



CASE STUDY 8

WE CAN: CAMPAIGN ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Country: 16 countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka

Focus: Violence Against Women

Donor(s): UK & Dutch Governments and Oxfam Unwrapped

Organisation(s): Oxfam

Budget: GBP 11m

Timeframe: 2004-2011



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KEY POINTS

- Engaging with both men and women to tackle violence against women (VAW)
- Recognising VAW as part of broader, gendered power structures
- Making the issue accessible through the change maker approach

OVERVIEW

We Can has been hugely successful a viral campaign focused on changing attitudes and beliefs about gender and violence against women (VAW). The campaign has been led by hundreds of organisations across sixteen countries, “working together to challenge and change entrenched attitudes that support and justify violence against women at the individual, community, and society levels”.¹ The campaign has used a ‘change maker’ approach, encouraging participants to make “a pledge to reflect on one’s own practice, end VAW in one’s own life and to talk to 10 others about it”.² While the first phase of the campaign focused on awareness raising and recruiting change makers, the second phase “was designed to systematically re-engage change makers and support them in deepening change, for example by becoming more involved in wider advocacy work, through the participation of change makers in

local-level activities and work with institutions they may be part of”.³ By 2011, the programme had signed up approximately 3.9 million change makers (of which approximately half were men), and 7.4 million people had participated in related activities.⁴

GENDER AWARE WAYS OF WORKING

The We Can campaign recognises VAW as part of broader gendered power structures: “Social customs and attitudes that support VAW are entrenched and institutionalized at all levels – home, family, community, society and the State.”⁵ Therefore, the campaign “deliberately promoted a broad definition of VAW to include not just physical violence, but exclusion, intimidation and early marriage.”⁶ As a result, although the campaign has focused on VAW, this is in the context of challenging discriminatory gender roles and norms more broadly: “To end VAW, it is important to challenge and

POLITICALLY INFORMED

Being politically informed is a way of working that recognises that development outcomes are determined by the dynamics of power and politics. It is not about formal governance reforms, such as elections or civil service reforms. It involves analysing stakeholder interests and incentives to understand what is politically feasible.

change existing social attitudes that accept it as 'normal'.⁷⁷ For example, change makers' activities have included "disseminating information on gender discrimination and violence against women, questioning norms that 'normalise' violence against women, challenging gender-biased attitudes and stereotypes, opening up a dialogue with their friends, neighbours and clientele, and generating public debate."⁷⁸

The campaign's understanding of VAW as reflective of broader, gendered power structures has also led to the recognition that although its emphasis is on individual level change, a supportive social environment is necessary for sustained progress. Therefore, the work of change makers has been "supported through highly visible and coordinated community mobilisation programmes, public education events, mass media, and other traditional and non-traditional means of communication, a variety of institutions (civil society groups, universities), celebrity endorsements, and unique 'sign ups', where an entire community will 'sign up' to end violence against women."⁷⁹

"We came up with the idea that we needed to address the issue within families, communities, neighbourhoods and institutions to stop women from feeling that they had to be silent about it."¹⁰

GENDER AWARE

Being gender aware is a way of working that analyses how women and men, girls and boys, experience an issue differently and/or unequally, and the power relations that sustain these inequalities. A robust analysis also looks at how gender intersects with other forms of diversity, such as race, religion, ethnicity, class and disability, and non-binary gender identities or diverse sexual preferences.

While the first phase of the We Can campaign focused on recruiting and supporting individual change makers, the second phase focused on institutionalising this change. For example: "We did a lot of work with educational institutions because the campaign had mobilised a lot of students and teachers, so we worked with these institutions and they had a big influence [...] Partly because of education where young people were learning and being socialised, and also because young people have influence in them."¹¹ Similarly "We also worked with local government bodies which are close to communities and community leaders, so we were looking at how we could influence and institutionalise change."¹² Therefore, We Can's conception of gender as a system of power relations running throughout society is reflected in a campaign which works at multiple societal levels.

POLITICALLY INFORMED WAYS OF WORKING

The We Can campaign's politically informed approach is exemplified by its engagement with men as well as women, strategic alliances with existing women's movements and networks, and its work at multiple societal levels, bolstered by a sophisticated communications strategy.

"You have to work with men and women, not framing men as the enemy, but as the campaign ally who can recognise that there are problems and help solve them."¹⁵

The campaign targeted men in multiple ways, including mapping allies and tailoring materials: "It avoided pointing fingers, focusing not on the actions of the person and enabling men to become change makers who acknowledge that they have been violent but can change. The campaign also focused on youth and, depending on alliances and contexts, that meant young men too."¹³ As a result, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, half of all change makers were men. This has been crucial for the success of the campaign because "when we are talking about social change we are not just talking about the attitudes of women, we are talking about the people around them. Therefore, it has to be owned by everyone so that it's not just a women's problem".¹⁴

In addition to engaging male change makers, the campaign also capitalised on the existing women's movement South Asia by forming strategic alliances: "Oxfam GB country offices initially invited partners in ongoing projects to form fledgling 'We Can' alliances. There was no blueprint for alliance development; alliance structures and processes varied from country to country. The campaign allies had much leeway in developing their mobilisation strategies – within a joint, clearly articulated regional strategy."¹⁶ The campaign also recognised the need to ensure that its partners were both diverse and influential: "People we already had relationships with, that was a starting point, but the numbers there were small, so then we identified which organisations, networks and institutions had a large outreach."¹⁷

The geographic scope of the program, and its aim to "bring together diverse local, national, regional and international efforts working to combat VAW"¹⁹ has necessitated a

strategy which is tailored to working in varied geographic contexts and at multiple societal levels: "There appears to be a complex trade-off between the benefits of a single core approach (scale in generating materials, exchanges of ideas, experience and learning) and the need to adapt methodologies to local contexts (risk, attitudes to women, role of fundamentalism, level of mobility, etc.). It was very important in the beginning to have a centralised team which worked on ideas, strategies and materials design; but it was always envisaged that country campaigns and allies would adapt the campaign to their own contexts. This became more complicated as the campaign spread outside South Asia."²⁰

One important way in which the campaign has addressed this challenge has been its focus on the quality of communications: "From posters to story booklets; street theatre to poetry and songs; seminars to public rallies; bags, caps, t-shirts, badges, stickers, pencil cases and key rings with the 'We Can' logo; comics to television spots; puppets to kites; murals to billboards – a huge range of formal, informal, traditional and popular media is used to bring 'We Can' messages to its great variety of potential audiences and activists."²¹

CONVERGENCE OR TENSION?

This case overwhelmingly highlights the complementarity of gender-informed and politically informed approaches. As one interviewee summarised it: "These things are completely inseparable, because you can't work on gender without working politically, and any work on gender is a political project because you're taking on board the way in which socially, economically and politically, gender difference plays out."²²

However, despite the program's success, it is also important to note the issues that were sometimes raised by working with men: "Some saw the materials as reinforcing the role of men and boys as

protectors of women and, in its efforts to make it comfortable for men to join, the campaign failed to effectively challenge underlying power imbalances."²³ This perhaps points to a possible tension that must be addressed by approaches that employ both gender analysis and the principles of a politically informed way of working.

In addition, interviewees underscore both the strengths and limitations of working at the individual level and the domestic sphere: "There is a level of power that operates at the informal or domestic level or in terms of women's networks and it's very important to recognise that. However, it's also important to remember that there is always a limitation and a ceiling on the influence of those kinds of networks, and romanticising the power and importance of those kinds of networks, but it needs to be looked at carefully in any context."²⁴

EFFECTIVENESS: CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

The first critical factor for the success of the campaign has been garnering support from donors and partners for its novel approach: "We did have questions from donors because this was new and there was only limited evidence for how it would work. With women's organisations, some of our partners were willing to take the plunge and didn't want to get involved [...] but it was a good tension in some ways but it made us very mindful about how we were working."²⁵

Secondly, the change maker approach has been a way "to break down what seems like a very big problem and a very sensitive issue to something that people could relate to, understand, and feel that they could and needed to do something about, and so make it accessible."²⁶ The success of this strategy has been dependent in part on limiting control over its implementation, "not being prescriptive of the actions the change makers took [...] so it was sustainable because they were not reliant on the program".²⁷

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"Recognising that we needed to grow our alliances and engage a very diverse group of people and engage the population. Going beyond the usual women's groups."¹⁸

However, the scale of the campaign, while reflective of its success, has also been a challenge in some ways. For example: "When the numbers of change makers are in the hundreds of thousands it's relatively easy to engage with [them] [...] When they are in the millions and across a region, you can't practically track their activities, you can't be centralised, and it's hard to reach people."²⁸

METHODS

A rapid review of select programme documentation, combined with confidential interviews with at least two key informants per case. These include project staff, independent reviewers, donors and other stakeholders. Identifying and listening to local and/or female informants has been prioritised. Interviews for this case study took place on 20.03.2017 and 20.04.2017.

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2. Green 2015:1
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8. Mehta & Gopalakrishnan 2007:44-5
9. Mehta & Gopalakrishnan 2007: p.42
10. Key informant interview, 20.03.2017
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This case study was written by **Orlanda Siow** of UCL as part of the Gender and Politics in Practice (GAPP) research project. It is one of 14 short case studies focusing on development programs that aim to be both politically informed and gender aware. See *From Silos to Synergy* for a synthesis of the lessons that emerge. Explore all GAPP publications at dlprog.org/gapp.

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Possible, Women at work: Katrina E. Avert



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