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# Stories of Participatory Reflection and Transformative Change

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The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) is an international network of more than 80 NGOs from all regions of the world that advocates for the rights of migrants and trafficked persons. GAATW members provide direct assistance to migrants and trafficked persons, run information campaigns, and engage in policy advocacy at the national and regional levels. The International Secretariat of the Alliance is based in Bangkok, Thailand and supports its members with research, knowledge building and sharing, and international advocacy. We focus on women's rights to mobility and decent work.

This report was designed by Borislav Gerasimov.

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Cover page image provided by Sawiyan. Photo by Jared Kohler.

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## Acknowledgements

This collection of short stories was put together by Emilia Cebrián, with editorial support from Bandana Pattanaik and Borislav Gerasimov, from the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW). Each story was reviewed by Neeta Hardikar and Sejal Dand (ANANDI), Loretta Enofe-Laurel (GPI), Dina Baslan (Sawiyán), and Abigail Quic (SERES).

We are deeply grateful to the ten partner organisations that embarked with us in this collective reflection process, who generously shared their time, skills, stories, and insights with us: Area Networking and Development Initiatives – ANANDI, India; Beyond Borders Malaysia, Malaysia; BUKU, Thailand; Girls’ Power Initiative – GPI, Nigeria; Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj – NMES, Nepal; Sawiyán, Jordan; SERES, Guatemala; Somos Pytyvõhára, Paraguay; Southern Peasants’ Federation of Thailand – SPFT, Thailand; and Waling Waling, United Kingdom. We also thank Javier Arteaga, Kanchana Di-ut and Smriti RDN for their support with translation to Spanish, Thai and Nepali respectively.

Finally, we express gratitude to Foundation for a Just Society (FJS) for the financial support and the flexibility that allowed us to lead an experimental, open-ended knowledge building process with a group of grassroots organisations from all corners of the world.

October 2022

## Introduction

This collection of short stories presents key insights and learnings from a series of reflection exercises conducted by four organisations in Guatemala, Nigeria, Jordan, and India in the context of a pilot project titled *Generation Equality*.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this initiative was to explore how organisations support and strengthen the communities they work with on the ground and how they build or engage with social justice movements.

These four stories present how *SERES*, *Girl's Power Initiative (GPI)*, *Sawiyah* and *Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI)* planned, navigated, and documented their reflection processes in close collaboration with the communities they support, while also discussing key achievements and lessons learnt, challenges faced, and new questions unlocked in their journey towards realising their vision of change.

Rather than providing answers to the complex issues explored in this pilot, the purpose of these stories is to share some insights on what it means to stay grounded in the community; why we think it is important to make space for honest conversations about our methodologies of work for social transformation; and what these processes looked like with youth leaders in Guatemala and El Salvador, adolescent girls in Nigeria, refugees of African origins in Jordan, and poor women in rural, tribal and denotified communities in Gujarat, India.

### Guiding principles

Over the course of several months, we invited ten partners from different parts of the world to embark with us on a collaborative reflection process to critically analyse our journeys of change with a focus on our methodologies of work with the community. Rather than following a structured plan with a predefined set of activities, we developed an open-ended and flexible pilot in which our role was to support and walk alongside our partners as they planned and implemented their reflection exercises. We made a conscious effort not to define in advance what 'reflection' and 'documentation' should look like in the context of *Generation Equality* because we wanted our partners' proposals to be reflective of the specific contexts in which they operate, and to be closely aligned with the needs and priorities of the communities they support.

Drawing from our extensive experience with Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), this pilot emphasised the value of reflection as a key tool for learning, something that has become more and more difficult to achieve with the increasing 'projectisation' of our work in the NGO sector. Reflective spaces are essential to assess whether the path we are walking is bringing about the changes we seek, whether our practice embodies the values and principles that guide our work, and in what ways we are centring the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of those we aim to support.

Another guiding principle behind this initiative was our belief that we are all integral parts of social justice movements at the local, national, regional, or international level, and our work contributes to

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<sup>1</sup> We called this project *Generation Equality* to highlight the vision of equality, social justice, freedom, and non-discrimination that we uphold in our work. The title is also a reference to the vision of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), particularly to the intergenerational, inter-movement and intersectional dialogues that it fosters. This project is not linked or affiliated with the Generation Equality Forum.

building or supporting social justice movements. But what does ‘supporting social movements’ look like? And how do we do that? As we approached our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and immersed in an intensive process to review our work and develop a new Theory of Change for the GAATW International Secretariat, we realised that we needed more conceptual clarity on movements, alliances and grassroots organisations so that we could make better plans to support them proactively. We also believed that unless we gained clarity on this crucial aspect of our work, ‘movement support’ would remain as a merely nice sounding phrase. Our discussions also reaffirmed the key role of our movement support work within the current context of shrinking civic space and projectisation of NGOs, a trend that many of our members, partners and allies were also witnessing in their everyday work. In the words of Srilatha Batliwala:

*This is very important in today’s context, because more and more activists and NGOs are involved in doing ‘projects’ and delivering services rather than building movements. They work for ‘beneficiaries’ and ‘target groups’, rather than mobilising and building the collective voice and power of the people affected by injustice. Today we have multiple projects that provide resources, services and even legal support (...). And these projects are in our control, not in the hands of the people for whom they are meant – so they are dependent on outside actors and leadership, not on the people who have the most to gain from change!<sup>2</sup>*

This is why we decided to partner with ten grassroots organisations who were interested in mutual learning and engaging in dialogues across regions, sectors, and movements. Between July 2020 and February 2022, we worked closely with: [Girls’ Power Initiative – GPI](#) (Nigeria); [Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj](#) – NMES (Nepal); [Area Networking and Development Initiatives – ANANDI](#) (India); [Sawiyani](#) (Jordan); [Beyond Borders Malaysia](#) (Malaysia); Southern Peasant Federation of Thailand – SPFT<sup>3</sup> (Surat Thani, Thailand); [BUKU](#) (Pattani, Thailand); [Somos Pytyvõhára](#) (Paraguay); [SERES](#) (Guatemala); and [Waling Waling](#) (United Kingdom). In bringing together a diverse group of organisations working on a wide range of social justice issues with different communities, we sought to foster inter-movement and inter-sectoral solidarity and gain insights into the transformative power of supporting social movements.

## Process

After a series of individual meetings with the partners, we asked each organisation to go through a comprehensive set of questions that we developed with a double purpose: a) to better understand who they are, what they do and why they do it; and b) to, hopefully, set in motion an inquiry about key aspects of our work for social change that are frequently left unexamined. We encouraged partners to tackle this task as a collective effort and to carefully think about a format to present their answers. Then, we requested each organisation to put together a simple plan outlining their reflection exercise and some ideas on how to document the process. While our partners implemented their

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<sup>2</sup> Srilatha Batliwala, All About Movements: Why Building Movements Creates Deeper Change, CREA, India, 2021, p. 9. Available at: [https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/All-About-Movements\\_Web.pdf](https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/All-About-Movements_Web.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> SPFT does not have their own website or social media page. To learn more about their work, please see: GAATW’s e-magazine Our Work, Our Lives, *Intersecting Struggles: Food, Land and Climate Justice*, Issue 3, October 2021, pp. 80-86. Available at: <https://online.fliphtml5.com/ctwzi/isqm/#p=80>



reflections, we facilitated a series of online dialogues where the ten organisations and the GAATW Secretariat, got to tell their stories, and we exchanged experiences, learnings and questions with the group.

An important feature of this pilot was to facilitate spaces for sharing, community building and mutual learning among the organisations involved. We attempted to create a safe and welcoming space where we could disrupt the silos that keep us apart in our day-to-day work and hopefully spark some 'aha moments' as we shared our stories and strategies with the group. By focusing on our journeys of change and methodologies of work – rather than on thematic issues or specific groups – we sought to discover our common struggles while also celebrating our diversity.

Once the dialogue sessions were over, we decided to extend the pilot's timeline and continue working with a smaller group of five organisations. This second phase allowed each partner more time to build on their reflection-documentation processes. Working with a smaller group made it easier for the Secretariat to provide tailored support throughout the process, to build more intimate connections among partners, and explore together certain cross-cutting issues arising from the first phase through a series of what we called *partner-led knowledge building sessions*.

### The stories

We decided to highlight these four stories because we wanted to explore how this diverse group of organisations translated into practice the rather abstract and open-ended notions of 'reflection' and 'documentation', and what the process looked like for each of them. What was the role of the community in designing and implementing the reflection? What were the methodologies used at each stage of the reflection and why? What were the insights and learnings gathered from this experience? Were the partners able to act on those learnings and insights? In what ways? Did the reflection unravel any changes within their organisations? These were some of the questions that we hoped to answer after revisiting the many reports and materials resulting from our partners' work, but also from our individual and collective discussions with SERES, GPI, Sawiyan and ANANDI in both phases of *Generation Equality*.

## Connecting, creating, changing: Youth leadership in Guatemala and El Salvador

SERES is an organisation that cultivates and catalyses youth leaders to build more just and sustainable communities in Guatemala and El Salvador. Founded in 2009 by Antonio Sánchez and Corrina Grace, two activists in their twenties who were certain that young people can become agents of change if given access to the right tools and opportunities, SERES believes in long-term impact to build an empowered generation of future leaders.<sup>4</sup>

With around 30% of the population under 25 years of age,<sup>5</sup> Central America is considered a young region that was severely impacted by decades of civil war. Armed conflict had devastating effects on Central American communities and keeping silent gave the best chance of survival, leading to what is known as a *generation of silence*.<sup>6</sup> While today's youth were born in the post-war era, they were raised by their parents and grandparents under that same idea. Guatemala and El Salvador, the two countries where SERES operates, are marked by social exclusion, environmental degradation, and pervasive violence. Young people are discouraged from addressing social issues or participating in decision-making, and migration is often seen as the only way out for them and their families.

In a context marred by silence and hopelessness, SERES' work proves to be particularly vital. Their vision of change actively questions the dominant narrative that portrays the young as either violent or uninterested in what happens around them and suggests a radical alternative: what they need in order to thrive are safe spaces to be heard and inspired, and tools to develop their capacity to lead for social change. This core belief influences every initiative that the organisation undertakes – from simple tasks, like opening a meeting with a practice of gratitude or inspiration, to the biggest of challenges, like shifting to a structure of shared leadership once the co-founder and director decided to step down.

SERES is currently co-led by Sara Hurtarte and Abigail Quic, two Guatemalan women who have been part of the team since 2016. Abigail is Tz'utujil and a SERES graduate. Their transition into Co-Executive Directors was a pivotal moment in the journey of SERES, as it represented 'a bold step forward in a country marked by decades-long division and conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous (ladino)'.<sup>7</sup> While this new structure seemed like the right choice for an organisation committed to building more equitable and sustainable communities through local leaders, founders and external supporters were concerned about the challenges it might entail. Despite their pushback, everyone in SERES was confident that co-leadership was a move in the right direction, and over time they were proven right. As the pandemic took over the world, Sara and Abigail were able to respond rapidly and in a grounded manner to emerging crises and continue to support each other 'from a place of healthy respect and understanding'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.seres.org/our-vision> Accessed: 8 February 2022.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www3.paho.org/informe-salud-adolescente-2018/part-one-a-profile-of-adolescents-and-youth-in-the-americas.html> Accessed: 8 February 2022.

<sup>6</sup> SERES, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.seres.org/blog/executive-director-announcement> Accessed: 8 February 2022.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



The work of SERES is centred around a programme on *Transformative Sustainability Leadership (TSL)*, consisting of three key modules to educate youth about global challenges and empower them to build resilience and create lasting change in their communities: these are the ‘Activate’ Community Congress, ‘Catalysers’, and ‘Youth Sustainability Summits’. Once the participants graduate, they become part of a network of ambassadors who lead local projects on relevant social, political and economic issues. The young ambassadors get together every month to build connections, support each other and discuss their action plans.

The TSL curriculum is described as a *learning ecosystem* that equips people between the ages of 14 and 31 with the necessary tools to navigate complex and rapidly changing contexts, lead from a living processes paradigm and take action in their communities. This means that leaders are seen as facilitators and mobilisers, rather than authorities. Through mentorships, interactive workshops and immersive experiences with peers, partners and other stakeholders, the SERES network fosters a culture of strategic inquiry and appreciation. Everyone is encouraged to ask difficult questions, learn from their mistakes and connect with others in a collaborative spirit.

### Understanding the journey of the young

*Generation Equality* provided a timely and much needed opportunity for SERES to pause, look inward, and better understand its impact through the voices and perspectives of the young ambassadors and a group of alumni who are no longer active in the community. It was important for the team to create a safe space for honest conversations on how young people define and describe their journey through SERES, in what ways this experience has changed them and what motivates their activism (or lack thereof). Through online Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and two in-depth interviews, the team learnt from the experiences of young leaders and their connection to the SERES network in what they called ‘success cases’ and ‘learning cases’.

One of the key exercises during the FGDs asked participants to close their eyes, picture their journey with SERES and then make a drawing. As they took turns to share their drawings, it was curious that all of them used elements of nature to visualise their experiences: mountains ‘that represent the greatness of SERES’, rainbows of hope ‘in my life and the youth in my community’, and personal ‘paths’ to be uncovered. Young people see themselves as seeds that are slowly but surely sprouting into robust trees, populating the woods – the network of young ambassadors mobilising their communities in Guatemala and El Salvador. In these illustrations, SERES is the river that nourishes the soil and flows by their side, accompanying them through the joys and struggles of growth and transformation. The journey of the young is not linear or easy, and there are multiple obstacles along the way; these are depicted as stones in the river, representing the setbacks encountered as emerging leaders, but also ‘the people who didn’t believe in us’, as Beatriz puts it.<sup>9</sup> Taken together, these images provide a powerful vision of a shared philosophy of change, one that is deeply interconnected with nature and the environment.

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<sup>9</sup> SERES: Viaje, impacto y evolución. February 2021. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ecc56efe349354c54bca55b/t/60d513d20907ee5a65fc8297/1624576989616/SERES+-+GAATW.pdf>



*Image 1: Drawings by two participants of the Focus Group Discussions representing their 'journey' through SERES. Source: SERES: Viaje, impacto y evolución. February 2021.*

For most of the participants, it was the 'Activate' Congresses that ignited a process of self-discovery and personal growth. Through concrete action plans and small changes, like cleaning the local river or simply carrying a reusable water bottle everywhere, they were able to connect with others and see the impact of their actions. 'Catalysers' and 'Youth Sustainability Summits' provided them with facilitation tools to share their learnings with peers, family and community members, and deepened their sense of belonging. In a playful, supportive and non-judgemental environment, these young people rediscovered their power to mobilise.

### Learnings and challenges of young women leaders

As part of this reflection exercise, Abigail Quic conducted in-depth interviews with two young women leaders, Manuela Morales, who is still active in the network, and Magdalena Buc, who stopped participating in 2018. These conversations delved deeper into their motivations to create and lead projects in their villages, how these experiences transformed them and what, if anything, drove them apart from SERES.

Manuela Morales is a young Quiché woman from Chuabaj, a village in the department of Chichicastenango, Guatemala. She first discovered SERES through other young leaders in her community who participated in an 'Activate' Congress and came back inspired and ready to act. This sparked curiosity in Manuela, and she decided to participate in the next 'Activate' that was held in her community. She is now a youth ambassador and leads K'at, a group formed by nine women and two men that received two awards for its impact and reach.

Manuela shares that when she first started to engage in her community through waste management and cleaning initiatives, local people were surprised. They wanted to know why she was doing this, and what she was getting in return. 'As I was taking these actions, it made me feel part of the community. Before, I didn't think about that, I was isolated.'<sup>10</sup> After her participation in another programme called 'Catalysers', what Manuela valued the most 'is that I met other women who had dreams and who were taking action and also creating movements in their communities.'<sup>11</sup>

Becoming a community leader transformed Manuela's own understanding of women in leadership. She used to think that their role is to listen and not to share their thoughts or speak their mind. But

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.seres.org/blog/hope2021> Accessed: 8 February 2022.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

now, 'I have a saying, I have a life purpose, I lead, I have the potential to carry the 'vara' (a symbol of leadership in the communities, given to those who become mayors).'<sup>12</sup> Manuela explains that her group now participates in communal decision-making spaces, such as the Community Councils for Urban and Rural Development (COCODE), where they are frequently consulted on various issues.

Magdalena Buc is a Maya Kakchiquek young leader from San Lucas village in Santa Apolonia, El Salvador. She joined SERES in 2017 at the age of 18, became a youth ambassador and then stopped being active in 2018. Similar to Manuela, Magdalena first participated in an 'Activate' Congress, where she met wonderful facilitators and, together with two other young women from her village, started organising reforestation, cleaning and waste management campaigns. 'The biggest learning for me was to find affirmation that I can do things.'<sup>13</sup>

Her journey with SERES, Magdalena shares, has been 'an invitation to change', and the biggest transformation she experienced as a woman 'is knowing that I have rights and now I stand by them and defend my younger sisters.'<sup>14</sup> Despite these positive experiences, Magdalena was going through a very challenging moment in her personal life, which eventually led her to step away from the network. During this time, she received multiple calls and invitations from Glendy, another facilitator, but she says that an in-person visit would have meant a lot, as seeing her peers always brought joy.

Although different, the stories of Manuela and Magdalena shed light on the transformative potential of the work that SERES does. Rather than claiming to have the right answers to the dilemmas that young people face in their communities, they actively listen and create safe learning spaces where the young bring their full selves, feel valued and build relationships of trust with their peers. And perhaps even more importantly: they lead by example, exploring the multiple ways in which power can be shared and shifted, and communities can navigate a context of adversity and isolation through collective action and the radical practice of hope.

The learnings and insights gained during SERES' reflection exercise not only helped the organisation to develop a better understanding of 'the journey of the young' and their experiences of engaging with the network, but also shed light on areas of growth identified by the young leaders themselves. Much like in Magdalena's case, many participants felt that they needed more follow-up from the network's facilitators during their journey, as well as support that was context-specific and tailored to the concrete mobilisation processes that they were leading at the local level. This led SERES to partner with a volunteer collaborator to develop a mentorship programme and a toolkit by and for the young themselves, where a group of young leaders built their capacity and strengthened their skills to mentor other young ambassadors. A pilot version of the mentorship programme is currently taking place with 15 mentors and 15 mentees, and after a careful evaluation and learnings process, SERES will decide whether it makes sense to continue with this initiative or if further changes are needed.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.seres.org/blog/a-learning-story-for-seres> Accessed: 8 February 2022.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

## Reflections on the journey ‘towards an empowered womanhood’ in South Nigeria

Girls’ Power Initiative (GPI) is a non-profit organisation that seeks to equip adolescent girls and young women with the knowledge, skills and opportunities needed to achieve their full potential and become visible and valued actors in society. Co-founded in 1993 by Bene Madunagu and Grace Osakue, two feminist activists who understood early on that women’s empowerment and gender-sensitive education cannot wait until adulthood, GPI’s vision is to become ‘a sustainable feminist institution leading the transformation of patriarchal values in Nigeria’.<sup>15</sup> The organisation currently operates in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), and four states in the South-South of Nigeria: Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Delta and Edo.

GPI’s work is focused on addressing the challenges faced by adolescent girls and young women in Nigeria from a gender and human rights perspective, with the greater aim of empowering them to be self-reliant and lead actions for change in their communities. Its core programmatic offer is a three-year-long Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Programme for girls between 10 and 18 years old in which they cover a variety of themes, such as life skills development, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), leadership skills and activism for social change, among others. The curriculum is divided in three consecutive years and the girls are organised in groups according to their age. The three-hour long Weekly Centre Lessons take place on Saturdays or Sundays at each GPI centre. Once the girls successfully pass all three levels, they graduate from the programme and receive support from a facilitator to carry out an intervention on a relevant social issue that affects their community. The idea is that after graduation, the girls continue to build relationships with the broader GPI network through the Graduate Alumnae Association (GAA) activities, as well as through internships and opportunities for employment. Aware that not everyone has access to the GPI centres, the organisation also offers a School Outreach Programme – an abridged one-year version of their CSE curriculum with girls in selected schools during the year. Instead of the weekly three-hour lessons, the facilitators have 40-minute sessions, and after an evaluation, the participants earn a Certificate of Graduation or a Certificate of Participation.

GPI’s approach is to listen attentively to the needs and desires of the girls they work with and adjust their programmes and activities accordingly. This led them to revise their core programmatic offer – originally focused on gender and leadership skills – and adapt it to fit the girls’ interests and demands, resulting in a Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) curriculum with human rights and gender as cross-cutting themes. The methodology of work is frequently revised and includes a variety of activities, but the premise remains the same: the weekly lessons are a safe space where the participants feel comfortable to address complex issues and share their lived experiences without fear of being judged. In fact, every lesson starts with a one-hour safe space led by the girls themselves, where they check-in with each other, share their experiences and identify how the knowledge gained in the programme might serve to address challenges in their everyday lives. The safe spaces are then followed by two-hour lessons, in which the facilitators share information and employ a variety of methods to promote critical and creative thinking, such as brainstorming, role playing, writing exercises and case study evaluations, among others.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://gpinigeria.org/who-we-are/> Accessed: 3 March 2022.

*The most beneficial activities that impacted me positively were the checking-ins of Saturday meetings. Here, I could share and learn from experiences of girls like me. I also learnt a lot from lessons taught by facilitators and subsequently my peers in year three. (GAA member)<sup>16</sup>*

*I benefited greatly from the Safe Space Sessions. It really helped me in making informed decisions; my self-esteem was built there. The GPI library service also contributed greatly to my B. Sc. Project. My success at school politics in the University was made possible through my association with GPI. (GAA member)<sup>17</sup>*

The GPI team knows that their work with adolescent girls and young women cannot be carried out in a silo, which is why they also target the girls' families, schools, communities, as well as government institutions through media, research and policy advocacy. They understand that gender equality cannot be achieved without addressing broader societal issues that disproportionately affect women and girls at all levels of society; from poverty, poor governance and corruption to patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes and harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM).

Over the years, GPI has strived to build a strong feminist organisational culture where every girl and young woman can thrive. A turning point in this journey was the successful leadership transition from Bene Madunagu, one of the co-founders, to Comfort Ikpeme, a GPI graduate, as Head of GPI Centre in Cross River in 2015. Besides consolidating the organisation's commitment towards its graduates, it also highlights that within GPI there is space for building knowledge and sharing power across generations.

When Bene Madunagu and Grace Osakue first founded GPI, it was one of the few organisations working on gender equality and SRHR education with adolescent girls and young women in Nigeria. Over the years, however, they are proud to see that there is greater awareness about the impact of gender inequality in their everyday lives, and more and more organisations are following their lead on the path 'towards an empowered womanhood'.<sup>18</sup>

### **A look in the mirror: Reflecting on GPI's journey of change with the girls and graduates**

GPI's approach to this reflection journey was ambitious and carefully considered, as it included a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods involving multiple stakeholders. The overall purpose was 'to achieve an honest and engaging conversation about GPI's journey, opportunities and challenges along the way, lessons learned, new possibilities and the road ahead'.<sup>19</sup> While the main targets were the GPI girls and graduates, the team also reached out to the broader community in the states where GPI has centres. With the support of an external consultant, they developed and implemented a questionnaire and a series of online Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with current students, on one hand, and with GPI graduates on the other, as well as an online survey for the girls' parents, teachers, community members, and policymakers.

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<sup>16</sup> Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), *A look in the mirror. Girls' Power Initiative (GPI) reflection at 26 years*, 2022, p. 55. Available at: <https://gpinigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GPI-Reflection-Report-at-26-Years.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> <https://gpinigeria.org/> Accessed: 3 March 2022.

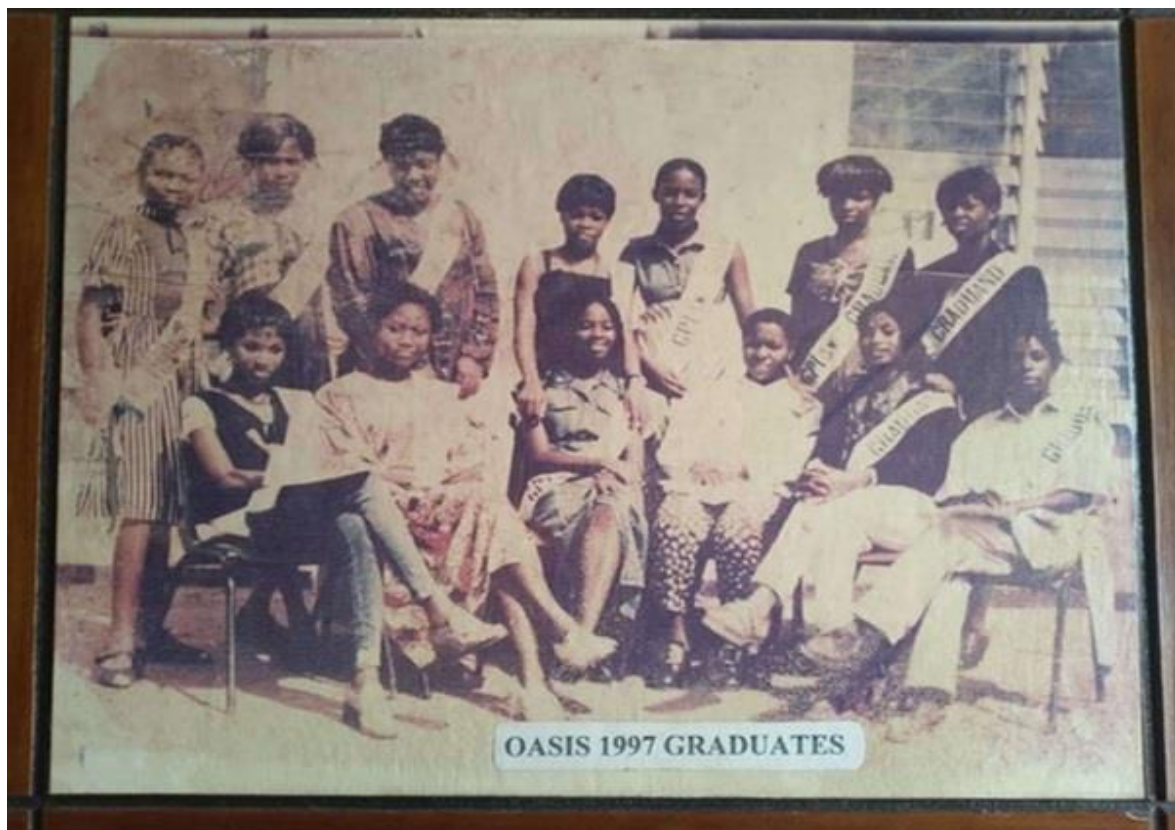
<sup>19</sup> GPI, *A look in the mirror.*, p. 7.



Besides providing a sociodemographic profile of the GPI network, the questionnaires asked respondents to reflect on the organisation’s impact on the girls, the families and the communities – depending on who was answering the survey – and to assess the type of changes identified as well as the quality of the activities. There was also an open-ended section for additional comments and suggestions.

As for the FGDs, a number of online sessions were carried out by each GPI centre with graduates (GAA members) divided per graduation year. Some centres achieved a higher participation of graduates while others were not as successful. The FGDs held with girls who are currently enrolled in the CSE programme included participants from all centres and were also conducted online. In all cases, the discussions were planned around a similar selection of topics and questions, including but not limited to: the reasons for joining GPI; initial expectations; how their participation in GPI has helped or is helping them; any changes in society that might be linked to their engagement with GPI; challenges encountered as GPI girls or graduates; whether they had referred anyone else to the organisation; and if they had any suggestions for GPI’s improvement.

Such an exhaustive plan required the involvement of several staff members, as well as coordination and collaboration across all GPI centres to reflect on the past and present work of the organisation and gain a better understanding of where they stand right now to continue advancing GPI’s mission and vision of change. As a result, some team members got to work together for the first time and had the opportunity to learn first-hand from the experiences of early graduates, the transformative impact that the organisation’s programmes had on them in the long run and their roles in shaping what is now Girls Power Initiative.



*Image 2: GPI Benin, pioneer member graduates, 1997. Source: Girls’ Power Initiative (GPI), A look in the mirror. Girls’ Power Initiative (GPI) reflection at 26 years, 2022, p. 53.*

## Key insights and learnings from GPI's reflection exercise

There are several important lessons from GPI's reflection process. The first thing that stands out is their effort to reach out to GPI graduates of all ages, including groups that had graduated as early as 1997. This was not an easy task, especially since many of them were no longer active or their contact details were outdated. Even though they couldn't reach the target numbers initially set, the graduates' participation was instrumental in the evaluation of GPI's journey. Their responses provided relevant insights into the long-term impact of GPI's programmes, showing that even small actions or changes in perspective, like learning how to chair a meeting or discussing topics that are usually considered taboo, could spark meaningful and unimaginable transformations in girls' and young women's lives, as shared by the graduates themselves.

*The work that I do now on gender mainstreaming has its bedrock from GPI. (GAA member, 38 years old)<sup>20</sup>*

*I refuse to be silent in my office. I am bold to say what I believe in and I do not shy away from it. (GAA member, 35 years old)<sup>21</sup>*

*GPI has always been about humanity; it gave me a purpose. For example, the times when we have gone on community interventions, I felt I was sharing what I learnt with others. GPI gave us a sense of belonging. (GAA member, 25 years old)<sup>22</sup>*

*It is the first place I learnt about womanhood. I was taught not to be ashamed of myself or to be ashamed of my body. They also taught me about my right to the point where I have to say 'No'. (GAA member, 21 years old)<sup>23</sup>*

Another aspect worth highlighting is GPI's commitment to creating safe spaces where everyone – from the girls to the graduates – feels comfortable to provide honest feedback about their experiences with the organisation. Even in an online setting, the participants were excited to engage in the discussions, and they had many comments and suggestions for improving GPI's work.

Most of the girls and graduates that took part in this reflection recognised that their engagement with GPI positively impacted their self-esteem, confidence, and assertiveness. The check-ins, experience sharing sessions and weekly lessons were mentioned as highly beneficial activities that supported them in finding their own voice and making informed decisions about their lives, particularly when it came to SRHR and women's rights issues. Life and leadership skills development were also brought up by several girls and graduates because they played a key role in their personal growth and career choice. While not many of the girls knew what to expect when they first joined GPI, they were able to identify issues in their families and communities and speak up or intervene using the knowledge and tools acquired on the CSE programme, or approach someone else for support when needed.

*Before, I was told that women's education ends in the kitchen, but I came to understand that I have a right to achieve all I want, and my education does not end in the kitchen. (GAA member, 24 years old)<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.



*I have an improved behaviour and attitude... And more confidence in speaking to others, I now make better decisions with decision-making skills learnt and a good self-esteem. My facilitators inspire me a lot. (GPI girl, 17 years old)<sup>25</sup>*

*Before I joined GPI, I had body image issues but after joining GPI I had a boost in my self-confidence and had a better perception about my body. I was also able to help my friend overcome body-shaming and to embrace her body with love. (GPI girl, 15 years old)<sup>26</sup>*

*It has increased my self-esteem. I can also identify and deal with peer pressure. (GPI girl, 11 years old)<sup>27</sup>*

Parents, teachers, community members and policymakers also rated GPI highly in terms of the changes they witnessed in the girls' behaviour and attitudes, skills development and SRHR education, including the reduction of rape and other incidents of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS, and targeting systematic practices and social norms that negatively affect girls in their communities. Parents and teachers of GPI girls and graduates associate the organisation with girls' empowerment in Nigeria and believe that the CSE programme should be part of the school curriculum. Although there are still some misconceptions about GPI among members of the community, most of them are familiar with the organisation's work and have referred adolescent girls to their programmes and services.

This reflection exercise has reaffirmed the transformative power of GPI's approach, not only from the girls and graduates' perspective, but also from the point of view of their parents, teachers, and communities. More importantly, it has evidenced that devoting time and resources to holistic and participatory reflection processes can provide invaluable insights into the complex, multi-dimensional and non-linear pathways towards social change, while also having concrete effects on the organisation's programmes and activities. GPI not only listened to what the girls and graduates had to say, but they also started acting on their suggestions. As an example, the reflection process has led to the optimisation of the e-library on GPI's website, as 25 of the organisation's hardcopy publications since its inception, comprising adolescent sexuality education training manuals, research works, adolescent sexuality series, student's manual on human trafficking, among others, have been made available online, ensuring access to a wider audience beyond those within close range to GPI's offices. Also, the dissemination of the reflection's findings with graduates in the Graduate Alumnae Association (GAA) has re-energised its members and has led to the creation of a technical national working group consisting of an interim national coordinator and state representatives of GPI Centres where they graduated. Their mandate is to define the objective of the GAA as an entity with a focus on the graduates' ownership of GPI as primary beneficiaries, as well as on its sustainability. Even if there is still a long road ahead for Girls' Power Initiative, their commitment to creating spaces where the girls feel safe, valued, respected and inspired to speak their minds continues to be their compass in the journey towards a more equal and just society for women and girls in Nigeria.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

## Building community and mobilising for change in Amman, Jordan



Image 3: Women in Sawiyan's community filming the *House of Hope*, a theatre-meet-film project about women solidarity carried out in collaboration with Seenaryo. Photo credit: Majd Manaa.

In March 2021, we received an invitation from Dina Baslan, co-founder and co-director of Sawiyan, to attend the online premiere of [House of Hope](#), a theatre play turned into short film that narrates the stories of a group of women from Somali, Sudanese, Yemeni and Jordanian communities living in Amman, Jordan. Over the course of nine months, the group of 22 women worked together with Jana Zeineddine, facilitator, director and producer from [Seenaryo](#), to write the script and give life to the characters through an applied theatre process called 'democratic collaboration'.<sup>28</sup> Based on their lived experiences, *House of Hope* explores issues of racism, gender-based violence, trauma, displacement, motherhood and solidarity in the face of adversity. The short film starts with a young woman knocking on a door at night in search of help. In shock and unable to speak, she is welcomed by a group of women who guide her inside and look after her. As the days go by, the women find solace and hope in each other's embrace and discover that coming together is a powerful act in times of despair. The screening was followed by a Q&A session on Zoom, where the actresses and co-creators gathered with family, friends and the public to talk about this collaborative project between Sawiyan and Seenaryo. In stark contrast to the play's setting, the ambience on Zoom brimmed with laughter and words of encouragement, and even with the language barrier and the challenges of the online world, we felt part of this moment of sharing, celebration and joy.

*It took us years to build the trust, the real, hard relations we established between us, where despite the politics and the different realities that separated us, bonds of respect and love held us together. So for the trust to lead to this collaboration with Seenaryo where theatre was instrumentalised as a tool to facilitate self-expression, healing, confidence building and relationship strengthening, and for it to be translated into first-hand narration of women's stories and artistic expression of solidarity... It truly was a transformation experience that I will forever cherish being a part of. (Dina Baslan)*

The online premiere of *House of Hope* was only a glimpse into the vibrant community that is Sawiyan. The story of the organisation goes back to December 2015, when 800 Sudanese refugees and asylum

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwK4Jced5XE&ab\\_channel=Seenaryo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwK4Jced5XE&ab_channel=Seenaryo) Accessed: 10 February 2022.

seekers were [forcibly deported from Jordan](#) after 30 days of protesting outside the UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) headquarters in demand for better living conditions. In this context, a group of activists, journalists, researchers and humanitarian workers started to mobilise the people of Amman to collect food and winter clothes and coordinated advocacy efforts in support of the Sudanese community. Two years later, the volunteers behind this emergency response decided that it was time to formally register as a non-profit organisation with a focus on marginalised refugees of African origins and impoverished Jordanians in Amman. In Arabic, Sawiyan means ‘to come together, to meet your fellow man on the same level, to cultivate community, or equality’,<sup>29</sup> and the choice of name speaks to the organisation’s culture and core values. This is reflected in Sawiyan’s commitment to building connections based on trust and solidarity that bring together a diverse group of people with a shared purpose: mobilising support for those in need in a way that is constructive and uplifting.

Much like the people driving Sawiyan’s mission and vision forward, the organisation’s programmes are dynamic and diverse, ranging from skate days at 7Hills SkatePark, to English classes that combine Freirean pedagogy with language learning, to live music sessions and football tournaments. These initiatives aim to address the needs and aspirations of the Sudanese, Somali and Yemeni refugees in Amman by working collaboratively with community leaders, volunteers and local and international NGOs.



Image 4: Sawiyan community members at a dialogue session held at the community centre balcony to share and exchange knowledge and personal experiences. Photo credit: Aisha Jamal.

*In my time with Sawiyan, I have seen it change from an organisation founded and led by two dedicated individuals from outside the Sudanese community to more of an organic movement spearheaded by passionate volunteers from within the community itself who*

<sup>29</sup> <https://sawiyan.org/our-story> Accessed: 10 February 2022.



*are attuned to the unique needs of their people and are responding with their own creative initiatives to empower them and makes their voices heard. (Dima, House of Hope film actress)*

This approach is wonderfully illustrated by the story of Sawiyan’s English programme. It goes back to the efforts of two community teachers, Mobarak Adam, a Sudanese man living in Amman who started to organise English classes for his friends and neighbours in the Sudanese community, and Hassan Abdullahi, a Somali man who was also volunteering as an English teacher while in Amman. Mobarak and Hassan were aware that learning English was a priority for many refugees of African origins living in Jordan, but the majority either did not have the money or did not feel comfortable to attend classes. This is how they found in the English lessons a simple but powerful way to support their compatriots.

In 2018, Mobarak and Hassan partnered with Sawiyan to expand the reach of the English lessons. The two volunteer teachers worked together with Dr Shireen Keyl, Sawiyan’s Board Member and Assistant Professor at Utah State University, to update the curriculum in a way that resonated with the students’ lived experiences.



Image 5: Teacher Mobarak Adam, Teacher Hassan Abdullahi, and Dr Shireen Keyl giving a class held at partner organisation HelpAge in 2019. Source: <https://sawiyan.org/about-the-program>

*I came [into Sawiyan] with this repertoire of critical pedagogy, transformative education, radical love in educational context, and I think that it’s something that can be applied in a lot of contexts [...] There is much relevance to the work of Paulo Freire especially given that he himself, being Brazilian, having experienced drastic poverty at a young age, really understood the obstacles that occur for those who seek an education [...] If we can marry*

*content with a critical pedagogical approach, I think it can be extremely transformative and empowering for everyone involved: the community, the educator, even the institution, which I think it has for Sawiyan. (Shireen Keyl)*

Drawing from the principles of Freirean pedagogy, the lessons aim to be a safe and welcoming space for students to learn English while also critically engaging with issues that affect their everyday lives, such as discrimination and racism. Mobarak and Hassan are the programme's co-directors, and together they have developed three levels of the current study books, incorporating elements of racial empowerment and other critical literacy tools in an effort to address the needs of refugee communities in Jordan.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the English programme had to move online. The transition was not easy, but Mubarak and Hassan successfully adjusted the curriculum to Zoom and, with support from the team, they managed to reach an even larger number of students. In fact, since the beginning of 2022, 'a total of 202 students from 8 nationalities signed up for their classes and received their textbooks. 12 volunteer teachers run the 8 different online classes through Zoom'.<sup>30</sup>

### Reflecting on Sawiyan's shared identity and its journey of community mobilisation

The first exercise we planned as part of *Generation Equality* was a questionnaire that we put together with the goal of better understanding our partners' work. This document was shared as an invitation for each organisation to reflect on their journey and vision of change and decide how they wanted to tell their story to the rest of the group. Sawiyan's team approached this task with curiosity and creativity and realised early on that it would not be possible to translate into words the weaving of voices, people, places and practices that lie at the heart of the organisation. As they got together to discuss and reflect on the suggested questions, they decided to illustrate this process with a collection of quotes, photos and videos in the form of a presentation.

Pictures and clips of people dancing, singing, getting ready to play football and sitting in circles during team meetings populate Sawiyan's presentation as Dina, Aya and Randa talk about what it means for them to come together and build community. In one of the videos, we can see Randa, the former office manager, articulating her vision of Sawiyan to a group of volunteers sitting around a table. Randa is standing next to a black flipchart sheet with a detailed drawing of a two-storey house with one door and multiple windows. 'Nobody is having their work done without all of us together', she emphasises, and goes on to explain that the colour of the flipchart, although unintentional, symbolises how other NGOs and development agencies put refugee communities 'in the back'. 'We're in a dark place, but when Sawiyan came with a big house, it became a place where we can learn, where we can have fun, where we don't feel like we have man-woman, white-black, rich-poor, no – we're together, we're one big family.'<sup>31</sup>

In her vision, Randa raises a very common issue in the context of humanitarian work, where international agencies and NGOs often make decisions about people's lives without consulting them or involving them at any stage of the process. Sawiyan's efforts to stay grounded in the community,

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<sup>30</sup> <https://sawiyan.org/about-the-program> Accessed: 10 February 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Sawiyan, PowerPoint Presentation for *Generation Equality's* online dialogues, August 2020. Slide 9.

on the contrary, are rooted in the belief that refugees are best placed to assess their needs and identify how their families and communities can be supported. In their own words:

*The story of Sawiyan is a story of a journey of growth and evolution from an emergency response volunteer group to a community-immersed exchange of arts, culture, history, energy, enveloped in radical love to the human spirit. We struggle to find the right term to describe our connection – an organisation, a movement, a collective – however, one thing is clear to us all, that we are part of a family that is searching for a deeper meaning to our co-existence.<sup>32</sup>*



*Image 6: Volunteers at the 7 Hills Skatepark in Amman, where children, youth and their families carry out team building exercises on Saturdays. Photo by Jared Kohler.*

### Staying grounded and curious in times of uncertainty: Insights from Sawiyan's community consultation

Towards the end of the 2021, several core members of the Sawiyan team had to relocate out of Jordan, throwing the organisation into a state of disorientation and shock. It came after years of setting the organisation on the path of being refugee and community led, where the administrative structure was built on relationships and personalities rather than processes and terms of references. The team decided to engage in a series of community consultations with the purpose of evaluating Sawiyan's journey and figuring out how to move forward in the new context and with the community leaders presently active on the ground. The community consultations were held with programme leaders and volunteers and delved deeper into how they understood the organisation's mission, purpose and current structure, the support they needed to successfully continue leading programmes and activities as well as their suggestions for Sawiyan's future. The discussions provided mixed feedback and the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Slide 11.

organisation decided to take a step back and for the first time to freeze its activities as an NGO to direct its time and attention to a communal participatory reflection exercise to document the narratives of community leaders and the connections that mobilised people for social change over the past six years. It is unclear where this exercise will take the group, especially as local policies continue to further marginalise refugees of African origins. Perhaps reverting to an informal, unregistered volunteer group will serve everyone, at least for the time being.

Sawiyān's continues to navigate this reflection process with flexibility despite the challenges it poses. Not only does it offer crucial insights on how to meaningfully show up for others in times of crises, but also sheds light on the importance of self-awareness and open-mindedness to guide us through times of uncertainty and organisational change. There are two main takeaways from Sawiyān's reflection that we would like to highlight:

The essential role of community-led initiatives during times of crises: Sawiyān's support system during the pandemic relied heavily on strong networks of trust and solidarity that were cultivated among community members and volunteers since the very beginning of the organisation in 2015. These networks were crucial to develop a COVID-19 response that accurately reflected the growing needs of the refugee communities on the ground; and not only supported families and households in securing basic supplies such as food and medicine, but also sent a message of solidarity. The community-led English language programme, for instance, served as a platform to spread messages to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and the online lessons amplified the programme's reach at a time when offices and community centres had to close their doors indefinitely.

Navigating times of uncertainty with curiosity and an open mind: Rather than simply moving forward in the path previously set, Sawiyān seized this opportunity to unlock further questions about the organisation's purpose and current approach to social change. They went so far as to question the effectiveness of their organisational structure in the new context and realised that major changes needed to be made. This shows that it's essential to be open to emergent responses in highly challenging and unpredictable circumstances in order to continue supporting those in need in a way that is constructive, uplifting and ultimately empowering.



## Empowering women to realise their rights and transform their communities in Gujarat, India

Since 1995, Area Networking and Development Initiatives, better known as ANANDI, has been working on empowering women and young people's collectives to transform their communities in the state of Gujarat, on the western coast of India. The organisation was founded by five young feminist activists who had previously worked with rural, tribal and Dalit communities as part of *Mahila Samakhya*, a national programme by the Indian government focused on women's empowerment. While these experiences laid the foundation for ANANDI's work with women from socially and economically marginalised groups, the founders' vision was much bolder: 'to bring rural women's concerns to the centre of all development processes so that all can live in a just, equitable and peaceful society'.<sup>33</sup>

ANANDI works closely with poor women from tribal, denotified and other disadvantaged communities in two areas of rural Gujarat, each with its own set of sociocultural barriers and structural vulnerabilities. The organisation's approach combines women's empowerment with rights claiming and is rooted in the belief that the process of empowerment is not only about recognising oppressive systemic forces that push people to the margins, but also about acting to transform them. In linking these two approaches, ANANDI supports women's efforts to mobilise for their own rights, listening and learning from them rather than imposing change agendas and interventions from the outside. In the words of one of their founding members,

*When you don't have access to a right, you collectivise to fight for that right. But when the law comes in, it always focuses on the individual. Fighting for your right can be a lonely process. So, our strategy is to help fight for individual rights through collective struggles.*<sup>34</sup>

As a feminist organisation, ANANDI's core strategies are multi-dimensional, process-oriented, and intersectional. The organisation focuses on mobilising women and young girls and building their leadership skills through a strategy called *collectivisation*; that is, supporting the formation and strengthening of women-led organisations to become agents of change in their own communities. The women's collectives, known as *sanghathans*, are quite diverse and address a variety of issues that affect their day-to-day lives, such as gender-based violence, limited or lack of access to healthcare services, and no access to public resources and government schemes, among others. With ANANDI's support, the *sanghathans* plan, decide and lead efforts to protect and promote women's rights and ensure sustainable livelihoods.

While ANANDI's core strategy is anchored in building women's collective power to mobilise for their rights, this process is accompanied by a wide range of other essential tools for social transformation that span the individual and the collective. The organisation designs and implements programmes focused on capacity and leadership building, awareness raising and advocacy, such as the Fellowship Programme for young leaders, but all these are closely intertwined with the process of *collectivisation*

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<sup>33</sup> Generation Equality: Learnings from participatory praxis of ANANDI, 2020, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Srilatha Batliwala, Vani Periodi and Ankita Aggarwal. *The Long Road Travelled. ANANDI's reflections on its 25-year journey*. January 2021.

and are seen as lateral, back-and-forth efforts between ANANDI’s team and members of the *sanghathans*, rather than top-down transfers of skills.

*Table 1: Women’s collectives supported by ANANDI. Source: Empowering Women and Young People’s Collectives to Transform Communities, ANANDI, October 2020. Slide 6.*

<b>Women’s Collectives</b>	<b>Social categories</b>	<b>Communities</b>
Devgadh Mahila Sangathan Ratanmahaal Mahila Sajiv Khet Utpadak Mandali	Adivasi and other socio economically marginalised communities	Wage workers, forest dwellers, organic fertiliser and seed producers, farmers, health workers
Panam Mahila Sangathan Panam Mahila saving and credit cooperative	Displaced due to the Panam Dam – OBCS, Dalits  Women entrepreneurs	Wage workers, daily wage workers
Maliya Mahila Shakti Sangathan Azad Mahila Machimari Sahakari Mandali	De-notified Tribal DNT community – Minority Community Muslims, Dalits  Tribal migrant agricultural workers	Fisher women, wage workers, livestock keepers, salt pan worker, entrepreneurs
Mahila Swaraj Manch	Women leaders in PRI, women leaders from other marginalised communities – mainly Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBC)	Elected Women Representatives and Dalit and OBC

### ANANDI’s reflection process

In 2020, ANANDI celebrated 25 years of ‘championing equality, justice and peace’<sup>35</sup> with women and young girls in Gujarat, so when the organisation received our invitation to participate in *Generation Equality*, they saw this as a timely opportunity to look back on ‘the long road travelled’<sup>36</sup> and reflect on its 25-year journey.

ANANDI’s reflection exercise was designed and conducted by a group of three external consultants in close collaboration with the team. The methodology consisted of a series of reflection meetings that were held in a hybrid modality (a combination of online and in-person sessions) with the women’s collectives and with ANANDI’s team. The materials used to guide the reflection were developed by the consultants and included a) a set of trigger questions to unpack the core concepts behind ANANDI’s work; b) an exercise to build the organisation’s narrative of change; and c) an exercise to reflect on the core strategy of *collectivisation*. The eight meetings held with the *sanghathans* were facilitated by ANANDI’s team, while the remaining four sessions with the organisation’s team were facilitated by the consultants. In an effort to overcome the limitations posed by the hybrid format, ANANDI decided to engage in further discussions with the *sanghathans* beyond the formal meetings convened as part

<sup>35</sup> ANANDI, 2020. Slide 18.

<sup>36</sup> Batliwala, Periodi and Aggarwal. *The Long Road Travelled*.

of this reflection exercise. Key insights and learnings were drawn from the meetings' notes and recordings and then articulated in a comprehensive report by the consultants.<sup>37</sup>

### Unpacking the concepts and strategies at the heart of ANANDI's work

The reflection report starts by outlining how ANANDI understands the key concepts that inform the organisation's work as stated in their mission: 'to organise women and young people to work towards transformative change that is based on social justice, sustainable development, accountable governance, and fraternity, realised through a process of empowerment and claiming rights.'<sup>38</sup> Then, it spells out ANANDI's core strategies as defined by team members and sanghathan leaders in the reflection discussions, often illustrating these definitions with examples from women's lived experiences and the organisation's work:

*When the most excluded and marginalized people, particularly women, move from invisibility to visibility, that is transformation!*<sup>39</sup>

*The Sanghathan is like a group of sticks – when they are tied together, nothing can break them! But each stick on its own, or just a handful, are much weaker, and easier to break.*<sup>40</sup>

*Social justice is not something handed down from above, but is achieved together, through collective effort and action.*<sup>41</sup>

As illustrated by these quotes, this first exercise is particularly enriching because it grounds abstract concepts that are quite common in the NGO sector, such as transformation, empowerment, social justice and sustainable development, but are rarely ever defined. In doing so, it attempts to unpack underlying frameworks and assumptions behind an organisation's mission, vision and core strategies. In this case, the set of guiding questions not only focused on the way ANANDI frames its work, but also on how the perspectives of women and young people are integrated in these understandings.

ANANDI's reflection was intersectional and intergenerational in its approach. Each exercise purposefully brought together people from different age groups, different areas of the organisation as well as multiple levels of leadership in an effort to make space for all their voices to be heard. This approach opened up the conversation to differing and sometimes conflicting perspectives about ANANDI's journey and narrative of change, key milestones and turning points, achievements and challenges faced along the way, which were actively discussed and negotiated throughout the process.

After exploring the key concepts at the heart of ANANDI's work, the report delved deeper into the *collectivisation* strategy to better understand how the organisation's work alongside the women's collectives in rural Gujarat is supporting women's rights and advancing gender equality, social justice and sustainable development in their communities. Looking back on ANANDI's journey through the eyes of its founders, team members and women's collectives shows that their work with the

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

*sanghathans* has positively impacted women's everyday lives and has produced both tangible and intangible gains for them and their communities.

*The sanghathans have been both key sites of women's empowerment and formations through which this empowerment has translated into concrete actions for change.*<sup>42</sup>

Some examples include improved access to healthcare services, gains in land ownership rights for women, increased access to social security and citizenship rights, greater awareness and community accountability in tackling multiple forms of violence against women and girls, among many other achievements that were highlighted in the report. It is clear that the process of empowerment is closely interlinked with access to basic rights and sustainable livelihoods, and the struggles of the women's collectives show that mobilising for practical issues that affect women's day-to-day lives can also serve to advance their voice, visibility and participation in decision-making spaces at the family, community and state levels.

Building the capacity of young women to take on leadership roles has been another key aspect of ANANDI's work, both within the organisation and with the *sanghathans*. In the beginning, the collectives mostly consisted of older women, but over time this has changed and now around half of the members are young. Leadership sharing presented its difficulties and generated tensions, but the *sanghathans* are slowly learning to navigate this process and embrace cross-generational dialogues and perspectives among older and younger members.

While the formation of the women's collectives was originally catalysed by ANANDI, gradually and with the organisation's support these have become quite autonomous and sustainable. The path towards sustainability was not linear or free of obstacles, but ANANDI's effort to equip local women with the tools for mobilisation, rather than trying to provide 'solutions' from the outside, proved to be essential. As time passed, ANANDI's role shifted towards a more lateral support of the *sanghathans*, focusing on capacity building and information sharing rather than on leading. At the same time, the *sanghathans* have triggered the creation of other collectives and forums to tackle specific issues that affect local people's livelihoods and access to basic rights, such as credit cooperatives or committees to monitor access to justice or government schemes.

Something that stands out about ANANDI's reflection exercise is that while it focused on critically analysing the organisation's journey towards realising its mission and vision of change, the insights gathered are relevant to everyone working to advance women and young people's rights and support marginalised communities across sectors and borders. Through powerful questions that initiated a profound inquiry about what is at the heart of ANANDI's work for change, this reflection sheds light on cross-cutting issues in the 'for purpose' sector that we rarely have the time or the resources to examine critically and creatively, let alone do so in close collaboration with the very people we support on the ground.

ANANDI's 25 years of work demonstrate that long-lasting change necessarily comes from within,

*that it is the people with the greatest stake in change, most marginalised and oppressed by the deep structures of power, most excluded by the development process and political*

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

*interests, who understand best what needs to change, and it is they who must be the change architects and catalysts.<sup>43</sup>*

But perhaps the most important lesson from this reflection is hope... We have hope because the *sanghathans* have shown us that if women come together and mobilise their collective power, it is possible to transform deep structures of power in a relatively short amount of time. And, after many years, even in the face of extreme hardship and difficulties, the women leaders continue to fight for a better, fairer world for all.

*And till today, they still prioritise the most excluded – asking, always, who’s left out? They come from a place of love; they show us that transformation is also about what you hold on to, and not just what you let go or change!<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusions

As an international feminist alliance working at the intersections of gender, migration, and labour, we are always inspired by the multiple ways in which communities, organisations and movements around the world are reimagining the world we live in and mobilising towards a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all. Their struggles invite us to look deeper into our own journeys of change and reflect on our core strategies to transform ‘the practices and places of power’.<sup>45</sup>

We are proud to share the stories of SERES, GPI, Sawiyan and ANANDI, as their journeys of change and reflections exercises have set in motion new inquiries into our own work to support members, partners, and allies and strengthen our efforts to realise migrant and trafficked women’s rights to decent work and mobility. We hope this collection will provide inspiration and guidance to bridge the gaps between principle and practice and will encourage you to cultivate a practice of participatory reflection about what it means to ‘stay grounded in the community’ and bring about change ‘from the ground up’.

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<sup>45</sup> Urgent Action Funds, *Sisterhood Feminist Principles of Philanthropy*, November 2021, p. 6. Available at: <https://urgentactionsisterfunds.org/sisterhood-feminist-principles-of-philanthropy/>



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