
Building *Communities* of *Resistance*:

Reflections from grassroots organisations around the world



Building Communities of Resistance: Reflections from grassroots organisations around the world

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 Charlotte Clar.

Available at: <https://www.gaatw.org/resources/publications>

Cover page image by: Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj

Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Key insights on collective knowledge building or co-creating knowledge.....	6
Shared principles and strategies in our work for social change	13
<i>'The danger of a single story': Storytelling and changing narratives</i>	13
<i>Meaningful participation and active listening</i>	21
<i>Movement support and building collective power</i>	25
Conclusions.....	34

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Emilia Cebrián, with editorial support from Bandana Pattanaik from the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW). Draft versions were revised by Neeta Hardikar and Sejal Dand (ANANDI), Mahi Ramakrishnan (Beyond Borders Malaysia), Loretta Enofe-Laurel (GPI), Bhagavati Adhikari (NMES), Dina Baslan (Sawiyah), Abigail Quic (SERES), Alejandra Sosa (Somos Pytvöhára), and Margaret Healy, Angie García, Viviane Abayomi and Khadija Najlaoui (Waling Waling). Borislav Gerasimov from GAATW edited the report.

We are deeply grateful to the ten partner organisations that joined us in the work that led to this report and generously shared their time, skills, stories, and insights: Area Networking and Development Initiatives—ANANDI, India; Beyond Borders Malaysia, Malaysia; BUKU, Thailand; Girls' Power Initiative—GPI, Nigeria; Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj—NMES, Nepal; Sawiyah, Jordan; SERES, Guatemala; Somos Pytvöhára, Paraguay; Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand—SPFT, Thailand; Waling Waling, United Kingdom. We also thank Javier Arteaga, Kanchana Di-ut, and Smriti RDN for providing translation to/from Spanish, Thai, and Nepali respectively during the online discussions.

Finally, we express gratitude to Foundation for a Just Society (FJS) for the financial support and for 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.

Bangkok

October 2022

Introduction

*One of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves
is by building communities of resistance,
places where we know we are not alone*

bell hooks

In July 2020, the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW-IS) partnered with ten grassroots organisations in South and Southeast Asia, West Africa, Western Europe, and Central and South America as part of a pilot project titled *Generation Equality*.¹ Over the course of several months, we brought together this diverse group of organisations to engage with us in a collaborative reflection process to critically analyse our journeys and change agendas, with a focus on our methodologies of supporting and strengthening the communities we work with.

In designing this pilot, which originally spanned over seven months and was later extended and divided in two distinct phases, we made a conscious effort to develop a set of open-ended and thought-provoking activities that would guide us through our explorations while also allowing partners enough flexibility to adjust their proposals to the specific contexts in which they operate and the realities of the communities they support on the ground. Therefore, we invited partners to design and implement a participatory reflection process focused on their journey towards realising their vision of change, as well as to decide how they wanted to document the main learnings resulting from their reflection.

The outcomes from both phases of *Generation Equality* are as diverse as the partners themselves. Some organisations meticulously tackled each of the activities that we proposed – they prepared a comprehensive presentation to share with the group, carefully planned and implemented a reflection exercise and documented the results in a report. Others, on the contrary, took a less structured approach throughout the process, exploring new or unexpected questions that arose along the way, trying to capture the organisation's journey in pictures and videos, and systematising insights and reflections through visual maps or Miro boards that continue to evolve over time. Despite their diversity, all these approaches shed light on crosscutting issues related to co-creating knowledge, building leadership and collective power, and meaningfully engaging with communities on the ground, effecting sustainable change, and supporting community-led responses to times of crises.

An important feature of *Generation Equality* was to encourage mutual learning and community building across borders and sectors. To this end, we first organised a series of *online dialogues* in which all partners took turns to introduce themselves and their stories of change and discuss their methodologies and approaches with the other group members.

In the second phase, we worked closely with a smaller group of partners to *build collective knowledge* on several cross-cutting topics that were of interest to all of us. We invited each organisation to lead a session and determine not only the thematic focus but also the methodology, resulting in five online

¹ 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.

meetings where we explored in-depth the issues of knowledge co-creation, communications, mentorship, appreciative leadership, and working towards our vision of change in times of isolation, restrictions, and remote work.

Both the online dialogues and the knowledge building sessions were enriching, and even though we did not exactly find answers to questions or solutions to problems, one of the most important takeaways was the affirmation that we are not alone, that there are many others out there who are grappling with similar questions and, in getting together, we could learn from each other's perspectives and strategies.

Another important aspect of this initiative was that it brought together organisations that were not only diverse in terms of focus, geography, trajectories, language, and experience, but also had not worked together before. We were impressed by our partners' openness to share their struggles, hopes, and fears with the group, and inspired by their commitment to lead these conversations with a spirit of inclusivity and collaboration. We believe that, even with all its challenges and limitations, *Generation Equality* helped us to connect with what we have in common while also celebrating our differences. This means that our shared vision for a more just, equitable, and sustainable world is much more powerful than the things that separate us, and there is power in getting together and breaking the silos of our work towards social change.

This report is the result of a collective effort to pause, look inwards, and reflect on the process of transformative change. It collates a series of insights, challenges, and lessons learnt by and with our partners in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. We hope that it stimulates others who are walking on similar paths and going through common struggles and encourages them to embark on their own reflection processes.

Key insights on collective knowledge building or co-creating knowledge

We start this report by exploring several key insights on collective knowledge building distilled from our inter-generational and cross-sectoral conversations during *Generation Equality*. We have always strived to bring women's knowledge to the centre and support actions for change anchored in their expertise and lived experiences. This is why we decided early on to adopt the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology in our work with migrant and trafficked women at the grassroots level, as we found it to be closely aligned with our values and principles as an international feminist network. Over the years, we have engaged in multiple rounds of FPAR with diverse groups of women around the world, and together with our members and partners, we have also spent much time reflecting on our experiences and documenting the challenges and lessons learnt along the way.²

The question of co-creating knowledge with communities has always been at the core of our work, perhaps more explicitly in our research projects than other initiatives. More recently, as we approached our 25th anniversary and began developing a new Theory of Change, we decided to look into our core strategies through a critical lens and assess whether we were moving in the right direction. As we embarked on a new global FPAR with migrant and trafficked women, we continued to reflect on our role in building knowledge *with* and *for* communities within the increasing 'projectisation' of our work, as well as on how we can support social justice movements in the context of shrinking civic space and growing criminalisation of activists and human rights defenders.

What does it mean to co-create knowledge with the community? Are we actually co-creating knowledge with others? How do we do this as an international network with a diverse membership? What have we learned through our FPAR experiences and how are we putting these lessons into practice? What have our members and partners' experiences taught us?

These were some of the underlying questions that guided our work in *Generation Equality*. We hoped to gain clarity on how transformative change happens from the ground up and to contribute to an ongoing conversation about producing knowledge in an equitable, participatory, and democratic manner that centres the needs and perspectives of affected communities and recognises their role in shifting unequal power structures.

"For something to be considered knowledge, it has to benefit us, raise our awareness"

The first *knowledge building session* was facilitated by the GAATW Secretariat. Our goal was to gain clarity on what co-creating knowledge meant to everyone involved, build our own working definition, and hopefully distil some key principles that we could come back to and adjust for the remaining sessions. To do this, we proposed the following questions to guide our exploration with our partners:

a) *What does co-creating or building knowledge collectively mean to you?* b) *Can you think of any examples where this has happened or is happening in your work?* c) *What made that process possible?*

² For more information on this, please see: GAATW, *Principle and Practice. GAATW-IS Reflections on Feminist Participatory Action Research*, Alliance News, Issue 34, December 2010. Available at: https://www.gaatw.org/publications/Alliance%20News/Alliance_News_Dec2010_FPAR.pdf

At the outset, one of our colleagues started by defining and unpacking what knowledge is and why it matters before delving deeper into the question of co-creation. This is the definition that Dina from Sawiyan proposed at the beginning of our conversation:

Knowledge is information, experiences, relations and narratives that enrich our understanding of the world and benefit us. For something to be knowledge, it has to benefit us, raise our awareness. (First knowledge building session, November 2021)

We decided to adopt Dina's definition of knowledge and build on it as we advanced in our discussion. Colleagues from ANANDI added that, as community practitioners, we are constantly co-creating knowledge with the communities and using it to inform our strategies. However, in their viewpoint, knowledge is not something that is just useful for oneself, but rather something that can be 'put out there' to be challenged, questioned, and discussed by others.

By the end of the session, we noticed that two seemingly distinct understandings of knowledge kept coming up. On the one hand, we referred to the more traditional concept of knowledge in the context of research processes, which are clearly structured and involve research questions and tools for data collection and analysis. On the other hand, we also talked about experiential forms of knowledge resulting from our everyday interactions with others and, perhaps more importantly, from people's lived experiences.

I felt like in our feedback there were almost two kinds of definitions: one which was more the structured research process, where there's the designing of the tools, the identification of the topics, there's a process, and then there's the other one which is the everyday occurrences that we feel are as important to be considered knowledge but are not necessarily the Western concept of a research project (...) I just wanted to put out this question: Are we acknowledging this difference? Are we discussing it? (...) This is a big question for us in Sawiyan. (First knowledge building session, November 2021)

This distinction is relevant because it leads us to examine *what counts as knowledge* as well as *whose knowledge counts*, two critical questions that point us to the linkages between power and knowledge production. Alternative forms of knowledge that are not linked to formal research processes or do not result from academia or formal education are rarely recognised as valid or legitimate. People in marginalised communities are often left out of spaces where knowledge is produced and legitimised, and their contributions tend to be overlooked, poorly documented, or even dismissed. This is why all of us prioritise methodologies and approaches that seek to democratise and decolonise knowledge production, such as FPAR, Critical Literacy or Popular Education.

A clear example of knowledge co-creation that does not fit into the research project framework was shared by Dina in the context of building 'the Sawiyan culture' – their shared identity as a community development organisation that works closely with refugees and asylum seekers of African origins in Amman, Jordan.

What enabled us to build a unique culture that identifies us as a group? First, it's the people that make up the community, but just as important is the time spent together in building relations, and then, the different platforms, frameworks or activities that we find ourselves in... because for every activity, we build our relations on a different level. Sometimes there are situations that are stressful and require a lot of sacrifices, and that's where we learn about one another more, and then there are other situations with more relaxed spaces that are just as important. And then, the third and last thing is for us to have a clear common goal that we're all working towards that would allow us to stick around for so long and want to contribute, share and build together for so long. (First knowledge building session, November 2021)

Co-creation works best when there is some work already done in understanding each other

Closely linked to Dina's point, our colleagues from ANANDI mentioned that, in their experience, co-creating knowledge with people or institutions has worked best when there was some work already done in understanding each other. This does not only refer to having a shared vision of change, but also to being able to identify common ways of working and clarity in terms of the processes involved. It is all three of the above that make it a co-creation, a partnership on equal terms.

As an example, Sejal talked about ANANDI's collaboration with a feminist policy group on the issue of agricultural labour violence towards women, an initiative that was originally very ambitious but was later adjusted to what the group could achieve in a short, more explorative process. For ANANDI, co-creation starts by identifying a gap in knowledge that the group wants to understand better, and then finding others who might be interested in engaging and, importantly, have the time to do so. It is also essential to frankly assess what the group wants to learn as well, as what everyone can contribute to the process, and identify the gaps. Co-creating knowledge means to meet at every point in the process, from setting the vision to designing the tools and monitoring the results or, as Sejal put it:

In the reflection and analysis is where everybody comes in (...) whoever has been engaged in the process of building that knowledge (...) We found that it really makes it robust if you go back to the people who you have collected data from, for instance. I find that co-creation means that everybody who contributed to the knowledge, that is the first place that you go back to; to share what we are coming up with and how it relates to experience. (First knowledge building session, November 2021)

Being frank and open-minded throughout the process is key

We agreed that a crucial aspect of building knowledge collectively is to be frank about where we stand in the process in order to identify what we can contribute and what we expect or need from others. This means being able to openly examine what we know as well as what we do not know. It also involves listening without judgement and recognising their expertise on the matter. Much like the Secretariat, our partners in *Generation Equality* belong to or work closely with groups of marginalised people whose knowledge is often undermined and whose voices 'have been neither heard nor

welcomed'.³ Whether it is adolescent girls in Nigeria, young leaders in Guatemala or refugees and asylum seekers in Jordan, government institutions and the development sector have more often than not worked *for* them but *without* involving them at any stage of the decision-making process.

A wonderful example of what happens when we approach knowledge building with openness was shared by Grace from Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), an organisation that works with girls in Nigeria. When Grace and Bene – the co-founders – first started GPI, they had a very clear vision for the organisation: they wanted to help girls have a voice and be able to contribute to society. But they did not know how they were going to achieve this vision. So, they got together with a group of girls to explore what they wanted to know and learn more about, as well as what they needed in order to become powerful women in the future. This is how GPI's curriculum on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) first came to be, and the co-founders recognised that it would not have been the same had they not sat down to listen to the girls with genuine curiosity and an open mind. In Grace's words:

What led to this rich building of knowledge? It's openness. Bene and I did not pretend that we knew what we wanted to do to attain the vision that we had in mind. Involving the beneficiaries, the girls themselves, in charting the path was what led to that co-creation. We were open, we were objective, we had listening ears, we were non-judgmental, because neither Bene nor I were girls. These were the girls, and this is what they said (...) We did not have experience in the field of sexuality education, hearing from them in an objective manner helped us, because it was only after we heard from them that we started to go for trainings in that direction. (First knowledge building session, November 2021)

Building trust and making space to co-create in challenging scenarios

Abigail talked about SERES' work with young people in rural and indigenous communities in Guatemala and El Salvador and directed our attention to an important point: the process of building knowledge collectively can be challenging when working with groups that have historically been silenced. This is particularly relevant in the Central American context given the profound impact of decades-long armed conflict and pervasive violence in local communities. Co-creating in these scenarios where people may feel disempowered in their voices and ideas can be very difficult, as it requires time to build trust-based relationships and create a welcoming environment where everyone feels comfortable to open up about their dreams and hopes.

Creating trust usually means finding out what it is we have in common as well as what separates us and makes us different (...) And it will always be vital, necessary for us to know that we are all more than our differences, that it is not just what we organically share that can connect us but what we come to have in common because we have done the work of creating community, the unity within diversity, that requires solidarity within a structure of values, beliefs, yearnings that are always beyond the body, yearnings that have to do with universal spirit.⁴

³ bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*, Routledge, New York, 1994, p. 84.

⁴ bell hooks, *Teaching community. A pedagogy of Hope*, Routledge, New York, p. 109.

For SERES, it is important to recognise that their role is just to support, facilitate or guide the process, and it is the young people who should identify the solutions to the problems faced by their communities. To do this, the organisation adopted an approach called *strategic questioning*,⁵ which starts by recognising that they are not the experts in the matter, but merely the facilitators.

Strategic questioning is a framework that recognises the value of people's ideas. So, from the very beginning it allows you to build trust and help people in the process of discovering what is the best solution to the problem or challenge they are facing. I think there is much we could talk about when it comes to co-creation, but this is what I can contribute regarding how to actually build spaces of trust where the voices that are not heard find real spaces for co-creation. (First knowledge building session, November 2021)⁶

Similarly, Lucía defined knowledge co-creation as a safe and interactive space where people get together to discuss their ideas, perspectives, and experiences regarding a specific issue at the local or global level. *Radical collaboration*⁷ is considered one of SERES' core values in the path towards realising their mission and vision of change, and Lucía mentioned that it is also a key approach to elevate other organisations' work as well. She talked about an initiative that SERES is working on in partnership with Directorio Guatemala, which is aimed at discussing the impact of the traditional philanthropy model on the non-profit sector at the local level and building their knowledge on how to shift unequal power dynamics. As part of this process, SERES recently launched a [call for applications](#) inviting funders that meet their own criteria to reach out to them and find ways to collaborate.

SERES Open Call for Foundations

We are receiving expressions of interest of foundations that match our criteria:

- Focused on long-term impact and growth stories spanning several generations.
- Support local leadership as a starting point for the local transformation.
- Listen actively and speak intentionally, based on a learning perspective.
- Willing to risk, betting on the unlikely leaders.
- Flexible and understand the challenges and difficulties of working in a changing and vulnerable environment.
- Committed to building capacity, beyond programmatic implementation.
- Interested in sharing their networks to connect more organizations and foundations in the region.
- Provide multi-year financing.
- Curious and looking for creative ways to collaborate

SERES' criteria for their Open Call for Foundations that are interested in supporting or collaborating with them, launched as part of a conversation on shifting the power in philanthropy. Source: <https://www.seres.org/blog/shifting-the-power-in-philanthropy-where-do-we-start>

⁵ For more information about this framework, please see: <https://commonslibrary.org/strategic-questioning/>

⁶ This intervention was originally in Spanish and was translated to English by the author of this report.

⁷ For more information about this framework, please see: <https://www.radicalcollaboration.com/>

In line with what Dina and Sejal brought up earlier in the conversation, Lucía identified three elements that are crucial in any co-creation: common interests, friends, and shared struggles.

You need to find the things that you feel passionate about and you want to share with others (...) Once you find that, and you find your people, you're going to find a sense of tribe, whether it's at the local or global level. We need to ask ourselves what it is that we care about, what we stand for, and the idea at the end is not only to find that sense of global tribe or community, but also to get together to pause, reflect, and build new perspectives or ideas regarding specific matters. (First knowledge building session, November 2021)

Navigating the challenges of knowledge co-creation

We also identified some of the challenges that we have faced in our efforts to build knowledge collectively with institutions, organisations or individuals at all levels. One of the most important barriers is the limited time to fully immerse ourselves in the process. Co-creating is not easily compatible with the project framework that dictates the work pace in the NGO world, and it rarely fits into a tight timeline, especially when it is externally imposed. Building authentic relationships, getting to know each other, and familiarising ourselves with the context, identifying shared agendas for change or a shared purpose are the building blocks of any co-creation, and cannot be rushed or 'projectised'. Unfortunately, not many donors or funders provide the type of long-term, flexible funding that would work best with these process-oriented initiatives.

Co-creation requires time and this is challenging for organisations because we are also dependent on external collaborations, which have specific timelines and are sometimes rigid, although this is not always the case. (Abigail, First knowledge building session, November 2021)

Some colleagues mentioned how our plans or attempts to build knowledge collectively can sometimes become overwhelming, and how easy it can be to lose sight of the bigger purpose in our collaborations with others. This is why it is important to think through our partnerships carefully and dedicate time to build our relationships with others, set boundaries and be able to identify not only what co-creation is, but also what co-creation is not or when we are not actually co-creating. Finally, as community-based organisations, it is also challenging to find a balance between long-term knowledge-building needs and the more urgent, day-to-day issues that we must attend to.

As community practitioners, we find this documentation and research difficult to commit time to, because the 'here and now' with the community seems so important. And we feel we're creating knowledge all the time. It is co-creating knowledge, but somehow, it's been a bit removed. (Sejal, First knowledge building session, November 2021)

Some concluding thoughts

The session on collective knowledge building helped us to deepen our understanding of this unique, dynamic, and non-linear process that we decided to call co-creation. Our diverse experiences reaffirmed that there is no ‘right way’ or ‘recipe’ to follow when it comes to building knowledge collectively with others, but rather a set of principles that will guide us throughout the process and will point us in the right direction. This means that what might have worked for Girls’ Power Initiative in Nigeria might not lead anywhere for SERES in Guatemala and El Salvador or for NMES in Nepal, as co-creation will look different depending on the purpose, the context, and the people involved. Whether it is through FPAR or popular education, the guiding principles that underpin any co-creation are negotiated and redefined as we move forward in our knowledge building efforts. Beyond the specific frameworks that we might decide to apply in our work for social change, what makes it a co-creation is our commitment and, most importantly, our constant practice of engaging with others in an equitable, participatory, and democratic manner, and building our knowledge base in a way that is empowering and insightful for everyone involved.

Shared principles and strategies in our work for social change

*So, you speak not just by words and discussion
but you speak by the way your programs are run.
If you believe in something, then you have to practice it.*

Myles Horton⁸

In this section, we present some insights gained by our partners through storytelling and narrative power in Malaysia, Thailand, and Nepal; active listening and meaningful participation in Paraguay and Nigeria; and movement building and collective power in the United Kingdom, Thailand and India.

'The danger of a single story'⁹: Storytelling and changing narratives

Here, we describe the strategy of storytelling with the broader aim of changing harmful narratives about refugees in Malaysia, young women and LGBTQ+ people in the south of Thailand, and landless women in Nepal.

The Refugee Fest: Art as a tool for resistance

Beyond Borders Malaysia is a non-profit organisation that was founded in 2018 by Mahi Ramakrishnan, a refugee rights activist, investigative filmmaker, and journalist. *Beyond Borders* works on protecting and promoting the rights of refugees and stateless persons in Malaysia by creating platforms for refugees to represent themselves, connecting refugee communities with the Malaysian society, and engaging in policy advocacy. In 2016, even before the organisation was formally registered, they created the *Refugee Fest*, a festival that aims to showcase the artistic talents of refugee communities in Malaysia and foster connections with the host society through performing arts. It is a four-day event that includes poetry readings, photo presentations, theatre plays, dance performances, film screenings, and panel discussions. Originally founded by Mahi as a platform for refugees to speak up about their experiences, after its fifth edition, a committee was formed and the direction of the festival was handed over to Saleh Sepas, a theatre director and playwright from Afghanistan who fled to Malaysia in 2016.

Thanks to the *Refugee Fest*, a series of collaborations between Malaysian and refugee artists have materialised. Some examples include the long-term engagement between *Parastoo*, a refugee-led theatre group founded by Saleh Sepas, and renowned Malaysian actress and filmmaker Jo Kukathas; the performance of a group of refugee poets in the *George Town Literary Festival* in 2018, which later led to other performances in a number of events hosted by civil society organisations, companies and art galleries in Malaysia; and, the publication of a poetry collection and a *book of illustrations* by Afghan poet Masuma Tavakoli.

One of the premises behind the work of *Beyond Borders Malaysia*, anchored in Mahi's multiple years of engagement with refugees and migrants, is that people are much more than their experiences and, in this case, much more than the persecution they have endured. The *Refugee Fest* has allowed

⁸ Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking. Conversations on Education and Social Change*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 153.

⁹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The danger of a single story*, TEDGlobal 2009. Accessed: 17 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda ngozi adichie the danger of a single story>

performers to move beyond the refugee label and identify as artists, which gives them a great sense of pride. This, in turn, has facilitated exchanges with the host community by emphasising the ways in which we are connected and similar, rather than the ways in which we are different.

We used the festival to connect people and it formed the fundamental work that needed to be done to enable Malaysians and refugees to get to know each other and to embrace one another. We also took the festival to a plantation to connect the refugees with ordinary Malaysians: it was a huge success. The Malaysian Indians and Malays on the plantation understood the consequences that made refugees flee their homes and could sympathise with their predicament. Many came forward to ask how they could help the refugees. (Mahi Ramakrishnan, September 2021)

While the festival originally started as an artistic platform for refugees, it has slowly evolved into a safe space to advocate for their rights in Malaysia, as the creative process is inevitably imbued with elements of activism and political advocacy. Through our conversations in *Generation Equality*, Mahi stressed how creativity and arts are sometimes given little importance as mediums to work with marginalised communities and emphasised that art can become a powerful tool for resistance, community building and self-affirmation.

Besides facilitating wonderful collaborations between local and refugee artists, the *Refugee Fest* has also contributed to centring and uplifting the work of women artists who had been discouraged by their families or communities to pursue their artistic interests or take the stage. *Beyond Borders Malaysia* has been engaging with men in the communities to break down these harmful narratives for women artists while also supporting the women themselves to pursue their artistic interests.

Women remain our main focus group because most of the communities we work with are patriarchal and this means women artists and thinkers are forced to take a step back. However, we have been pushing for women to take centre-stage by lobbying the men in their families. For example, Masuma Tavakoli's book that was published at the Refugee Fest last year changed the perception of not just the refugee communities but the Malaysian society as well, because Afghan women are seen to only belong in the kitchen, or rather we believe that Afghan men would not encourage their wives to be out there, making their mark. Masuma's book that illustrated her life under the Taliban shifted the narrative. (Mahi Ramakrishnan, July 2020)

Pattani kicks for change: Feminist football and narrative power in the deep south of Thailand

From Pattani, a city in the deep south of Thailand, we got to know the work of BUKU, an organisation that has been working to counter the public narrative that portrays the region and its people as dangerous and conflictive, while also challenging the gendered stereotypes and patriarchal norms that limit young people's dreams and aspirations, particularly those of young girls. Founded by Anticha Sangchai in 2011, a lecturer at the local university, the organisation first started as an independent bookshop in Pattani province. Two years later, it was registered as an NGO working on gender, sexuality, and human rights, and in 2016 BUKU FC – the first feminist football club in Thailand – was launched.

BUKU works closely with young women and LGBTQ people, most of whom are Muslim, in the triple border of Thailand's southernmost provinces – Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat – an area that is unfortunately known for an ongoing conflict between the Thai state and a separatist group. The organisation creates safe spaces for learning and building community and campaigns for gender equality and the human rights of women and LGBTQ people in the deep south.

Empowerment and well-being are important for our team, volunteers, and target group, so BUKU works from a culture of empowerment, wellbeing, and teamwork. We believe that social change comes from small changes within the individual or group experience. Therefore, we firstly emphasise our work on inner power and strengthening the community before campaigning and communicating with the broader society. (Anticha Sangchai, October 2020)¹⁰

Most of BUKU's activities take place in a small and cosy bookshop filled with the scent of freshly ground coffee. The first thing you notice when you step inside is a small sign that sets the tone for how the organisation approaches its work: '*We stand with you. You are safe here*'. But BUKU is much more than a bookshop. It is a space for activists, local leaders, young women, and the LGBTQ+ community to come together, share, and learn. They organise workshops, movie screenings, and cultural events. A section of the library was donated by friends, lecturers, and activists, and it contains many books about the history of Thailand's southernmost region, as well as Islamic studies.



BUKU's bookstore and coffee shop in Pattani, Thailand. Source: BUKU.

The feminist football club is an initiative where girls and young women get together to play two to three times a week. Even though most members are women or LGBTQ+ people, Anticha reminds us that everyone is invited to play. It does not matter if they are just training or participating in a tournament; when the team is on the field, you can tell that they are passionate about football, and some girls even dream of becoming professional football players. But what BUKU offers goes well beyond books and sports. It is a space for these girls and young women to be themselves and embrace their sometimes clashing identities while also having fun and making friends.

¹⁰ This excerpt was originally in Thai and was translated to English by Kanchana Di-ut.

When asked about how they work towards social change, Anticha said that BUKU focuses strongly on holistic well-being, learning, and community building, and emphasised that small changes at the individual or group level can, over time, shift how society perceives and portrays certain groups. She shares how some of the girls' families went from being against them joining the football club to openly and proudly cheering for them during matches and tournaments; or girls discovering that they can be Muslim, football players, and queer all at once, and nobody had the right to invalidate their identity.

Being Muslim is who I am. Being lesbian and a footballer is also who I am. I don't think there should be a conflict between these, or that I should be forced to choose between them. (BUKU FC member, December 2020)¹¹

BUKU's work over the years has created a safe and proud space for LGBT youth to see and accept their presence. LGBT stories can be discussed more openly in the community. And there are young women and LGBT people who have the potential to be leaders in their groups, families, and communities. (Anticha Sangchai, October 2020)¹²

In October 2020, as part of their work in *Generation Equality*, BUKU FC organised a regional futsal tournament for lesbian, bisexual and queer girls and women in Pattani titled Pattani Kicks for Change 2020, where six teams of 12 players each played football while also fighting stereotypes against Muslim women and girls who identify as lesbian, queer, or bisexual. The idea was that a larger tournament including teams from the three southern provinces in Thailand would help BUKU FC reach more people and increase the visibility and the acceptance towards LGBTQ+ Muslim girls and women who play football 'for peace and equality', as the club's slogan reads.

Playing football allows them to be free, be themselves, and also helps them face up to the bullying and bias they face. A tournament like this helps us reach the larger community, who otherwise don't acknowledge or accept us. (Anticha Sangchai, 30 November 2020)¹³

¹¹ See R Chandran, 'Football in hijab: Thai Muslim lesbians tackle stereotypes', *Reuters*, 30 November 2020. Accessed: 12 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-lgbt-sport-idUSKBN28A0BR>

¹² Translated to English by Kanchana Di-ut.

¹³ See fn. 11.



Members of BUKU FC train at the campus of the Prince of Songkla University in Pattani, Thailand, September 2020. Source: GAATW.

On our own terms: Storytelling and political advocacy by landless women in Nepal

Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj, also known as NMES, is a network of women from landless and informal settlements that was established in 2000 in Nepal. It is a self-organised group of women that have been advocating for the right to *Safe and Secure Shelter* for women and their families living in landless and informal settlements for more than two decades. The network was originally started by a group of eleven women in Kathmandu and currently works in 98 settlements across 15 districts in the country. It is now led by two generations of leaders, and they believe that intergenerational leadership is what makes sustainable change possible.

NMES first started working on economic empowerment through a savings group and a cooperative and later expanded their work. The organisation seeks to stop forceful evictions and propose alternative plans on resettlement for landless and informal settlements while also working on landless women's social, economic, and political empowerment. This means fighting to ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making spaces at the local and national level as well as making sure that women in the communities fully enjoy their rights and freedom.



Landless women united to raise their voice for their land rights, 2008. Source: Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj.

NMES' core strategies include building the capacity and leadership of women in communities, building solidarity with national and international allies, campaigning 'from the table to the streets', as well as creating alternatives for the communities in collaboration with the government. Over the years, they realised that only demanding their rights was not going to be achievable, so they started working to enhance their own capacity and request support from the government system.



A new generation of women mobilise with the land rights movement. Source: Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj.

Since its inception, NMES has been fighting against the government's misconception that landless and informal settlement women would not be able to lead an organisation, let alone advocate for themselves and their rights. The group knew that the government and other relevant stakeholders were not necessarily familiar with the issues of landless women, so they have been making their struggles visible and demanding support from the State.

As part of *Generation Equality*, the organisation decided to document its 21 years of work in a documentary and a photo album. As a continuation of that proposal, in which they captured the organisation's beginnings, struggles, achievements, and growth, they decided to collect a series of stories of women from landless and informal settlements. This idea was proposed as a way to support the current situation of the land and shelter rights movement in Nepal, as there was news circulating that the government threatened to evict the community of Kathmandu Municipality, and the general public was supportive of this forceful eviction.

NMES knew that, in addition to stopping the eviction, they needed to sensitise the general public about the struggles of women in landless and informal settlements. As they collected the life stories of 21 landless women and their families, and documented their journeys and the reasons behind their challenges, NMES realised that storytelling can be a powerful way to change the world. This was not easy, as many people were reluctant to participate in their initiative out of fear that the media will portray them in a negative light. But by telling stories in their own way and deciding what to share and how, the organisation helped to reshape how the media, the public, and the government see landless women and their families. NMES is making change happen *on their own terms*.

*We realised that those stories can be a change maker in the land right movement.
We are now planning to develop a short video based on them. We have a team of artists who will elaborate the stories in the form of art and drama. This will be our advocacy tool. (Bhagavati Adhikari, March 2022)*



Interview with Bimala Tamang, President of NMES, in the short documentary about the journey of the organisation produced as part of *Generation Equality*. Source: Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj.

The stories of these three organisations may not have much in common at first sight. Located in three different countries, each one of them works closely with a particular community that faces its own struggles: refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia who they do not have access to legal status, decent employment, formal education, equal protection under the law, and other rights; young women and LGBTQ+ people in the conflict-ridden provinces of southern Thailand; and women in informal settlements in Nepal, who have no right to land and have been subjected to forceful evictions by the government. Despite their differences, these three organisations have been working to change the harmful narratives that for decades have shaped the way people see their communities.

Using theatre plays, poetry collections, football matches, documentaries, photo albums, and life stories, *Beyond Borders Malaysia*, *BUKU* and *NMES* have been countering ‘the definitive stories’ told about their communities in the media, at school, in family gatherings, in government institutions and at international fora. They understand very well that stories are ultimately about power, and there is power in who tells stories, how stories are told, whose viewpoints are featured and, most importantly, what kind of narrative they perpetuate about the people in them. Just like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie affirms in her TED talk ‘The danger of a single story’, we believe that *‘it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person.’* What if the world could read the poetry collection published by the artists that also happen to be refugees? What if they could be moved to tears by their words as they perform at an art gallery? What if people could see the team of hijab-wearing girls having fun in a football match while their families cheer them on? What if people could learn about the everyday lives of women in informal settlements beyond their struggles for land rights? These are the kinds of stories that *Beyond Borders Malaysia*, *BUKU* and *NMES* are helping the communities tell.

Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity (...) When we reject the single story, when we realise that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ngozi Adichie.

Meaningful participation and active listening

This section explores the principles of active listening and meaningful participation in practice through the reflections of a self-organised group of adolescents and young people in Paraguay and a non-profit organisation that works with young girls in Nigeria, both working on the issues of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE).

From Paraguay to Nigeria: Walking side by side with youth

Somos Pytyvõhára is a self-organised group of young people in Paraguay, which has been working on sexual and reproductive health and rights education (SRHRE) since 2011. The name of the group refers to an expression in the Guarani language that translates to ‘he or she who helps’. They started organising in response to a misinformation campaign carried out by conservative groups against a public policy on SRHR that was being developed by the Ministry of Education in 2010. This campaign by the anti ‘gender ideology’ movement interrupted the policy process. That is why several groups of adolescents and young people saw the need to start actively and meaningfully engaging in policy advocacy to ensure that their views and needs were incorporated into the discussion, and to leverage their collective power against ‘anti-rights’ groups.

Somos Pytyvõhára became active after a capacity building process on SRHR for adolescents and young people carried out by BECA, a national NGO that promotes and protects the rights of children and adolescents in Paraguay. Once the training was completed, a group of participants decided to continue organising on their own and started working together – or ‘activating’ as is common to say in Latin America – to develop a peer-to-peer methodology on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). They also began engaging in policy advocacy at the local and national level through awareness-raising campaigns and networking with civil society and grassroots organisations. Over time, the group became an authority on matters of CSE for adolescents and youth in the country, and their contributions were recognised by the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare.

As part of *Generation Equality*, *Somos Pytyvõhára* designed and implemented a participatory reflection process to look back on their almost ten years of experience engaging in peer-to-peer education on SRHR with adolescents and young people. Their aim was to document and analyse the group’s decision to develop and adopt this methodology, as well as the main achievements, challenges and lessons learnt. As a result of this reflection exercise, *Somos Pytyvõhára* produced a series of audio-visual materials, including a [video](#) for social media and several illustrations that map out the main insights from their discussions.



Illustration based on the main points of a Focus Group Discussion held by Somos Pytyvöhára's facilitators on 6 November 2020. Source: Somos Pytyvöhára.

Peer-to-peer education, or *educación interpar* in Spanish, is a participatory and horizontal methodology designed by and for youth to educate each other on issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The decision to focus on gender and sexuality from a rights-based and feminist perspective resulted from the group's past experiences with sexuality education at school, which they identified as too rigid and unable to adequately respond to the students' needs. Many topics were still considered taboo and students did not feel comfortable enough to openly ask questions or seek information about sensitive issues such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Contrary to the mainstream approach adopted by high schools, peer-to-peer education aims to foster knowledge co-creation on topics of shared interest to young people in a holistic, dynamic, and playful manner. The group emphasises the need for fun and relaxed environments where building trust and fostering meaningful connections is prioritised. This does not mean that planning is taken lightly. Quite the opposite; the facilitators are always looking for better ways to create safe and welcoming spaces where every adolescent feels comfortable to ask, share and talk about how they feel or what they are going through without fear of being judged. They get together to plan each learning space, design activities and materials, and after each session, they take time to review what went well and what could be improved. Besides providing scientifically accurate information on SRHR, the curriculum is adjusted to fit each group's interests and specific contexts and covers a wide range of topics.

Apart from being horizontal and relaxed, to me, peer-to-peer education has always been like sharing, almost like a co-creation of knowledge, because we share what we have been learning but there is always a back-and-forth. We are always learning from what others can contribute in that horizontal dialogue. We present

ourselves not in the role of ‘experts’ but in the role of someone who is willing to share what they know and learn from others. (Cintia, November 2020)¹⁵

Somos Pytvõhára affirms that their work has a clear political intention. This group of young people are not only building their knowledge on CSE, but they are also cultivating their individual and collective power to reclaim control of their bodies, their sexuality, and their lives while transforming themselves in the process. The group acknowledges that their journey of organising has not been free of hurdles. They have sometimes been questioned by teachers who see them as ‘inexperienced’, they have been attacked by ‘anti-rights’ groups, and because they are an informal, self-organised group, they unfortunately lack the funds and the infrastructure to reach more people, particularly those in remote rural areas. But these challenges cannot compare to the empowering and exhilarating experience of knowing you are transforming the world and the people around you.

Because in a sense we are also making visible the absence of the State, we are making visible that many of our rights are being denied to us, that we lack access to information. And making that visible is a political act in itself. (Ana, November 2020)

I think the fact that we have organised ourselves and we are moving this group forward in a country where we don’t have a human rights-based education is an act of resistance. We are also responding to certain policies for adolescents and young people that are completely arbitrary. The fact that there is a ban on ‘gender perspective’ or the wrongly called ‘gender ideology’, that we are going against that... To me, that is a truly political act, it’s super empowering. (Daniel, November 2020)

Girls Power Initiative (GPI) is a non-profit organisation that since 1993 has been working with adolescent girls and young women in Nigeria on the issues of gender and sexuality, empowerment, and human rights. Like *Somos Pytvõhára* in Paraguay, the organisation has developed a Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programme for girls between the ages of 10 and 18 that covers a wide variety of topics from a rights-affirming, gender-sensitive perspective. However, the process that led *GPI* to develop this core programme was quite different from that of the Paraguayan group. When Bene and Grace, *GPI*’s co-founders, first started imagining *GPI*, they already had a clear vision for the organisation. They wanted to empower girls and young women to become catalysts for change in their communities and bring about gender equality in Nigeria, but they did not know how they were going to achieve this vision. They soon realised that in order to figure out the best ways to support girls and young women they had to sit down with them and make space to openly talk about their needs, dreams, and aspirations. And that is exactly what they did. Grace and Bene were aware that it was not up to them to decide what the girls wanted or needed. They also knew that if their work was to be successful and sustainable, genuinely listening and meaningfully involving the girls in the messy but exciting process of discovering how to work together was not just a starting point, but a core principle that would continue to guide them along the way.

¹⁵ All excerpts by *Somos Pytvõhára* were translated from Spanish by the author of this report.



So, what makes it possible for both *Somos Pytvõhára* and *GPI* to effectively advance towards the change they envision *with* and *for* adolescent girls and young people? In what ways are their approaches similar, and what makes them unique? Both organisations believe that transformative and sustainable change requires us to actively listen to and engage with adolescents and young people. While for *GPI* this process happens intergenerationally – between the programme's facilitators and the girls – as well as between the girls themselves in their 'Safe Space Lessons', for *Somos Pytvõhára* it is entirely by and for youth. But there is no recipe to follow to ensure that we are *genuinely listening* or *meaningfully involving the community in our work*, and these are certainly not items to be crossed off a checklist. It is about allowing time and space for young people's opinions, ideas, analyses, and experiences to be heard and reflected into the agenda. It is also about shaping the change agenda together and negotiating what strategies to adopt or how to develop core methodologies that accurately reflect our principles and values. Ultimately, it is about our openness to co-creating the path together with all the complexities, joys, and struggles that come with challenging 'power over' and building 'power with'.

The more people participate in the process of their own education, the more the people participate in the process of defining what kind of production to produce, and for what and why, the more the people participate in the development of their selves. The more the people become themselves, the better the democracy. The less people are asked about what they want, about their expectations, the less democracy we have.¹⁶

¹⁶ Horton and Freire.

Movement support and building collective power

In this final section, we look into the strategies of movement support and strengthening the communities' voice, visibility, and collective power through the experiences of Waling Waling in the United Kingdom, SPFT in Thailand, and ANANDI in Gujarat, India.

Waling Waling and the fight for justice for all migrant workers

Waling Waling was established in 1984 as a self-help group of undocumented migrant domestic workers campaigning for their rights in the United Kingdom. Their goals were to (1) support the practical needs of migrant domestic workers escaping from abusive employers who did not have the right to live or work in the UK; and (2) campaign against the unjust legislation that allowed employers to informally bring in migrant domestic workers to the country without recognition under immigration laws.

The name of the organisation refers to a rare and beautiful type of orchid that is known in the Philippines as *Waling Waling*. The group's founding members were migrant domestic workers who had run away from their abusive employers and had approached the Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers (CFMW) for help. With their support, they started organising to demand change in their unjust living and working conditions, campaigning for their rights and recognition as workers.

Waling Waling's current leadership team identified that 1997-98 was one of the turning points in the journey of the organisation. This is when all those years of organising and mobilising resulted in the introduction of the Overseas Domestic Workers (ODW) visa in the UK, which allowed migrant domestic workers to change employers, apply for family reunification and also established a path for settlement in the country. Despite having achieved their main goal as an organisation, *Waling Waling* knew that, by itself, this new legislation would not be enough to ensure the protection of migrant workers' rights, which is why they continued their work under a different name. The group stayed active for several years but eventually ended up dissolving.

In 2012, the Theresa May administration introduced significant changes to the ODW visa, which effectively tied migrant domestic workers to their employers and only allowed them to legally stay in the country for a period of up to six months without the possibility of renewal. In 2017, several members of *Waling Waling* got together to celebrate the 30th anniversary of [Kalayaan](#) – the campaigning organisation for migrant domestic workers in the UK – and decided to reconvene as *Waling Waling* in response to the hostile environment that had been created towards migrant domestic workers after 2012.

The most significant and happy moment of the organisation, however, was our major achievement of winning basic rights as workers in 1997/98. We won the campaign! (...) Unfortunately, those rights were all withdrawn in 2012 and that is one reason why Waling Waling regrouped. We wanted to reclaim those rights and to have domestic work in the private household recognised as work with rights and protections under the law. (Waling Waling, September 2020)

Waling Waling realised that, as a self-organised group of migrant domestic workers who had been building their collective power and mobilising for many years, they had a wealth of experience that

was of value for the migrant workers' movement in the UK. However, as they reconvened, they also learnt that much had changed in the past ten years and they needed to broaden their perspective to include the voices of all undocumented migrant workers in their organising, not just those of domestic workers. Nowadays, their campaign is not only aimed at restoring the rights of migrant domestic workers and pushing the government to ratify ILO C189, but also to make sure that all undocumented migrants in the country have access to regularisation. In November 2018, they participated in the planning and implementation of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (PPT) Hearing held in London on '[The hostile environment on trial](#)', with a focus on the working conditions of migrants and refugees.



Khadija Najlaoui representing Unite the Union at an International Domestic Workers' meeting in Brussels, 19 April 2017.
Source: Waling Waling.

Without the migrants, this country does not function. Migrant workers work in hospitals, they are leading hospitals, the food industry, agriculture, everywhere you will find migrant workers. There is no place in the UK or even in Europe where it's not migrants who are putting in the work. (Viviane Abayomi, November 2020)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, *Waling Waling* used to hold regular in-person meetings at [Unite the Union](#)¹⁷'s Head Office in Central London, where a group of 60 to 80 people would gather every month to discuss current events, inform active members of their rights as migrants and workers in the country, and refer them to existing resources when needed. These meetings were also a way for members to socialise and get to know each other, an important but sometimes overlooked aspect of mobilising for change. Most of *Waling Waling*'s current members are women, and most are undocumented migrant workers from different countries.

As part of *Generation Equality*, *Waling Waling* conducted a series of interviews with some of its members, particularly those who have become undocumented and have recently approached the organisation for help. The leadership team wanted to better understand how they can support its

¹⁷ *Unite the Union* is a combination of two Unions that joined together in 2007. Originally, the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU) joined with Amicus to become Unite. It was T&GWU that supported *Waling Waling* in its original campaign.

members in the current hostile context towards migrants in the UK, which became significantly worse with the COVID-19 pandemic. During these conversations, that were held by Zoom to comply with COVID-19 containment measures, *Waling Waling's* leadership team got a better grasp of how the community was doing, what kind of support they needed, and in what directions they could amplify their work.

Our organisation's members are from several different nationalities: Moroccan, Sri Lankan, Indian, Filipinos, Indonesian, Beninese, Nigerian, and others. By working closely together and meeting on Zoom more often, we have been able to deepen our awareness of the diversity in the different cultures and how to be more sensitive to this reality of our group. (Angie García, November 2020)

They also held a Zoom discussion facilitated by Bridget Anderson, Professor of Migration, Mobilities and Citizenship at the University of Bristol, where the current leaders revisited their history of organising and discussed the joys, struggles, and key lessons learnt in the process. The conversation was then edited in the form of a [20 minute video](#) and published on *Waling Waling's* Facebook page as an introduction to who they are, what they do, and a bit of their journey of change.

What we learnt is how to respond to the needs of the community and how to share solidarity. We learnt from each other, to share our stories, and this is a big approach for us in Waling Waling. (Khadija Najlaoui, November 2020)



Waling Waling's motto as shown in a short video prepared by the organisation as part of Generation Equality. Source: <https://vimeo.com/505801053/b3950ea457>

SPFT and the land rights movement¹⁸

The *Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand*, or SPFT, was founded in 2008 to campaign for access to land for small-scale farmers, landless agricultural workers, and communities whose land rights have been violated by government policies (or lack of enforcement of said policies). SPFT is based in Surat Thani province in the south of Thailand, and their goal is to create a community for landless people where food sovereignty and equal access to land become a reality, and land management is by and for the community. As stated in their slogan, which reads *Land Reform, Liberty & Human Rights, Democracy and Justice*, SPFT also mobilises for justice, peace, freedom, and democracy.



While the organisation was formally established in 2008, the roots of the movement go back to Thailand's 1997 financial crisis, also known as the *Tom Yum Kung* crisis, which led some concerned citizens to look into the root causes of the country's most pressing issues. Upon examining the government's database, they directed attention towards the unequal distribution of land ownership under the State's centralised land management system, and the multiple irregularities in land management that it allowed.

SPFT identifies that the main issue faced by poor people and landless farmers in Thailand is economic inequality and lack of access to land. The change that the organisation envisions is to reform the agricultural sector to achieve fair distribution of land ownership so that people have food security, residence, and access to arable land. In the long run, SPFT is mobilising to create a democratic society with economic equality where everyone, particularly small-scale farmers and landless workers, can access both natural and social resources equally.

¹⁸ To learn more about SPFT, please read the short story featured in 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>

Currently, *SPFT* has five communities of landless farmers in Surat Thani province, which have settled in either illegally occupied or abandoned land by palm oil companies. These are *Khlong Sai Phatthana*, *Nam Daeng Phatthana*, *Santi Phatthana*, *Kao Mai* and *Permsup*. The organisation believes that land is not a commodity, but a means to ensure their livelihoods. They practise communal land management, and they work towards achieving sustainability and food sovereignty. Each community grows crops, vegetables, and fruits, keeps livestock and fish, and for many years they have been fighting to gain legal access to the land where their communities have been established. Before the establishment of the organisation, small-scale farmers and landless workers were fighting for individual land ownership rights. But after joining *SPFT*, they started to fight for community land titles, also known as common rights, or complex rights (when the land is owned by the community and each family is allowed to work on a piece of land individually).

Throughout the years, *SPFT* has experienced many intimidation attacks and judicial harassment, including members being shot to death, community houses being razed to the ground by a tractor, and a group of soldiers being sent to monitor and control their activities. In response to their reports to the government, they have only received more threats, as well as legal action, including civil and criminal complaints against their members.

Despite these struggles, *SPFT* proudly identifies some important moments in their journey towards realising their vision of change. A key turning point is the land lease agreement that is currently being drafted by the Land Bank Administration Institute (LABAI) to develop a purchasing plan for the land where the *Nam Daeng Patthana* community is located.

This is for members of the community to be able to stay in the land with security and safety. There is also a plan to extend the land for Nam Daeng Phatthana Community. Many of us feel that from now on the members of Nam Daeng Patthana will not be prosecuted and they can have housing and arable land without having to worry about being prosecuted. (SPFT, August 2020)¹⁹

During the pandemic, when many people struggled with food insecurity due to unemployment and goods shortages, *SPFT*'s communities did well thanks to their capacity to produce their own food without having to rely on the market. The organisation recognises the importance of working towards food sovereignty in the long term.

The focus of this event is that every community or farmer has enough potential to be able to manage themselves both in terms of resources and the environment within the community in accordance with the real situation, without having to entirely rely on centralised state power. This can lead to decentralisation and the distribution of land holdings by allowing the community to self-manage, and SPFT's communities can be the prototype. (SPFT, August 2020)

In 2013, *SPFT*'s Agricultural Cooperative was formally registered as a body that allocates land according to the organisation's land management principles, provides low-interest loans and financial

¹⁹ All excerpts by *SPFT* included in this sub-section were originally in Thai and were translated to English by Kanchana Di-ut.

services to its members and sells rice, fertiliser, and other products in local markets. The Cooperative is led by a Board comprised of 13 members – nine men and four women from SPFT's five communities.

SPFT's Women's Group was formed in 2014. The leaders and members of the Women's Group have organised SPFT's celebrations and activities for International Women's Day (IWD) and Children's Day. As part of *Generation Equality*, the group decided to hold a series of reflection meetings to look back on the successes and challenges of the past seven years of organising, as well as to document the lessons learnt.

SPFT has encouraged women to take role in all aspects, such as conducting educational activities in both human rights and women's rights issues. SPFT also supports women of all ages to apply to be candidate of election at both the community and the organisational level. This is to encourage women to have a role in decision-making and to perform leadership skills in various situations. Some examples of areas where women are taking decision-making and leadership roles are community work, security work and cultural work. Regarding arts and cultural approaches, SPFT women design their farmer dance, stage performance, singing and making quilt (applique and patchwork techniques) for telling the story of the struggle and identity of SPFT. (SPFT, August 2020)

Through the reflection sessions, the group identified that it is still in its early stage of developing a strong common identity, as well as clear goals and strategies that would bring the members closer together and enrich their joint work and capacity building processes. This means that, so far, the work of the Women's Group in each community is somewhat limited, and sometimes one leader must take on a lot of responsibility to ensure that activities and plans move forward. However, the women also identified some important advancements:

Our women leaders are responsible and have the ability and self-confidence to be leaders at both the community level and as representatives of SPFT to join various events with the networks at national level. (...) On a personal level, women are active in their capacity building and can raise themselves in various fields as well. (SPFT, September 2021)

Collective power building with the sanghathans

ANANDI – Area Networking and Development Initiatives was founded in 1995 by five feminist activists with a shared vision: to bring rural women's concerns to the centre of all development process so they can live in a just, equitable, and peaceful society. For more than 25 years, ANANDI has been working with low-income women from rural, tribal, and denotified communities in the state of Gujarat on the Western Coast of India.



Video by ANANDI on the successful struggle of Panam Mahila Sangathan for the effective implementation and accountability of the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OYCtBdFB90>

One of the organisation's core strategies focuses on building women's leadership and collective power to challenge unjust structures and oppressive forces that are at the root of their marginalisation. Since its inception, ANANDI has adopted this movement building strategy – also known as *collectivisation* – through which they mobilise and organise women into their own platforms or structures. The process of collectivisation has slowly led to the establishment of several women's collectives or *sanghathans*, which have been essential in advancing women's empowerment in their communities and translating that empowerment into concrete and visible changes in women's everyday lives. The successful strategy of mobilising women into collectives eventually led to the setting up of several other grassroots membership structures such as cooperatives and para-judicial forums.

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. (ANANDI's reflection, January 2021)

ANANDI believes in combining the empowerment and rights approach, which entails not only recognising the forces that oppress women in marginalised communities, but also actively working to transform them. Rather than leading 'outside interventions' on empowerment or 'short-term projects' on development, the organisation focuses on consciously and systematically building women's collective power to become agents of change in their communities in a way that bridges practical needs, such as improved living conditions and sustainable livelihoods, with more strategic interests, such as increasing women's voices and public visibility.

ANANDI's approach was not about "doing" development or women's empowerment work, but about mobilizing women to empower themselves and translate this empowerment into real gains in terms of their access - and that of

marginalized communities - to development resources, citizenship rights, basic services, freedom from violence, to control over their bodies and reproduction, and both voice and decision-making power at all levels. (ANANDI's reflection, January 2021)

Building women's leadership is at the centre of ANANDI's work, as the organisation knows that the transformative power and sustainability of the women's collectives relies not only on their capacity to mobilise but also on strong women leaders that are accountable to both the collectives and their communities. Another important aspect of the organisation's movement building work was the process of transitioning towards shared leadership between elder and younger women leaders. While it was not simple or free of challenges, the *sanghathans* that ANANDI helped build and once led are now increasingly autonomous and walk alongside the organisation, rather than behind them.



One of the most important lessons from ANANDI's work on feminist movement building is the confirmation that sustainable change comes from within, which is why it is best achieved by working closely with local leaders and investing time and resources in those who have their lives on the line.

ANANDI's 25 years of work demonstrate [...] 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 interests, who understand best what needs to change, and it is they who must be the change architects and catalysts. (ANANDI's reflection, January 2021)

There is much to learn from the work and the stories of *Waling Waling*, SPFT and ANANDI, but we would like to focus on some insights on the transformative power of building, supporting and resourcing local movements. If there is anything that the pandemic has taught us, it is that, unfortunately, the infrastructure of our work for social change continues to rely heavily on external resources and short-term interventions, while existing grassroots efforts and local leaders from marginalised groups or communities are often left out of the conversation. When coronavirus began

spreading from region to region and the world as we knew it came to a halt, it was the locally-led organisations and movements that mobilised support for those who needed it the most, and responded quickly, with creativity and flexibility to the rapidly changing context. It was the leading members of *Waling Waling* who, even when they had very little to offer, got together every fifteen days, learnt how to use Zoom and found alternative ways to support those who had lost their only source of income and could no longer afford rent, or those who just needed to see a friendly face and hear a warm voice to know that they were not alone. When the world panicked and everyone started mass buying and hoarding food and other essential supplies, *SPFT* knew that they were well prepared, as food security and sovereignty had been a priority for their communities since the very beginning. In the case of *ANANDI*, it was their belief that the best way to achieve sustainable change for poor women in rural and remote communities was to support their organising efforts and to walk side by side with them as they built their collective voice and power, demanded accountability from the local government structures, and campaigned for better access to basic resources and services for their communities.

The stories of these organisations show us that if we want to create long-term, sustainable change in the power structures that push entire communities to the margins, we need to tackle the root causes of that vulnerability and oppression: the structures and institutions that perpetuate unequal land distribution in Thailand, favouring corporations over poor and landless agricultural workers; the policies and regulations that do not recognise migrant domestic workers' rights and push them into exploitative arrangements with their employers, and the xenophobic and racist attitudes that create a hostile environment towards migrants in the UK; the government structures that under resource basic public services and allow corrupt officials to take advantage of low-income rural women in India. But in addition to tackling the root causes of oppression it is just as important to support movements and communities to build their transformative power to imagine other possible worlds with more equitable, just, and sustainable futures, and make them a reality. In the words of a member of *ANANDI*'s team: '*Social justice is not something handed down from above, but is achieved together, through collective effort and action.*'

Conclusions

Our conversations during *Generation Equality* were – and continue to be – a wonderful source of learning, reflection, and inspiration for us at the GAATW Secretariat. As we relistened to the knowledge building sessions, revised our notes, and rechecked the materials prepared by our partners to put together this report, we reaffirmed the immense value of engaging with others with the purpose of co-creating.

This initiative, with all its challenges and limitations, allowed us to connect with a diverse group of activists and organisations whose paths might otherwise not have intersected. *Generation Equality* served as an invitation to break the silos that often keep us mobilising separately and find the common threads that bind our journeys of change: a shared commitment to support marginalised groups or communities towards visualising and realising their change agendas in a participatory, equitable, and democratic manner.

We put out these stories and insights in hopes that they serve as food for thought for people working in the ‘for purpose’ sector, either self-organising or supporting communities on the ground to transform unjust realities and bring about social change. We certainly do not have answers or solutions to many of the struggles that came up during this pilot, but we do believe that there is power, hope and inspiration in knowing that we are not alone in our work, that there are many others all over the world asking themselves the same questions.

Finally, we express our deepest gratitude to our partners for engaging in this experimental process with us, for sharing their journeys of change with the group, and for being open to participating in this collective reflection process. We would like to invite you all to further these explorations; to revise, interrogate, and reshape the insights, learnings and challenges collated in this report. It is our hope that these stories inspire further conversations and debates because there is no point in co-creating knowledge if it cannot be recreated and reinvented by others.



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)

191/41 Sivalai Condominium, 33 Itsaraphap Road
Bangkok 10600, Thailand

T: +66-2-864-14-27/8 F: +66-2-864-16-37

Website: www.gaatw.org

Twitter: @GAATW_IS

Facebook: GlobalAllianceAgainstTrafficInWomen