overall, 83% of cases had positive verdicts for women. Results from a sample group of 225 women from the three project locations showed an

Sahr Samuel Jimmy of the Family Support Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone Police, outside the police station in Kono, Sierra Leone  
Photo: ActionAid



improved picture compared to the baseline – 30% of women expressed satisfaction with the formal justice system, compared to only 6% of women in the baseline study. Although there remains room for improvement, women affirmed that the training had resulted in police being more willing to visit communities, to monitor cases regularly and to bring criminal cases to court.

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“Through trainings we’ve received from the AJW project together with the community [we learnt] how to carry out investigations, how to refer cases, how to prosecute and how to monitor cases in court... Having benefitted from the trainings, I can now distinguish between cases – ones that are criminal are sent to court, and ones that are not criminal are sent to the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs for mediation.”

Sahr Samuel Jimmy, police officer in the FSU, Motema Police Division, Kono

### **Addressing the relationship between the police and community:**

A number of strategies were employed to improve relations between the police and communities. The project initiated a series of meetings to bring community members and police representatives together to discuss their respective roles and responsibilities regarding women’s rights cases. Police personnel gave presentations on the support available from the FSU during legal clinics in communities.

In each project community, one women’s forum<sup>1</sup> member was appointed to liaise between the police and the wider community. Increased interactions between the police and communities helped to foster a sense of mutual respect and confidence between the two parties. Outreach initiatives also gave women who could not afford to travel to police stations the opportunity to come face-to-face with law enforcement personnel, whilst simultaneously serving as a deterrent to would-be perpetrators of violence.

<sup>1</sup> Women’s forums provide a safe space for women to interact, share experiences and, in the case of the AJW project, mobilise for collective action to support survivors of violence.

## Justice in action

### The informal justice system: strengthening local justice in Uganda

In 1988, the government of Uganda established Local Council Executive Committees, referred to as 'Local Council Courts' (LCC). These were intended to promote a more accessible justice system and to provide an efficient, popular system of justice and reconciliation within communities. The LCCs were required to have women representatives. However, their capacity to articulate women's issues was limited, partly due to a lack of technical capacity as well as challenges arising from Uganda's patriarchal society.

In addition, LCCs were faced with operational constraints. Due to a lack of office and court space, cases were often held under trees. Members of LCCs had limited legal knowledge and reference materials on which to draw when deciding on cases. Data storage facilities were largely unavailable (court files were often kept in the homes of LCC chairpersons or secretaries). Members of LCCs lacked logistical support to carry out investigations or to collect evidence, and coordination at local level was weak. As a consequence, it was difficult for LCC members to dispense justice adequately. In addition, complainants were required to pay fees before their cases were heard, and women often lacked the necessary funds.

#### **Providing court infrastructure and logistics:** ActionAid

International Uganda (AAIU) provided its local partner, Facilitation for Peace and Development, with financial support to build and renovate court halls in two districts. LCCs were given stationery to record their proceedings, and arrangements were made for courts to waive summons fees levied on women. Transport to and from crime scenes was made available for committee members. As a result, there was an increase in the number of VAW cases brought before the courts. LCC members now had space to store files and evidence, which reduced incidences of missing and lost files.

#### **Community awareness on government-protected rights and mechanisms for accessing justice** was carried out through

'social theatre for change'. A total of 42 drama outreach sessions were conducted in the project target areas, reaching 785 people (420 women, 365 men). Public rallies were also held in Ogur and Amac sub-counties, each attracting more than 4,000 people. The drama outreach and rallies increased awareness about violence and highlighted available support mechanisms for women and girls to access justice. These outreach sessions provided women with a safe platform to present their views



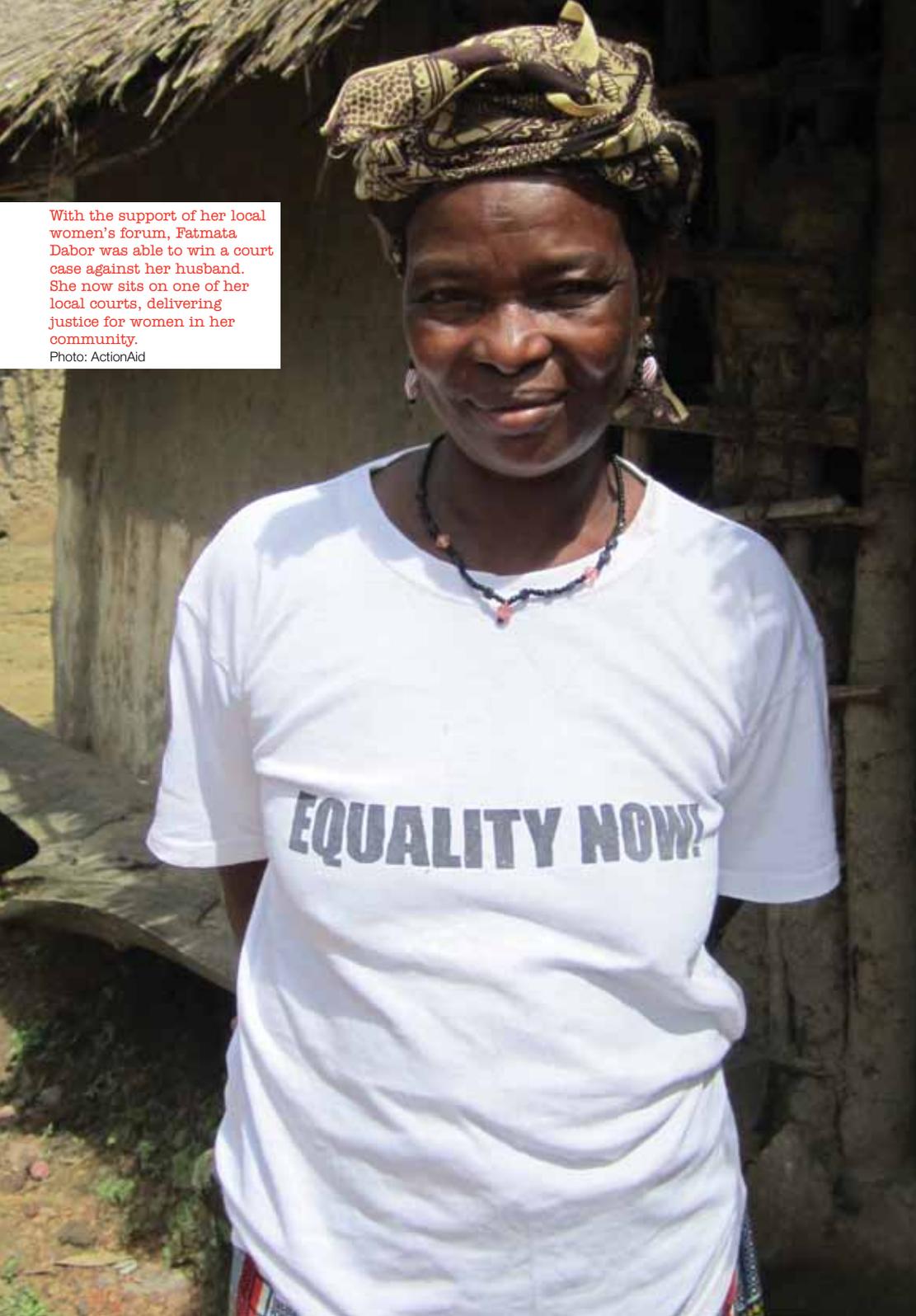
Construction of local court houses like this one provide the physical infrastructure for local council courts to deliver justice  
Photo: Althea Rivas/ActionAid

and perceptions of court services. Communities are now fully aware of redress mechanisms, as demonstrated by increased reporting rates. Additionally, clan leaders were made aware of the limits of their jurisdiction in mediating minor crimes.

#### **Building capacity of LCC members and developing a court reference handbook:**

The project supported its partner, the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (FIDA Uganda), to train LCC personnel and to develop a training curriculum and handbook. FIDA Uganda trained 75 LCC officials in legal rights and responsibilities regarding marriage, separation, inheritance, will writing, children's rights, women's rights, land rights and court procedures. Training sessions were designed so that trainees could pass what they

had learned to other colleagues as a means of expanding the reach of the project and promoting sustainability. The handbook was tested in the field and validated through a workshop that included staff from legal training institutions and local council court members. All the courts were supplied with copies of Uganda's constitution as well as handbooks.



With the support of her local women's forum, Fatmata Dabor was able to win a court case against her husband. She now sits on one of her local courts, delivering justice for women in her community.

Photo: ActionAid

## Section 2

### Empowering women for decision making and governance

Access to justice for women is closely linked to poverty reduction. Women make up the majority of the world's poor. Poverty and marginalisation mean that they are deprived of choices, opportunities, access to basic resources and a voice in decision-making. They face multiple barriers to accessing justice. Women's numerous productive and reproductive roles and heavy workloads mean that they often do not have adequate time to pursue legal cases and therefore frequently give up. Additionally, they may lack the necessary financial resources to pursue justice or be unaware of the legal options available to them. In many instances, women encounter social disapproval for pursuing justice, particularly in cases of domestic or sexual violence. Furthermore, women frequently lack the necessary leadership skills and organisation to advocate for the delivery of comprehensive services for survivors of violence, whilst their limited representation in both formal and informal justice systems means their needs and opinions are often overlooked.

#### Critical success factors

- ♀ **Enhancing women's participation and active agency:** Mobilising women to identify their vulnerability to violence and to develop action plans to protect their rights, as well as demand rights from duty-bearers
- ♀ **Supporting economic empowerment:** promoting women's financial independence is critical to increasing their ability to access justice. All initiatives supporting women to access justice should include a livelihoods component right from the start of the project
- ♀ **Building capacity of women to support justice in their own communities:** training paralegals and facilitating women-led community-based legal clinics can build trust and increase the willingness of women to report rights violations and seek redress

To influence sustained, demand-led access to justice for women, AA and partners employed a range of strategies:

- women were provided with capacity-building training to become active members of community structures (community policing, development committees, mediation teams, informal courts) which shape community development and post-conflict reconstruction.
- legal awareness and rights awareness campaigns were undertaken to increase women's willingness to use both formal and informal justice systems.
- women's groups (women's forums, coalitions and cooperatives) were established and/or strengthened to build a sense of solidarity and to raise collective awareness and interest around women's rights and justice issues.
- women were engaged in economic livelihood and skills training activities to support the financial costs of pursuing justice and to increase women's empowerment and economic independence.
- the engagement of women through AA's participatory methodologies such as Societies Tackling AIDS through Rights (STAR) and Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA) resulted in significant behavioural changes. Women who were once passive, shy and subordinate became active champions of change in their communities.
- increased knowledge, skills and confidence empowered women to challenge unequal power relations and gender inequalities, as well as harmful cultural practices that serve as a significant impediment to women's access to justice.

## Participatory methodologies

**Societies Tackling AIDS through Rights (STAR)** is a participatory approach which facilitates and supports the mobilisation of people and communities affected by HIV and AIDS through mutual reflection, planning and personal and collective actions. It is a community-driven, people-centred intervention that strengthens social support structures, mobilises communities and ensures sustainable HIV and AIDS response. It also generates community energy for advocacy and social change.

**Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA)** engages communities and other stakeholders in a process of identifying and understanding the nature of the threats and hazards they face. It is a qualitative way of analyzing vulnerability, which involves the participation of vulnerable people themselves. It helps communities to identify the root causes of vulnerability, which groups are most vulnerable, and agree on actions they can take to reduce their vulnerability.

However, despite these gains and successes, the project finds many men are still reluctant to relinquish decision-making positions to women and continue to prevent women from participating in development processes and community decision-making. Efforts to promote women's participation in decision-making processes and governance should be accompanied by sustained efforts to engage men about how women's active participation and leadership in development activities can benefit entire households and communities.

Additionally, the absence of an economic empowerment component in the original design of the AJW project to some extent undermined women's ability to report violations and pursue justice. Even though women are often highly involved in household productive work, men typically control household income and other important resources. This makes women vulnerable to violence and unable to challenge their situation. Women often have to request funds from their husbands to pay court fees, legal representatives, or even for transportation to access clinics, police, courts, and service providers. As a result, women are often unable to access much-needed services, particularly if it is their husband or family members who are the perpetrators of violence. An economic empowerment component is thus crucial to the success of any AJW initiative.



Women's legal clinics – like this one in Nyiragongo, DRC – provide a vital link between women in rural communities and justice systems

Photo: ActionAid

## Justice in Action

### Empowerment through self-belief and self-sufficiency in Sierra Leone

In the AJW project locations in Sierra Leone, a lack of knowledge about their rights and legal provisions was identified as one of the key factors preventing women from pursuing justice for rights violations. In the project baseline, women also cited a lack of access to justice systems (both in terms of paying travel costs to and from court and cumbersome and lengthy procedures) and a lack of cultural acceptability around justice for women, as significant barriers impeding their ability to access justice. In addition, justice systems were male-dominated and insensitive to women's issues, which often resulted in biased verdicts.

ActionAid International Sierra Leone (AAISL) and partners worked together with women in the project communities, facilitating their active participation in order to address these multiple obstacles.

Two key strategies employed were: **Strengthening women's leadership skills through women's forums:** Women's forums were established to strengthen women's leadership to address issues of VAW and access to justice. Forum members were provided with information on Sierra Leone's gender laws, international conventions and resolutions, referral pathways to access justice and advocacy skills. These forums

provide the opportunity to mediate domestic disputes and to undertake local level advocacy for the inclusion of women in traditional justice systems and to demand justice for survivors of violence. They offer a supportive mechanism for survivors of violence in remote and inaccessible communities. They also provide safe spaces where women are counselled and supported to access justice.

**“When we went to the local court in Swafe they passed judgement on [fellow women's forum member] Fatmata's case wrongly and I challenged them. Because of that challenge the Chairman said he would fine me and I told him he could not do this as I protecting the rights of another woman. I told him I will not pay that fine and I reported him to the Chief. The Chief told him he should not fine me. In the end they gave a positive verdict to Fatmata.”**

Aminata Mansaray, Vice Chairlady of women's forum Uman Tinap Tranga Wan, Ngo Town

As a result of local level advocacy, forum members influenced the traditional justice systems in the project communities to include four women, where there had previously been none. This increased representation of women in the traditional justice system led to an increase in the number of verdicts ruled in favour of women. 83% of all formal and informal cases in all project areas resulted in positive verdicts. Through collective action, women now promote and protect their own rights in their communities – and indeed in communities neighbouring the project locations – and demand rights from duty-bearers, service providers and government officials.

**“Women are now starting to have more decision-making roles in the community. Before this project, women were not allowed to participate in the local court or to challenge the decisions. Now myself and some other women are members of Court Number Three. This court does not operate without us. They don't pass verdicts on cases without consulting us.”**

Fatmata Dabor, Ngo Town



Fatmata Dabor  
Photo: ActionAid

### Providing livelihood initiatives:

In recognition of the importance of economic independence in supporting women's efforts to access justice, AAISL incorporated a livelihood component into the project design part-way through the project, to enable women to earn their own income, often for the first time in their lives. The initiative was funded from ActionAid's Reducing Violence Against Women project, implemented in Sierra Leone, Burundi and DRC between 2007-2009. Consultations were held with communities on women's livelihood support needs and preferred livelihoods options.

Women participated in basic training on business and money management, which aimed to help them manage their resources better and develop a degree of self-sufficiency to help cover the costs of travelling to formal courts, while also addressing household and family expenses. They were provided with groundnut seeds and soap-making equipment, as well as relevant training. Community sensitisations were also undertaken to encourage men to allow their wives to keep and control the income earned from these activities. These issues were also discussed in STAR circles (see pg. 18 for definition) and with community elders who were engaged in the project.

These combined initiatives were successful in raising awareness of women's rights, increasing women's self-confidence to speak up for their rights, and to have the financial means to pursue justice. Efforts to inform women about relevant laws and justice services, and livelihood support led to an increased willingness to access both formal and informal systems. With economic empowerment, women became more confident in taking leadership in challenging gender injustice. In one instance, 35 women contributed the proceeds of their livelihoods support to a woman who was taken to court by her husband.

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**“The AJW project has trained us...[and] provided us with financial support. They've opened a bank account for us – I'd never been to a bank but if you go to the bank now our money is there. We put the money in the bank to solve women's problems. If a woman is seriously ill, we'll support her. We'll not sit by and see the woman die of sickness, especially in the case where the husband does not have money. Also if a woman has a case we'll not sit by to see her being disgraced – we'll use the money to fight the case.”**

Fudia Conteh, Kathirio

## Justice in Action

### Legal clinics and advocacy in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Years of armed conflict in the DRC have seen large-scale violations of women's economic, political, cultural and physical security rights in general and SGBV in particular. This is true not only in conflict-affected areas but also in areas where there is relative peace. Ongoing instability and a culture of impunity that permeates the army, rebel groups and communities, presents a challenging background against which to work on issues of women's rights and women's access to justice.

According to a 2009 report, 17,507 women have experienced sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in DRC. Girls aged from ten to seventeen were the most common victims, although 10% of victims were below the age of ten<sup>2</sup>. The AJW project baseline survey found that only 1% of women interviewed in project areas had accessed justice and that women seldom even reported violations or attempted to seek legal redress. The reasons for this were many and varied, however obstacles that were often cited included poverty, social, religious and cultural constraints, lack of confidence in police officers and magistrates and long distances to the nearest trial court. Women were

largely unaware of their own rights or of strategies to challenge injustices.

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**REFLECT** (Regenerated Freirian Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) is an approach to adult learning and social change inspired by Paulo Freire and developed by ActionAid.

**REFLECT circles** bring community members together for training in basic literacy and numeracy skills and provide participants with an opportunity to discuss community development issues.

Engaging lawyers to settle cases or provide legal services in remote areas is a challenge in the DRC. ActionAid International DRC (AAIDRC) and project partners therefore built the capacity of 43 women who had participated in previous development projects with ActionAid (specifically those who had engaged in REFLECT circles) to become paralegals. Women were trained in judicial procedures, as well as in national and international laws pertaining to women's rights. Trainees formed clinics to provide legal advice, sensitise and raise awareness in communities on the

<sup>2</sup> Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG). Let us all join force to stop violence against women. Special issue of MONUC Magazine, Volume VII, No. 46, 2009.

referral pathways, and to provide counselling to survivors of violence. Paralegals organised monthly community-based meetings to assess women's rights violations, mediate minor cases, and provide a space for survivors of violence to share their experiences. Women's experiences were documented and communicated to duty-bearers for prompt action. Paralegals also took responsibility for referring serious crimes such as rape to relevant organisations.

During the project implementation, a total of 329 cases of violence against women (including forced marriage, domestic violence and polygamy) were registered in legal clinics. Prior to the project, cases had never been formally reported in these communities. Out of the 329 cases, paralegals transferred 35 cases of rape to the Association of Women Lawyers for prosecution. Four of the 35 cases resulted in positive verdicts for women, with the other cases still in progress.

As a second strategy to increase women's empowerment the project pursued sub-regional engagement by women as a way of addressing impunity on cases of violence against women. To this end, AAIDRC, local women's groups and partners organised a solidarity visit to Goma and Rutshuru. The aim was to highlight and condemn human rights violations against Congolese women and girls, and to demand action from duty-bearers. The visiting delegation, local women and survivors of SGBV signed a communiqué "calling for action against perpetrators of violence and to end rape and other forms of violence against women and girls in the DRC." The communiqué was presented to the head of the

army, the governor of North Kivu, MONUSCO, the UN, members of Rutshuru parliament and local authorities. Each stakeholder publicly denounced SGBV and made a commitment to putting in place mechanisms to punish perpetrators.

40 year old Leonie Maniraguha, from Nyiragongo, North Kivu, participated in REFLECT circles and training workshops facilitated by the AJW project. She worked with a paralegal trained by the AJW project to secure the return of land which had been taken from her by her step brother.

**"I have spent 2 days in jail because I fought for the land my parents left to me after they passed away, but I did not give up, I took the opportunity to claim that piece of land once more during the training supported by ActionAid. The local police and authorities were involved in this training as well as women in Nyiragongo."**

## Section 3

### Policy and advocacy for women's access to justice

In general, the AJW project baseline found that women in rural communities in the target locations had very limited knowledge of national and international laws protecting their rights. Furthermore, a number of countries engaged in the project have not ratified international legislation relating to women's rights. As a result, adequate structures to prevent violence and address impunity are often absent. Men are hesitant to relinquish power, which prevents women from taking part in conflict-prevention, resolution and peacebuilding activities. There is often limited commitment from governments implementing international instruments at a local level. The gender roles ascribed to women by society also undermine women's confidence to engage in and lead peace and reconstruction processes.

Through the course of the project ActionAid and its partners pushed to secure change in the legal landscape related to women's rights. Laws addressed include those relating to harmful traditional practices, domestic and sexual violence, property rights and inheritance law and constitutional reform processes. In the majority of countries, ActionAid and its partners have engaged with coalitions working to push through amendments or new laws in these areas. In Somaliland for example, the Family and Female Genital Mutilation laws are currently under government review and will be tabled shortly for cabinet approval. In Liberia, the project successfully lobbied eight lawmakers to make amendments to the Inheritance law, and secured the support of 12 MPs to re-submit the Gender Equity Bill (now called the "Bill of Equal Political Participation in Governance") which had previously been defeated in the legislature.

#### Critical success factors

- ♀ **Supporting collaborative action to reinvigorate policy processes:** Coordinating with other women's rights-focused actors helps build collective pressure on governments to ratify and implement international legislation in their national contexts
- ♀ **Employing a multi-tiered approach:** Supporting implementation of international policy instruments at both national and local levels to offer more comprehensive protection for women's rights
- ♀ **Amplifying the voices of survivors of violence at all levels:** providing platforms at local, national and international levels to listen to women's experiences of SGBV and other violations and using these to hold governments accountable for protecting, promoting and fulfilling their rights

In addition, the AJW project identified a number of international instruments – specifically the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and UN Security Council Resolutions (SCR) 1325 and 1820 – which could be used to anchor national-level policy work. The AJW project drew upon these international instruments for guidance, framing project activities as preventative rather than reactionary. Rather than marginalising women’s experiences, the project addressed gender-specific concerns within peace and security policy considerations. Country teams used international instruments as minimum acceptable standards for both programme delivery and policy work. Some of the tactics used by country projects to bring about localised change included:

- undertaking advocacy for the development and implementation of national action plans for the implementation of UN SCR 1325.
- providing platforms at country level to listen to women’s experiences of armed conflict and collectively identify actions to enhance women’s protection.
- creating activities specifically designed to foster women’s participation and active agency in decision-making in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building.
- conducting training and sensitisations on prevention and redress mechanisms for violence against women.

## Key international policy instruments

- CEDAW is an international human rights treaty exclusively devoted to gender equality. Adopted on 18 December 1979 by the UN General Assembly, it provides guidance on eliminating all forms of discrimination against women.
- UN SCR 1325, adopted on 31 October 2000, was the first Security Council Resolution to highlight the unique and disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women, and to advocate for the full and equal participation of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding.
- UN SCR 1820, adopted on 19 June 2008, recognises the systematic use of sexual violence against civilian populations in conflict situations as a tactic of war. It emphasises the importance of prevention and the protection of women and girls from sexual violence.

## Justice in Action National-level policy work in Somaliland

Somaliland has three parallel justice systems; the formal system, Islamic Sharia Law and the traditional justice system. Each of these systems has proven problematic in the interpretation and application of justice for women. The traditional justice system frequently compels survivors of rape to marry perpetrators. In instances where compensation is granted, it goes to the traditional elders who arbitrate cases, as opposed to survivors. The Islamic Sharia system is commonly misinterpreted to force women into

submissive roles and establish male dominance. Women are often too afraid to challenge Sharia Law and to report violations. Additionally Sharia Law is not mainstreamed into the legal system, meaning there is no way to enforce judgements. Despite widespread use, the male-dominated formal justice system suffers significant corruption and is largely irresponsive to women’s needs. Additionally, traditional elders and politicians frequently interfere with the formal justice system.



Women survivors of violence sell shawls produced with the support of an income-generating scheme aimed at promoting women’s economic independence.  
Photo: Ali Jibril Hirsi/ActionAid

Although the Somaliland government developed a National Gender Policy (2009–2011) to address discrimination and inequalities, it was never fully rolled out and implemented. Recognising this as a key policy document, ActionAid International Somaliland (AAIS) and partners employed a number of strategies to secure government support to develop an action plan for its implementation.

**Establishing evidence:** AAIS and partners used the AJW project baseline to develop a policy brief that reviewed the three justice systems, detailed the prevalence rate of violence, and made recommendations regarding what the government and civil society could do to address the situation. As a result of the policy brief, AAIS and partners increased awareness at the highest levels about challenges in the justice system that prevent women from accessing justice. The findings and recommendations of the brief were used to influence government actors to develop and commit to implementing an action plan for roll out of the National Gender Policy.

**Alliance building to develop action points for dissemination of the policy:** AAIS and project partners – Women for Advocacy, Action and Progress Organization, and Solidarity Community Development Organization – formed a coalition with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), youth organisations, women’s coalitions, women’s NGOs, the women’s umbrella network Nagaad, and Somaliland’s Ministry of Labour and Family Affairs, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry

of the Interior, the Ministry of Education and CSOs to present findings and recommendations from the policy brief. This meeting resulted in the development of an agreed action plan for implementation of the National Gender Policy. AAIS and partners initiated a community dissemination process, which targeted religious leaders, traditional elders, women’s coalitions, district and regional authorities, youth groups and individual women for their input into the process.

The coalition provided a platform for the collective participation and contribution of stakeholders in the review and dissemination of the gender policy. The strategies used in strengthening and raising awareness about the policy promoted the participation, ownership and voice of people living in poverty and exclusion. Coalition members provided strategic direction on how planning, resource allocation, development and implementation of programmes should be carried out with a gender perspective.

## Justice in Action

### Using international instruments for localised change in Liberia

Following Liberia’s civil war, many perpetrators of SGBV returned to their communities, often ending up living alongside those against whom they had committed crimes. Many survivors were denied the opportunity to relate their experiences of violations in the country’s formal truth and reconciliation process. While it was expected that reconciliation processes would continue at the community level, only traditional council members, who were exclusively male, were given the authority to resolve local-level conflicts.

**“I believe that to some extent this project has contributed to giving women the space to participate in conflict resolution and increase access to justice for women. We have been trained to settle our own cases and communities are peaceful. Men in the traditional council give us free hand to mediate cases. Our structure is available and cost-free in communities.”**  
Evelyn Flomo, member of women’s mediation team, Polar

Although UN SCR 1325 calls on states to involve women at all levels of decision-making in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, in practice progress in these areas has been limited. Despite having Africa’s first democratically-elected female president, women remain under-represented in public administration roles at national and local levels, including those tasked with administering justice. Additionally, the presence of former perpetrators in their original communities means that violence against women remains an everyday reality. More recently, rates of domestic violence saw an increase as a result of the influx of refugees fleeing the political conflict in Côte d’Ivoire in late 2010 and in to 2011. To address this broad context, ActionAid Liberia (AAL) and partners worked on three major international instruments to bring about change at community level:

**1) Resolving conflicts at community level:** In order to address cases of women’s rights violations at local level the AJW project incorporated conflict mediation as a core part of its work. 25 women across the two project communities were trained on conflict resolution, mediation skills and techniques, international and national laws, women’s

rights, referral pathways and basic counselling skills to prepare them to act as mediators for non-criminal cases within their communities. Ivorian refugees were included in mediation teams and have been successful in mediating cases between Ivorian refugees in refugee camps and host communities. Women were also encouraged to participate in community policing, an initiative conceived by the UN Mission in Liberia to support the traditionally male-dominated national police.

Between July 2010 and November 2011, more than 1,000 domestic violence cases were settled by female mediation teams in the project communities of Polar, ELRZ and Zwedru. 30% of women interviewed expressed satisfaction with the informal justice system, compared to a baseline figure of 20%. Mediation teams have been recognised by the local government and are now frequently called to settle cases in communities neighbouring the project locations. Due to the presence of the mediation teams, traditional leaders no longer handle VAW cases and refer all aggravated cases to the formal justice system.

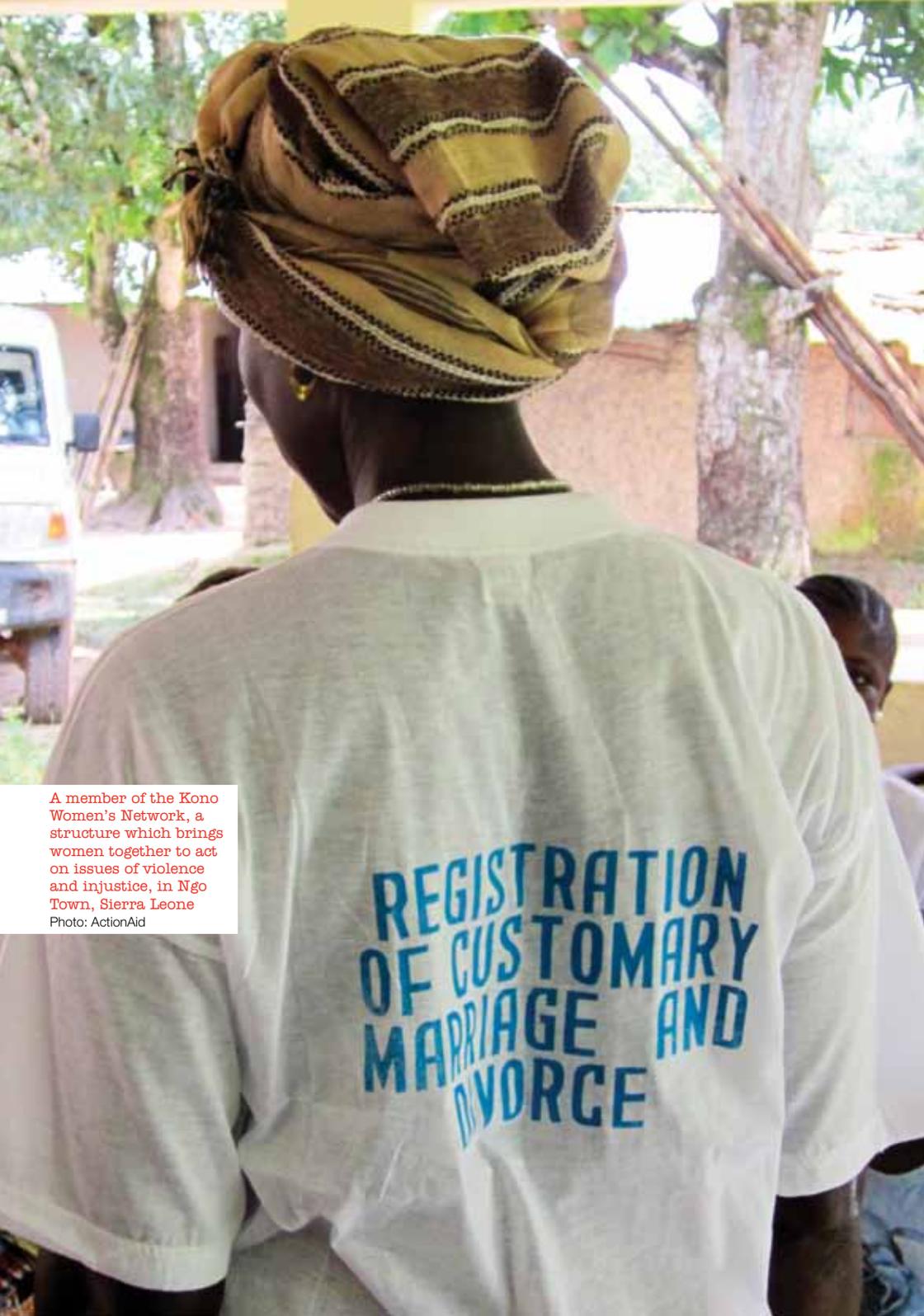
**2) Implementing the National Action Plan on UN SCR 1325:** To address the limited role of women in peace and security issues, AAL and partners promoted the Liberia National Action Plan (LNAP) on UN SCR 1325. The action plan aims to protect women and girls from violence and to promote women's participation in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery processes. AAL and partners served as key members of the steering committee established by the Ministry of Gender and Development to monitor the LNAP's implementation process. AAL and partners also collaborated with the UN Resolution 1325 Secretariat to draft a simplified version of the action plan and to support its implementation at national level. At community level, the project raised awareness about the importance of the LNAP through participatory radio talk shows, radio jingles and through songs sung by women in their communities to educate others and encourage wider participation. Community level outreach was successful in prompting greater participation of women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

**3) Sensitisation on VAW in Ivorian refugee camps:** AAL and partners embarked on a sensitisation campaign to address widespread sexual violence by men (including aid workers) in the camps to which Ivorian refugees fled to in the aftermath of the 2010/2011 political violence in Côte d'Ivoire. Representatives from refugee camps and host communities were trained in documenting cases of women's rights violations and in supporting survivors to report cases of SGBV. They also received training in refugee law, referral pathways to access justice, women's rights, UN Resolution 1820 and relevant national laws protecting women.

Refugees learnt about different forms of violence and how to report violations using referral pathways. As a result, 10 to 15 cases of VAW were reported every day, compared to just three to four cases prior to the refugee influx. Where cases were discovered of NGO staff involved in the sexual abuse and exploitation of refugees, the AJW project partners worked alongside refugees to ensure such incidents were addressed promptly. Two male NGO staff were dismissed from their positions after they were found guilty of abuse.



A sign in Polar, Liberia, spreads the message of women's rights  
Photo: ActionAid



A member of the Kono Women's Network, a structure which brings women together to act on issues of violence and injustice, in Ngo Town, Sierra Leone  
Photo: ActionAid

## Section 4

### The partnership approach: engaging multiple stakeholders

Partnerships and alliances are an integral aspect of ActionAid's human rights based approach. The AJW project partnered with community based organisations (CBOs), NGOs, networks, coalitions and alliances across the seven partner countries, as well as engaging strategically with governments. Working with partners:

- helped secure local ownership of the project. Partners were responsible for the national and/or local implementation of activities, and contributed valuable knowledge about local contexts.
- facilitated capacity-building of local and national networks/coalition/alliances to influence local, regional and national agendas promoting access to justice for women.
- improved outcomes for women by providing access to a wider range of services through collaborative work by multiple partners with varied expertise.
- helped reduce replication and increase efficiency in the delivery of services by facilitating stronger linkages amongst service providers. Best practices were shared by partners at national and international levels as a means of fundraising for continued support for access to justice initiatives.

Successful implementation of initiatives aiming to address women's access to justice is highly dependent on local backing, understanding and dialogue. While partnerships can be complex and difficult to navigate, the AJW project found that trust is likely to grow when local partners are increasingly able to lead project planning and decision-making processes.

#### Critical success factors

- ♀ **Promoting ownership:** Working with partner organisations responsible for the implementation of national or local level activities can help secure ownership of the project, as well as enable lead agencies to capitalise on partners' valuable local knowledge and expertise
- ♀ **Building capacity to leverage funding:** Training on programme and financial management, as well as proposal development and report writing can pave the way for partners to mobilise further resources to sustain and scale up their work on access to justice for women
- ♀ **Engaging with multiple partners:** Collaborative work by multiple partners with varied expertise can improve outcomes for women by providing them with access to a wider range of services

## Justice in Action

### Skills exchange at community and national levels in Burundi

Sexual and gender-based violence, particularly rape, is a widespread problem in Burundi as the country recovers from conflict. From 2003 to 2009, centres run by the organisation Supporting Survivors of Violence Against Women (SERUKA) received 8,613 survivors of rape seeking care. However, women pursuing justice for rights violations committed against them often encounter discrimination, inadequate laws, a weak judiciary with problematic legal support, amicable settlements for criminal cases, risk of stigma from their communities and families for pursuing cases, and limited resources to provide comprehensive support. As part of the AJW project, ActionAid Burundi (AAB) worked alongside two partners to address these issues – the Society for Women Against AIDS in Africa (SWAA) and the Association des Femmes Juristes [Association of Women Lawyers]. The two partners operated at two levels – the former at community level and the latter at national level. Both had programme expertise on access to justice for women, as well as HIV and AIDS issues.

In the cases of SWAA and the Association des Femmes Juristes, the partnership approach facilitated productive skills exchange between ActionAid Burundi and partners, enabling the organisations to pool

their individual expertise and strengthen the services offered to the most vulnerable women. Through the AJW project, AAB offered strategic and organisational development support for partners. In the case of the Association des Femmes Juristes, this support developed their capacity to submit a project scale-up proposal to the Irish charity Trocaire. The project partners shared best practice of the project and demonstrated the positive change that had been brought about as a result, securing funding which enabled the organisation to expand its work from one to three provinces.

#### **Partnership working to support survivors of violence: SWAA**

Burundi works with women living with HIV and AIDS (WLWHA), providing them with treatment, care and other relevant services. SWAA also offers survivors the option to pursue legal measures for rights violations they have suffered and, where applicable, links them to the Association des Femmes Juristes for assistance with their cases. As part of the AJW project, AAB supported SWAA to deliver services for women who had suffered SGBV and other rights violations, as well as raise awareness on how to access justice amongst community leaders, ex-combatants, unemployed youth, returnees, people living in



Members of the SWAA team outside their office in Ruyigi, Burundi  
Photo: Althea Rivas/ActionAid

refugee camps and members of local associations for the campaign to stop violence against women. As a result, there was an increase from 30% to 35% to 72% in the number of women who pursued legal measures for cases of rights violations in 2009, 2010 and 2011 respectively.

#### **Partnership working for legal support at national level: In**

Burundi, violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of HIV and AIDS. Women who have been sexually abused are vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. In cases of violence, if a survivor is tested HIV-positive and has evidence of a negative HIV test before the violence occurred, they can request that the perpetrator be tested. If the perpetrator is HIV-positive, SWAA reports the case, regardless of the survivor's wishes. This is because Burundi national law criminalises acts in which individuals knowingly infect others with HIV and AIDS. ActionAid Burundi's partner on the AJW project, the

Association des Femmes Juristes, represents survivors of violence in court, particularly for cases involving military personnel that cannot be dealt with at a local level. During the AJW project period, a total of 15 cases (ten from communities and five at national level) were brought to court. At the time of writing, five out of the six cases that had been concluded received positive verdicts, whilst the remaining trials are ongoing.

In order to tackle aspects of the legal system which inhibit women from reporting their cases and pursuing justice, the Association des Femmes Juristes led a campaign to advocate for the revision of flawed or discriminatory laws, the adoption of laws for areas not yet legislated, and the ratification of international legal instruments protecting the rights of women. As a result, there was an increase in voluntary counselling and testing and a reduction in HIV infection rates during the AJW project period.

Participants including members of the Nigeria Police learn about women's rights and justice at Men's Leadership Training  
Photo: WFWI Nigeria/ActionAid



## Section 5

### Engaging with men

Violence is strongly associated with dominant norms of masculinity and entrenched gender inequalities. The AJW project recognised the need to engage men to promote understanding that GBV is a social issue and to encourage them to become equal stakeholders in violence prevention and gender justice strategies. Men are often the most effective mobilisers of other men, and it is critical that they adopt leadership roles to encourage other men to support gender justice. If men are excluded from strategies to prevent violence, there is a risk that they will regard such initiatives with suspicion and negativity. With this in mind, the AJW project developed initiatives to engage men on gender justice issues and to challenge the patriarchy and gender norms which perpetuate discrimination against women.

#### Critical success factors

- ♀ **Engaging men from the start:** Involving men from the outset can help increase understanding and build buy-in, and reduce resistance further down the line. Consideration should be given to the timings of meetings and activities, to ensure men are able to attend
- ♀ **Rolling out “Train the Trainer” initiatives:** Building the capacity of male leaders to facilitate training on women's rights and women's access to justice for other men within their communities can help increase engagement and support for women's rights work
- ♀ **Changing attitudes and behaviour:** Promoting understanding amongst men of how harmful cultural practices and rigid gender roles inhibit women's access to justice can start the process of changing attitudes and behaviour. Over time, this has the potential to result in greater respect for women's rights and a consequent reduction in rights violations

The strategies used across all seven AJW project countries to engage men in these areas included:

- building the capacity of men in the police, the judiciary, hospitals, traditional structures and the military on the role they can play in promoting access to justice and providing safe environments for women.
- developing awareness among men about harmful traditional practices as a means of promoting positive changes in attitudes and behaviours towards women and women's rights.
- adopting a Train-the-Trainers approach, where male leaders in both formal and informal institutions were recruited and trained to lead gender and justice trainings for other men within their communities.
- working with men in parliaments and relevant line ministries to influence and lobby for the implementation of laws and policies guaranteeing the rights of women.
- engaging men in both formal and informal justice systems to help ensure that survivors of violence were treated appropriately and to increase the number of verdicts ruled in favour of women.

Although the project worked with traditional and religious leaders and communities to minimise harmful practices and norms, negative attitudes and behaviours still continue to pose a challenge to women's access to justice. Behavioural change strategies require significant time to address deeply-entrenched cultural beliefs and practices in a way that is sustainable. The time limitation of the two-year AJW project posed a problem in this respect, and it is recommended that organisations working with men develop long-term plans for sustained engagement to bring about the greatest possible impact.

## Justice in Action

### Changing attitudes and behaviour in Nigeria

In Nigeria, harmful cultural practices and rigid gender roles inhibit women's right to inherit or own land and play leadership roles at both local and national levels. Although the Nigerian constitution guarantees women's property rights, this is often not enforced. Additionally, women lack representation in informal justice structures. Women for Women International Nigeria (WfWI Nigeria, the implementing partner for the AJW project in the country) identified men's participation and engagement as fundamental to achieving long-term and sustainable change in the area of women's rights and women's access to justice. Men were encouraged to act as advocates to stop gender-based violence and to become allies with women in their communities. They were actively involved in a number of AJW project activities, including campaigns to raise awareness of women's rights and women's access to justice.

#### **Men's Leadership Programme:**

One of the key components of WfWI Nigeria's AJW project interventions in Nigeria was the creation of a Men's Leadership Programme (MLP). The MLP targeted a total of 60 male leaders in Enugu (in 2010) and Jos (in 2011), and aimed to provide men with knowledge relating to VAW and promote behaviour change. Participants were drawn from institutions and informal bodies involved in administering justice, such as law enforcement agencies, the civil service, and religious and traditional leadership structures and bodies. The training covered a range of topics including: the psychological effects of trauma; customs affecting women; national and international laws protecting women; the Islamic legal system; violence against women; and women's access to justice. Legal experts from Universities in Enugu and Jos, the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), the Judiciary, the Clergy, Nigeria's Human Rights Commission, the Center for Peace Advancement in Nigeria, and the Center for Legal and Dialogue Development were invited to be guest speakers at MLP trainings.

Each participant was required to train ten other men in their respective communities. However, male community leaders actually performed training on a much

larger scale, providing 1,730 people in entire communities and congregations with information gained through the MLP.

### **Involving men in project activities:**

Men were engaged from the outset of project through stakeholder meetings, during which they were informed about the project's aims and objectives and what support would be required from them. WfWI Nigeria supported men to develop action plans during the MLP which they executed in communities. Men also participated in campaigns organized by the project to raise awareness on VAW and access to justice for women. This approach was successful in securing buy-in from men, ensuring they did not undermine the work of the project team, and in convincing other men that they had a role to play in ending violence against women.

### **Raising awareness to change attitudes and behaviour:**

Despite the existence of laws protecting women's rights – such as the Nigerian Constitution on property rights which states that a woman as an individual has the right to own property just like her male counterpart, as guaranteed under section 43 and 44 of the 1999 Constitution – these are often not enforced. Additionally, women are either not present or underrepresented in the informal justice structure. This denial of rights could be attributed to harmful cultural practices that inhibit women's right to inherit or own land and take leadership positions. The combination of increased awareness of women's rights, increased demand from women to seek and

achieve justice, and community-level awareness raised amongst both men and women on women's legal provisions have all contributed to a number of positive outcomes, including some related to behaviour change, in the project areas:

- women are now able to inherit land from a deceased husband. During the course of the AJW project, community leaders supported four widows to retrieve inheritances from their in-laws in Mista Ali/Jengre.
- women are allowed to buy and own land in some of the implementing communities. Community leaders agreed to sell land to registered women's cooperatives in a process facilitated by WfWI Nigeria. Women now use the land for poultry farming and processing.
- community leaders recognise the value and importance of including women in leadership and decision-making positions. Three women representatives now hold seats in one community cabinet. The year-long capacity building programme undertaken by WfWI Nigeria for women provided women with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate actively in decision-making processes.



A banner welcomes participants at a Men's Leadership Training organised by Women for Women International  
Photo: Women for Women International

After WfWI Nigeria referred a woman to Nigeria's Human Rights Commission (HRC) for a land-related issue, HRC reported the case to the community chief. The chief followed up with the woman's ex-husband and convinced him to return the land to his ex-wife. HRC has confirmed that an agreement of ownership was drafted and signed by both parties. The woman now owns and lives on her property with her children.



Members of the Heer Beeti (Women Mediators) group gather to discuss issues of access to justice for women in Somaliland

Photo: ActionAid

## Section 6

### Promoting systems and structures for sustainability

In recognition of the fact that women's access to justice is subject to such a wide variety of factors – legal, social, economic, cultural, political, amongst others – across a broad range of stakeholders at multiple levels, and taking into consideration the limited time-span of the AJW project, a sustainability plan was incorporated to ensure that activities could continue after official funding came to an end.

Throughout implementation, the participating countries were encouraged to engage in activities that could be sustained by ActionAid (and WfWI Nigeria in Nigeria), implementing partners or communities themselves. Where one-off or pilot interventions took place (such as hiring of a retained lawyer in Sierra Leone or building court halls in Uganda), these were done with the aim of demonstrating to governments and other duty-bearers the positive impact such activities can have in terms of facilitating women's access to justice, with the aim of encouraging the measures to be supported by the state as standard practice.

#### Critical success factors

- ♀ **Establishing and/or strengthening of community women's groups:** Mobilising women to come together to support survivors of violence, collectively pursue justice and advocate for their rights to be protected and fulfilled
- ♀ **Facilitating international-national-local linkages:** leveraging the international connections of the lead organisation (particularly if an International NGO) can provide national and local level implementing partners and communities with valuable access to donors and international networks
- ♀ **Building partners' capacity:** Providing training on project cycle management, proposal writing, case study collection, report writing and monitoring and evaluation increases partners' ability to implement effective access to justice for women programmes and leverage funding for future work

The following strategies were central to the project's sustainability approach:

- the project harnessed the expertise and community experience of local partners which understand the local dynamics and politics and will exist long after the official project end date. Partners were provided with training to build their capacity to deliver women's rights programmes, as well as to engage with donors with a view to leveraging funding to scale up women's rights work.
- communities were equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to continue to fight for women's access to justice. Empowerment and capacity building of women was a critical component here.
- community structures, groups, cooperatives and women-centred institutions were established and/or strengthened to leverage collective action for change over the long-term.
- women and partners were linked with other local and national-level organisations concerned with women's rights and justice issues with a view to forming sustainable and long-term networks.

The groups that were established or strengthened to sustain the AJW project in communities are still at an early stage and will require constant nurturing so that they continue to promote women's legal rights. The AJW project highlighted the need for organisations working on issues of access to justice for women to further strengthen the ability of women's groups and partners to monitor practices within the formal and informal justice systems to ensure they are efficient and effective in their provision of services to survivors of rights abuses.

## Justice in Action

### Mobilisation and coalition-building in Somaliland

In order to promote sustainability, ActionAid International Somaliland and project partners Women for Action, Advocacy and Progress Organisation (WAAPO) and Solidarity Community Development Organization (SCDO) focused on mobilising and organising women at community level and strengthening women's coalitions to continue programme activities and advocacy around women's access to justice.

#### **Establishing community based**

**volunteer groups:** Paralegal groups, VAW watch groups and women mediator groups were established to serve as support structures for survivors of violence within communities.

- Community paralegal groups include trained lawyers and women volunteers. Women paralegals in the three AJW project locations received capacity-building training on case reporting, evidence collection and documentation. Paralegals now seek forensic medical testimonies from health professionals and ensure the provision of psychosocial support to survivors of sexual abuse.

- VAW watch groups work closely with women's coalitions to educate women on VAW and access to justice. They also work with religious leaders to sensitise their congregation on the protection that religion (Islam) provides for women. In addition, they support monitoring and documentation of women's rights violations. Members were provided with financial support to establish small businesses and other livelihoods, enabling them to cover costs relating to legal issues (such as travel to and from court) as well as the everyday expenses of their families.
- Heer Beeti (women's mediation groups) mediate disputes and ensure that conflict is minimised in communities. Mediation groups received training in basic conflict mediation and resolution, Somaliland's traditional justice system, and women's rights under Islam and in national legislation.

## Building coalitions for sustained advocacy on access to justice for women:

WAAPO and SCDO established a total of ten coalitions with a combined membership of over 2,000 women to undertake advocacy on VAW and women's access to justice. The coalitions benefited from initial training on women's rights, national and international instruments promoting women's rights, referral pathways to access justice, and the Somaliland penal code. Since then, three out of the ten coalitions have been formally registered as women's rights advocacy groups. These groups have received further training in coalition building, leadership, fundraising and management and now serve as pressure groups that lobby the government for efficient and effective redress mechanisms for women's rights cases.

“We are pleased with the mediation done by women. In three weeks women mediators resolved three major disputes over land between two families, property rights and forced divorce which we were unable to do in the last five years. I will advise the Somaliland government to include women Heer Beeti in the court jury.”

Hassan Ali Yusuf, traditional elder, Dami Village



Awareness raising and sensitisation on women's rights can help change the attitudes and behaviour of traditional leaders like Mohamed Hirsi Farah, from Somaliland

Photo: ActionAid

## Conclusion

It is clear that the diverse strategies employed by the AJW project across the seven countries have had a significant impact in terms of addressing both the supply and demand sides of justice. Central to these successes has been the strength, resilience, resourcefulness and active participation of the women involved in the project, as well as the commitment and dedication of those working alongside women's groups and movements.

By providing women with the knowledge, skills and capacity to demand redress for rights violations, and by supporting their empowerment and mobilisation, the project has made real strides forward in ensuring women's access to justice. At the same time, through building the capacity of different stakeholders at multiple levels, across both the formal and informal justice systems, personnel involved in the administration of justice are now more able to address women's rights cases in ways which reflect increased understanding of and commitment to gender equality.

However, whilst the project's achievements have been impressive, there undoubtedly remains much to do. It is over-ambitious for any project with a relatively short timeframe (two years in the case of this project) to hope to fully address the multiple and complex challenges that conflict and post-conflict environments pose in relation to women's access to justice. The AJW project experience highlights the need for increased investment across the board – in infrastructure, training, awareness raising on women's rights and legal provisions – for formal and informal actors responsible for delivering justice. Greater attention needs to be paid to achieving change in attitudes and behaviours – resulting from a genuine understanding and appreciation of women's rights – rather than relying on tighter policing and punitive measures to act as a deterrent to committing rights violations against women.

Additionally, initiatives aiming to increase women's access to justice should look to scale up the empowerment discourse from the personal to the local and eventually to the national in order to achieve maximum impact. Women's economic empowerment was shown by the AJW project to be a critical factor here. Lastly, a strong national and international policy component is essential if similar initiatives are to bring about structural change in the way states handle cases of women's rights violations. The challenges facing this area of work are huge, but the AJW project experience shows that change is possible. It is hoped that the learning captured in this publication will go some way to providing other organisations engaging on issues of women's access to justice with tangible examples of how success can be achieved, and inspiring them to continue the fight.

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