TOWARDS A GENDER EQUITABLE SOCIETY

SUMMARY

Search for Common Ground (Search) and ABAAD-Resource Centre for Gender Equality (ABAAD) implemented the UK-AID funded "Towards a Gender-Equitable Society" project for 12 month with the overall goal of reducing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Lebanon. The project employed a robust Theory of Change (TOC) - IF media is used to break gender stereotypes AND survivors and those at risk of gender based violence (GBV) have access to services, THEN an enabling environment will be created in which social norms around violence against women and girls will be shifted. This policy brief illustrates the extent to which enhancing the capacity of media professionals to produce gender-sensitive media products in Lebanon, creates an enabling environment in which social norms towards violence against women and girls (VAWG) and sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in Lebanon are shifted. Furthermore, it provides recommendations that are meant to improve the effectiveness and impact of future similar interventions.

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over the past decade, 1 in 3 women, around 736 million globally, were subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner1. The term SGBV is used to describe any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences. It is also referred to as VAWG, in recognition of the fact that it is most often perpetrated against women and girls by men and boys. In Lebanon, and according to UNFPA's gender based violence report in 2020, 69% of gender based violence incidents reported through the GBV information management system (GBVIMS) are incidents of domestic violence and 98% of cases reported to organizations using the information management system (IMS) are female3.

Lebanon is witnessing a political and economic crisis that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, prolonged periods of isolation, economic insecurity, social unrest, and restricted access to medical and social services have deepened power inequalities and created the opportunity for VAWG to continue and for new forms to occur. Mass media and social media can play a transformative role in societies in bringing attention to gender, women, and girls’ issues and influencing public opinion on gender related matters, such as SGBV. However, in Lebanon, and even though media outlets have increased their coverage of social issues, there is still a prevalent discriminatory climate in the media industry, and many media productions, particularly television and film productions, still have stereotypical images of women and men in the content they present and, on many occasions, SGBV cases are romanticised or ridiculed. This shows how a mixture of institutionalised gender discrimination, rooted cultural sexism, and the lack of laws, policies, and enforcement of protection mechanisms all lead to the normalisation of stereotypical media portrayal of women and girls, and push women and marginalised groups’ issues out of the public sphere.

Within this context, Search, in partnership with ABAAD-Resource Centre for Gender Equality (ABAAD), implemented the UK AID DIRECT-funded project “Towards a Gender Equitable Society” in Lebanon. The project aimed to break gender stereotypes and help reduce SGBV, including intimate partner violence and child marriage. The ABAAD's component of the project aimed to improve the access to and delivery of quality SGBV prevention and response services through their “women and girls safe spaces” programme, mid-way houses, and mobile unit interventions. Search's component focused on shifting cultural and social norms related to SGBV and traditional gender norms by enhancing the capacity of media professionals to produce gender-sensitive media products in Lebanon.
Search implemented a series of activities that targeted 21 media professionals including training and coaching sessions on the “Common Ground Approach” (CGA), “gender”, and “media for social change”. Search also facilitated media professionals learning and exchange visits to the ABAAD women and girls safe spaces. Following these activities, participants were requested to write film proposals based on their new knowledge and experiences garnered from the training and site visits. The participants submitted film proposals, of which Search and ABAAD selected five for funding. The five produced films addressed a variety of social issues contributing to SGBV and were showcased in an event that included 303 attendees. In parallel, a production house and an online television channel were contracted to produce two mini-series; “Beyond Stereotypes”, tackling gender career choices through the eyes of community influencers; and “Together, Let’s Talk About”, addressing GBV and VAWG, and that were disseminated on social media platforms.

**RELEVANCE TO THE LEBANESE CONTEXT**

The deteriorating stability and critical events in the country over recent years have led to an increase in SGBV cases in Lebanon. Influenced by the damaging effects of Covid-19 and the socioeconomic pressures, households have faced an unprecedented hardship, which strained family relations and increased tensions. This context has in fact resulted in heightening the relevance of the project to the needs of the communities, given its objectives related to breaking gender stereotypes and reducing SGBV. On the other hand, another aspect of this rapidly deteriorating context is that the economic crisis has contributed to the modification of traditional gender roles within the household, a trend aligning with the objectives of this project, working towards an enabling environment in which social norms are shifted. Specifically, the project aimed at challenging and addressing entrenched gender norms around SGBV in Lebanese society and working towards shifting perceptions among both media professionals and those community members viewing media outputs around issues related to gender inequalities, roles, and expectations. The intervention design highlighted the issue of SGBV and VAWG to communities and promoted the role of non-governmental organisations supporting survivors of SGBV. However, it was emphasised that creating real shifts in perceptions and attitudes towards gender and SGBV will not come about without meaningful policy change in formal arenas.

**EFFECTIVENESS & IMPACT OF THE ACTIVITIES**

The most impactful outcome of this project was its ability to train media professionals, filmmakers in particular, to produce gender-sensitive materials and enhance their overall capacities. Through the frequent dialogue, informative training and coaching sessions, filmmakers benefitted from an open environment to discuss and challenge their existing beliefs around gender identities. Indeed, the participants stated that their perspectives on gender and GBV issues have changed. This was true both in terms of their own knowledge and awareness surrounding gender as well as in terms of how they perceived their own identities. In fact, 79 percent of project participants reported change in perceptions around social norms and GBV, and media professionals also signaled heightened awareness and sensitivity towards gender-related issues, and more inclusive attitudes to gender and identities. Safe spaces were also created where such topics could be discussed and where filmmakers exchanged their perceptions and sensitively challenged each other’s opinions. The participants were specifically selected based on their diversity and their differences in knowledge of gender issues, which allowed them to create content that is representative of various points of views within communities. The media professionals were able to spread awareness regarding gender and GBV sensitive issues in Lebanon using media tools and thus meet the essence that media may be used to break gender stereotypes and thus create an enabling environment to shift social norms around GBV.
SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

A social media campaign was launched on various platforms and included videos of influencers in different sectors that focused on debunking gender stereotypes. These videos were able to reach 1.5 million views and received a lot of support and positive feedback indicating that the social media campaign was a strong way to reach a huge number of community members and spread positive messages and awareness on gender and SGBV in a digestible form and accessible to thousands of users. Analysis on the social media campaign suggested that in terms of reach, the project was able to showcase gender-sensitive media products and widen the possibility of raising awareness among a far greater audience.

FILM FESTIVAL

Attending the film festival allowed some community members to develop awareness of situations they may not have been fully aware of or had not unpacked as key issues before with 88 percent of attendees agreeing or strongly agreeing that the films created a shift in SGBV in Lebanese communities. However, community members largely indicated that changes at the community level would require structural changes to meaningfully shift wider beliefs about gender in the long term. All of the participants emphasised that the created content is a solid and encouraging foundation for changing cultural perceptions around gender, VAWG, and SGBV in Lebanon.

Figure 1: Film festival attendees answering the question “Do you believe the films are able to create a shift in SGBV in Lebanese communities?”

SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

“Social media is a huge change and it helps show you the right from the wrong. Unlike previous times, it will give you news from all over the world and wake you up to certain things that you don't even know about.” - Lebanese Male Adult (Beirut)

“When I saw the media campaign, I encouraged myself that if I got harassed, I would not remain silent and would talk about it in front of all people.” Lebanese Young Female (Beirut)

“The film included a lot of messages, such as rape, violence, lack of awareness, etc. They are showing that media and awareness are important to avoid such incidents.” - Lebanese Male Adult (Bekaa)

“We didn’t know that the situation was so bad, to that extent. So, after this video, of course, we need to be more cautious.” - Non-Lebanese Female Adult

SUSTAINABILITY

The likelihood that this initiative will continue to be beneficial after it concludes is high, due to the strategy adopted of enhancing the capacity of people, who will later use the acquired skills and knowledge to shift perceptions about gender and SGBV in their communities. Additionally, the creation of media products ensures sustainability, as these will continue to be disseminated by the project participants, the implementers, or other organisations and will serve as a reference for future relevant interventions.
RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve long-term behavioral change and significant shifts in societal norms, it is advised to make sure that resources are allocated consistently and over time. Because they are effective instruments for raising awareness and facilitating communication. Search and ABAAD should guarantee that the mini-series and films created as part of this project are used in forthcoming campaigns, events, or projects concentrating on SGBV.

Youth, and particularly student groups, are active and powerful agents of change in their neighborhoods, as such, it is advised to expand on their understanding of local communities as well as their technical engagement and literacy to ensure their long-term presence and engage them in awareness campaigns.

It is advised to work with local governments and further involve community leaders, women’s local organisations, women human rights advocates, and grassroots initiatives that already have a strong base of support and can reach a specific audience in order to improve the impact. Their involvement at the local level might aid in the promotion of media products/films, and their contributions would be particularly significant in directing women to the right sources of assistance.

Institutional issues like the judicial system are mostly responsible for preventing long-term change in views and behavior. Therefore, it is strongly advised that future projects look for appropriate partnerships and collaborations to advocate for national structural changes and reforms as well as an increase in funding for centers that support women.

More similar programmes must be developed building from this and expand the role of media in dealing with stereotypes and shifting community attitudes by ensuring short films produced from this project and additional films are also aired on TV and screened in movie theatres and communities, and that more festivals are done at community levels given their acceptance in Lebanon.

REFERENCES

1 https://www.who.int/news/item/-2021-03-09-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence