

# INFLUENCING THE INFLUENCERS

Oxfam’s **CREATING SPACES To Take Action on Violence Against Women and Girls<sup>1</sup>** (CS) project (2016-2021) aims to reduce violence against women and girls (VAWG), including the prevalence of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines. The project is implemented by local partner organizations, with support from Oxfam country offices and Oxfam Canada.

Garnering the support of influencers<sup>2</sup> is incredibly important in the protection and promotion of women’s and girls’ rights; the CS project showed strong evidence of their role in fostering legislative and policy change, and in shifting gendered institutional and community beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. This document shares Oxfam’s key learnings on how to effectively engage influencers, whether they begin as opponents to, or champions for, gender equality.



Oxfam India

- 1 Oxfam acknowledges that gender-based violence has a disproportionate impact on not only on cisgender women and girls, but also transgender women and girls, transgender men and boys, non-binary, and gender diverse populations at large. Although some self-identified transgender and gender diverse individuals did participate in the Creating Spaces project, there was no targeted strategy and approach in place to engage them. The institution is continuously building its own knowledge and learning on how to design and implement inclusive programming and diversify its partnerships to actively reach vulnerable populations, including transgender and gender diverse people, and foster a safe space for their participation.
- 2 Creating Spaces used this term to refer to religious, traditional, community, political, law enforcement, service providers and other leaders who act as custodians of customs, practices and social norms (“norm-setters”) within communities. They shape expectations about appropriate behaviour and, as duty bearers, they have the power to enact and/or uphold formal and informal laws, norms, and practices.

# 1. CHOOSE INFLUENCERS WISELY AND STRATEGICALLY

Be absolutely clear about what you aim to achieve when identifying and securing influencers to drive social change. Consider **what** you wish to achieve through their participation and engagement; **who** would be best placed to do this work; **why** they are best placed; **how** you would like them to be involved; **what** you expect of them; **when** they need to be available to participate, and **how** you will engage them most strategically.

It is crucial to be selective in choosing influencers. Quality is better than quantity. You want your influencers to remain 'on point' – ensuring they fully understand what is expected of them – and that mutual expectations are clear. It is also prudent to carefully check their level of authenticity and commitment; working with outspoken influencers who do not support gender justice could undermine efforts, especially if they model biased attitudes. Engaging influencers of all genders is pivotal in challenging harmful social

On March 4, 2020, Senator Risa Hontiveros and fellow #GirlDefenders from Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, and Metro Manila, Philippines, held a consultation ('kumustahan') shortly before the sponsorship speech for the 'Girls Not Brides' bill prohibiting child marriage. Senator Hontiveros was a key political influencer who championed and authored the bill. Photo: Philippine Legislators' Committee on Population and Development

## Influencers:

There are two overarching types of influencers that serve different purposes and require distinct engagement strategies. Know what you want to achieve, and which type of influencer will support you:

- a. Champions who, through their words and actions already support gender equality, and who have a clear stance against VAWG including CEFM. This could include politicians, athletes, musicians, actors, and other public figures. These influencers can use their voice and visibility to influence large numbers of people, strategically supporting efforts to change social norms.
- b. People in positions of power in their communities, such as religious, traditional, civic and elected leaders, law enforcement, health and service providers, who may have big influence on legislative instruments that impact women's and girls' rights, and how these local and national laws and policies are interpreted and implemented. They also play an instrumental role in promoting and upholding harmful norms and practices. They may require longer-term engagement to enable them to reflect on their own gendered attitudes and beliefs, while being exposed to new ideas and information. There may be initial resistance to change, but once they have made shifts in their own attitudes and beliefs, they have the potential to persuade others in their congregations, institutions, communities, and amongst their peers.





Launch of the youth-led, multisectoral alliance of #GirlDefenders, Philippines. Photo: Patricia Miranda/Oxfam

## 2. USE THE POWER OF COLLECTIVES

norms that normalize VAWG and CEFM, however women in leadership positions may be more sympathetic and emboldened to take action in the short term. By championing these issues, women leaders can leverage their influence to sensitize male counterparts and gain their support over time.

Support influencers with clear messaging and simple, accessible information and knowledge resources, in languages they understand, and written in a relatable manner. Influencers should also be prepared for the possibility of community backlash; they can play an important role in helping to address and deescalate any tensions that arises in response to programming and advocacy on women's and girls' rights.

In West Lombok regency in **Indonesia**, for instance, the project team targeted religious and traditional figures who were widely respected by community members; their opinions carried significant weight and had the power to shift child marriage practices. After participating in CS activities, Islamic leaders started using Friday prayers to increase congregants' awareness of the amended legal age of marriage for girls.<sup>3</sup>

The enduring collective power of alliances, networks and coalitions organizing around issues of common concern has proven a powerful means of influencing leaders at the community, institutional, and national levels who play an instrumental role in reducing VAWG and CEFM. When interest groups come together and speak with one voice, from multiple perspectives and positions, and with visibility across media platforms, the targeted influencers are forced to pay attention. This is especially powerful when organizing and mobilizing takes place at all levels of society, supported by strategically located allies and champions across spheres of power, to strengthen and increase pressure for positive change. In the **Philippines**, the youth-led [#GirlDefenders alliance](#) is composed of multi-sectoral representatives including youth, government – both executive and Congress – and civil society organizations. Spearheaded by the CS partner Philippine Legislators Committee on Population and Development (PLCPD), #GirlDefenders is now a nationwide movement in support of legislative advocacy to end child marriage.

<sup>3</sup> In Indonesia, amendments to the Marriage Law that raised the legal age of marriage for girls from 16 to 19 years (equal to that of boys) were signed into law in September 2019.

### 3. TARGET INFLUENCERS WITH THE RIGHT STRATEGY AT THE RIGHT TIME

Targeting the right key influencers at the right opportune time can result in substantial gains. In **Indonesia**, CS partner Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia (KPI) stepped up strategic advocacy efforts to coincide with the launch of the country's National Action Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2018, given that [SDG 5.3](#) commits to ending CEFM globally by 2030. KPI played a coordinating role in the Coalition 18+ initiative, consisting of youth and women's organizations, legal professionals, academics, interfaith religious leaders and journalists working together to advocate for an end to child marriage. Mobilizing from the village to national level, they used the timing of simultaneous presidential, national, provincial and district elections to increase pressure to help change the minimum age of marriage for girls from 16 to 19. Through these efforts they targeted national legislators and duty-bearers, including the President, and succeeded in raising the legal age of marriage through an amendment to the Marriage Act (1974) that was signed into law in late 2019. Capitalizing on this major victory and national attention on CEFM, the CS partners continued to engage village and district-level government leaders on local mechanisms to stop child marriage, resulting in the ratification of village-level regulations in West Lombok and Gowa Regencies to protect women and children from violence.

4 See Oxfam's Canada's feminist principles: <https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/oxfam-canadas-feminist-principles/>

### 4. AMPLIFY SURVIVORS' VOICES

First-hand accounts from survivors of violence and child marriage can build a powerful counter-narrative to prominent voices who support CEFM, including conservative religious, traditional and political leaders. When affected young women were seen, their voices heard, and experiences shared and understood, political actors strengthened their personal commitment to end CEFM. In **Indonesia**, three child marriage survivors (pictured below) applied for a judicial review of the Marriage Law by the Constitutional Court in 2017. Their leadership and first-hand narrative accounts of the dangers of CEFM attracted the attention of legislators, resulting in a surge of support against the practice, and ultimately the 2019 amendments to the Marriage Law. The young women's lived experiences were captured and shared nationally by media outlets, effectively inserting their voices into public debates that affect their lives.

It is vital that survivors share their stories of their own free will, they fully consent to any participation in advocacy and programming, and that all possible measures are taken to protect survivors from harm.<sup>4</sup> The CS local partner organizations built relationships and trust with survivors and made efforts to safeguard against any negative backlash or harassment from the community.



*Endang Wasrinah (Indramayu, West Java, Indonesia)*



*Rasminah (from: Indramayu, West Java, Indonesia)*



*Maryanti (Central Bengkulu, Bengkulu, Indonesia)*

Photos: Indonesian Women's Coalition (Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia), 2021

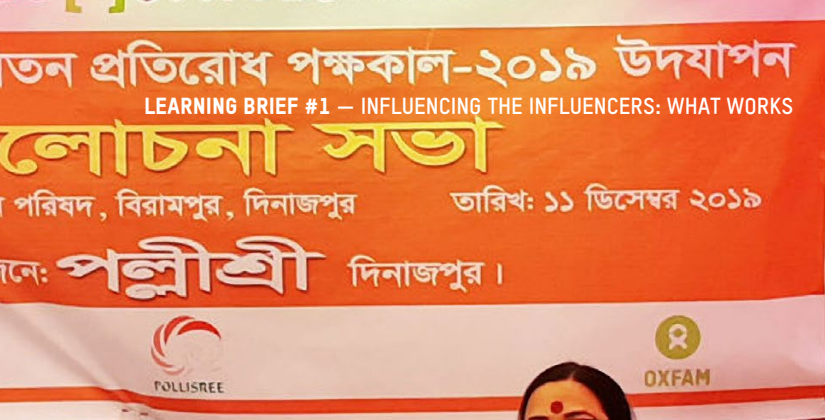


Enough Campaign in East Java during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence, Indonesia. Photo: Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan (YKP)

## 5. ENCOURAGE INTER-GENERATIONAL COLLABORATION AND MENTORING

Intergenerational collaborations between women advocates and youth are powerful, because of the strengthened mobilization against VAWG, and greater credibility given to the youth voice. Working with older women leaders made it possible to strategically deploy their (senior) standing in communities. Young women's and girls' rights advocates were supported, mentored, and legitimized in their communities. They were also able to access intergenerational knowledge, experience and constructive guidance, growing

their leadership skills to lead effective anti-child marriage campaigns. For instance, in **Bangladesh**, young people were empowered through the CS project to engage community leaders on the negative consequences of child marriage; partnering with women advocates enabled them to reach diverse groups of stakeholders who were otherwise inaccessible to them. For women advocates, working alongside youth was instrumental in raising their voice, reaching families, and finding creative means to engage influencers.



During the global 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign in 2019, Creating Spaces partner, Pollisree, organized a seminar in Poliprayagpur Union Parishad (UP) of Birampur, Dinajpur attended by local government officials, and other community leaders. On this occasion, a local advocate, Arzu Hanna, who won the Joyita Award was celebrated for preventing VAWG in her region. Participants took an oath to stand against VAWG and CEFM. Photo: Foyсал Ahmed /Creating Spaces Bangladesh

## 6. BE REALISTIC: CHANGE TAKES TIME

Across Creating Spaces countries, key influencers with ongoing participation and exposure to project interventions have been more likely to advocate for changes in local and national laws and practices to protect and promote an end to VAWG and CEFM. Sustained, multi-year engagement is needed to enable positive shifts in influencers from opponents to champions for women’s rights and empowerment. In **India**, a Community Score Card<sup>5</sup> assessed short-term changes in influencers’ attitudes and beliefs on gender and women’s rights, and awareness of domestic violence, child marriage, and related laws. Although the Score Card revealed clear improvement in influencers’ ability to understand and advocate for better

practices, unfavorable gendered attitudes were still prevalent. These findings underline the need for a long view to shifting deeply entrenched social norms that have been cemented over time. Across Creating Spaces countries, key influencers with ongoing participation and exposure to project interventions have been more likely to advocate for changes in local and national laws and practices to protect and promote an end to VAWG and CEFM. For instance, religious leaders in **Nepal** committed to stop facilitating underage marriages and to challenge cultural traditions that harm the health, safety, and economic wellbeing of women and girls, such as dowry practice<sup>6</sup> and the *chhau goth* menstruation hut system.<sup>7</sup>

5 The Community Score Card was administered in two rounds: Round 1 at baseline and Round 2 after a series of community interventions. The tool included 45 indicators across these six parameters: General attitudes to gender, Prevalence of domestic violence and its legal awareness, Reporting and access to services, Awareness of child marriage, Reporting on child marriage, and Community action.

6 Dowry practices subjugate women and girls to violence and further promote child marriage by putting a lower ‘price’ on young brides. The burden of dowry on lower-income families also perpetuates other harmful practices such as son-preference and female infanticide/ feticide.

7 *Chhau Goth* is a Nepali tradition yet iterations of it seen in other countries. Women and girls are considered “impure” when menstruating and forced to isolate themselves in menstruation huts and deprived of nutritious foods during their cycle. This practice increases their exposure to sexual violence, wild animal attacks, illness, and death.

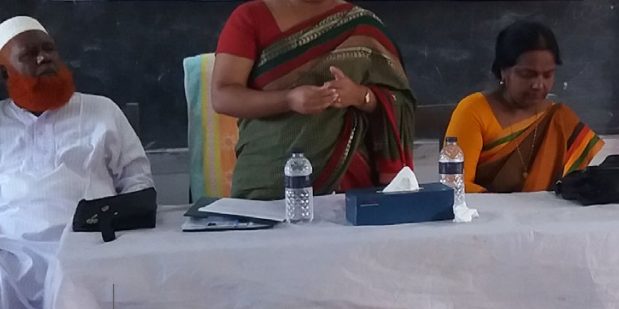
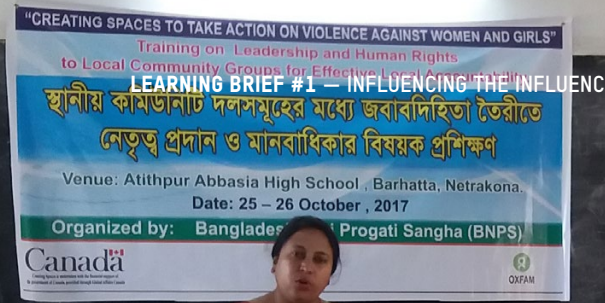
## 7. USE EVIDENCE-BASED FEMINIST RESEARCH

Using a combination of evidence-based data and first-person narrative testimony in influencing local leaders has proven effective for promoting social norm change and increasing pressure for legal change. The project used credible data from national and international research institutes, and several countries conducted their own feminist research on the **social norms and other structural factors** driving gender inequality, discrimination, and violence. In **India, Nepal, the Philippines and Indonesia**, documenting and sharing data and evidence of the high rates and negative impacts of child marriage and other forms of VAWG have been successful in influencing religious leaders and high-level government officials to support shifting norms and outlawing harmful practices.



CS partner Everest Club in Dailekh, Nepal facilitated a feminist research process to collective evidence on the impact of women-led Community Discussion Centres. Findings were used to advocate to government bodies to formalize and sustain the CDC structure to promote and support women's and girls' rights and leadership opportunities. Photo: Aarati Sharma/Oxfam





Farida Yasmin, then Barhatta sub-district officer in Bangladesh, inaugurated a Creating Spaces training workshop with community group representatives on accountability and leadership on women’s and girls’ rights. She was one of several governmental officials mobilized by Creating Spaces Bangladesh to end VAWG and CEFM. Photo: Parveen Akter Nupur (Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha)



Creating Spaces partner, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), organized a rally in Barhatta sub-district during the global 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign (November 2018), inaugurated by Farida Yasmin and attended by other advocates and Creating Spaces youth group members. Photo: Ataur Rahman (Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha)

## 8. RECOGNISE AND APPRECIATE INFLUENCERS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Influencers can be further motivated through recognition for their role in championing women’s and girls’ rights. Using awards<sup>8</sup> and other tokens of appreciation can act as a motivating factor in sustaining their participation and engagement. This can be linked to developing the leadership and voice of women, supporting them to take up leadership positions in community and governance structures, and increasing their participation in public life. In **Bangladesh**, Farida Yasmin, a CS

influencer and local sub-district leader, received the distinguished Faraaz Hossain Courage Award 2019<sup>8</sup> for stopping 59 child marriages in her region. This award recognized individuals displaying exceptional courage and empathy towards fellow humans. When accepting the award, she emphasized that her achievement was a significant outcome of her involvement in CS, as this was where she was motivated to work to end CEFM.

<sup>8</sup> Awards can be internal and project-specific, or externally offered - by government or other institutions - to community leaders combatting violence against women and girls.

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For more information on our EVAWG programming, visit: <https://www.oxfam.ca/what-we-do/issues-we-work-on/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

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