ACT

Advocacy, Coalition Building, and Transformative Feminist Action to End Violence against Women

COFEM



Introduction

Accountability in action: state obligations on evawg

Accountability in Action: State Obligations on EVAWG a four-part thematic series, or "Pocketbook," focused on access to justice and how women's rights organisations (WROs) can hold states to their commitments to end violence against women and girls (EVAWG).

What is a Feminist Vision of Access to Justice?

OVERVIEW

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM) is an advocacy collective of thought leaders, activists, practitioners, and researchers working globally to EVAWG. The Act to End Violence Against Women Programme (ACT), co-led by the European Union and UN Women, catalyzes feminist action between civil society, grassroots movements, and WROs through a shared advocacy agenda to EVAWG.

COFEM's Feminist Pocketbook has been a widely used advocacy tool for supporting feminist approaches to addressing VAWG among practitioners in the field, with feedback attributing this impact to its digestible analysis of key issues and targeted messages aimed at policymakers, donors, and practitioners. Because the Feminist Pocketbook worked effectively as an advocacy tool, COFEM adapted its format to focus specifically on accountability. The Accountability in Action State Obligations on EVAWG Mini-Pocketbook supports feminist movements and WROs in their efforts to hold governments accountable in their commitments to EVAWG by demystifying EVAWG political machinery and implementation, offering concrete strategies to monitor state performance and budget allocation, and enabling more precise, purposeful engagement with policymakers. The content was informed by a series of learning dialogues with WROs hosted by COFEM through UN Women's ACT initiative alongside key reference documents.

OBJECTIVES

Drawing on COFEM's advocacy experience, we know how much work goes into influencing policy. Not only do WROs face the challenge of navigating complex accountability systems, but the broader context of backlash and shrinking civic space further complicates these efforts. We designed this pocketbook to make your work easier, more strategic, and more effective for WROs sailing these muddied waters, while staying grounded in feminist values and processes.

This series has four interlinked goals:

1. **Explore feminist approaches to access to justice.**
2. **Interrogate how states uphold their obligations** to ensure women's access to justice, using National Action Plans, budgets, and implementation gaps as indicators of state accountability.
3. **Elevate WROs' transformative advocacy** that drives accountability and expands women's access to justice at the national, regional, and global levels.
4. **Unpack EVAWG accountability mechanisms to equip WROs** to hold states to their obligations and strengthen women's access to justice through coordinated advocacy.
5. **Provide succinct tips and talking points** for WRO engagement with policymakers and other stakeholders.

Together, these tools will help movements challenge hollow commitments, track resourcing, and press for structural reforms that move beyond promises on paper.

THEMATIC STRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION

What is a Feminist Vision of Access to Justice?

The introduction describes a holistic, feminist vision to access to justice for women and girls: transformative, survivor-centered prevention, support services, redress, and accountability.

TIPSHEET 1

Bridging Rhetoric and Action: Holding Governments Accountable to their Commitments under National Action Plans to EVAWG

This tipsheet positions National Actions Plans on VAWG as sites of power, not just policy. Using Access to Justice as an entry point, it equips WROs to analyse NAPs as political commitments, expose gaps between promise and practice, and use them strategically to demand action, resources, and accountability from states.

TIPSHEET 2

Follow the Money: Analyzing Government Funding Flows to VAWG

This tipsheet uses access to justice as the foundation for understanding government budget cycles. It helps WROs assess whether EVAWG resources match state obligations, expose gaps that undermine justice pathways for women and girls, and analyze budgets to strengthen accountability demands.

TIPSHEET 3

Pursuing strategic advocacy on access to justice in constrained environments.

This tipsheet provides practical tools for making strategic advocacy decisions feminist organizations seeking to strengthen survivors' access to justice in politically and economically restrictive environments

WHAT IS ACCESS TO JUSTICE?

General Recommendation No. 33 under the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) describes six interrelated characteristics defining access to justice:



Justiciability

All women enjoy the rights provided for under CEDAW.



Availability

All women access well-resourced and equipped courts, quasi-judicial[1] bodies, and other institutions for redress.



Good quality

Justice systems are competent, efficient, independent, and impartial, providing timely, gender-sensitive and effective remedies.



Accessibility

Women in all their diversity navigate secure, affordable, and physically accessible justice systems.



Provision of remedies

Women receive protection and redress for harm they have survived.



Accountability

Justice systems are monitored for their adherence to these principles and held accountable if they violate the law.

UN Women defines access to justice as: **"Fair, effective, affordable, and accountable mechanisms, for the protection of rights, control of abuse of power, and resolution of conflicts. This includes the ability of women to seek and obtain a fair and just remedy through formal and informal justice systems and the ability to influence and participate in law-making processes and institutions."**[2]

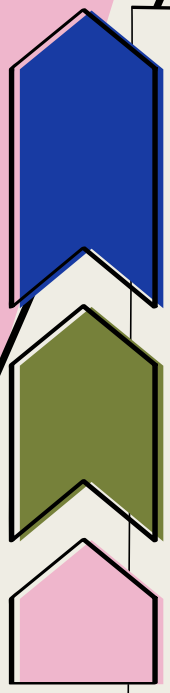
However, access to justice is not only about legal remedies, but about nurturing an ecosystem where women can realize their rights at all stages of their survivorship: from mobilizing communities to prevent violence and ensuring the accessibility and availability of social, health, and economic resources to enabling survivors' leadership and participation in transforming structural barriers.

[1] Quasi-judicial refers to bodies that might operate like a court system but are not overseen by a judge such as an administrative agency under the government, a business, or other institution

[2] UN Women, UNDP, UNODC, and OHCHR (2018). A practitioner's toolkit on women's access to justice programming. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2018/WA2J-Introduction-en.pdf

Pathways to justice can include legal aid and law reform, prosecution of perpetrators, state oversight, community-based approaches to redress, cooperative processes to address and resolve harm, alternative dispute resolution systems (e.g., mediation, arbitration, conciliation, negotiation), reparations, and preventative justice that addresses the root causes of justice.

Importantly, justice pathways are shaped by risk, power, and context. Pathways to justice are not equally available to women and girls in all their diversity, meaning a survivor-centered approach rejects a singular, prescribed model of justice. In many contexts, criminal justice responses may deepen racism, poverty, or insecurity, and alternative mechanisms may lack safeguards or reinforce patriarchal norms.[3] In conflict, rural or other settings, options may be under-resourced or nonexistent.



Long-term
Transformation of Institutions, structures, and norms to realize effective prevention and robust response

Medium term
Political, social, and financial advocacy for change

Short term
Survivors safely navigating existing structures

How do feminist movements nurture an ecosystem with strengthened access to justice?

Feminist movements play a critical role in interrogating how justice systems operate in practice, including whose voices are prioritized, which pathways are resourced, whether legal and policy frameworks address diverse realities, and elevating prevention as a form of justice. Therefore, WROS navigate these tensions honestly and simultaneously, prioritizing survivors' safety, agency, and dignity in the short-term while pressing for long-term structural reform. For example, The Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa (ISLA) uses strategic litigation to surface structural inequalities underlying VAWG and demands that states commit to resourcing prevention and protection. Aahung, based in Pakistan, seeks to strengthen people's knowledge, attitudes and agency across sectors such as health and education to prevent harm. Actos Transformadores, a volunteer-run transfeminist network in Mexico City builds tools to reduce the harm caused by violence without resorting to prisons or punishment, holding perpetrators accountable while centering survivors in the process. Transforming justice requires both strong community-led initiatives and holding states accountable, each initiative addressing the gaps the other cannot fill alone.

> "Courts tend to view GBV as isolated incidents or interpersonal challenges. We are trying to surface the reality that GBV and violence against women broadly occur due to systemic issues and inherent gender inequalities."
>
> **Achieng Orero, ISLA**

> "Preventive justice, for us, means working to ensure that harm is prevented before it actually occurs."
>
> **Annam Khan, Aauhng**

[3] See e.g., Richie, B. E. (2015). Reimagining the movement to end gender violence: Anti-racism, prison abolition, women of color feminisms, and other radical visions of justice. U. Miami Race & Soc. Just. L. Rev., 5, 257, Ptacek, J., & Braithwaite, J. (2014). Evaluation Research on Restorative Justice and Intimate Partner Violence: A Review and Critique.

Guiding principles for a holistic vision of justice

Regardless of the path(s) pursued, we can nurture a transformative ecosystem for survivors under the following principles:[4]



Survivor-centered
Survivors understand their options and navigate the system safely.



Intersectional
Actors and institutions address and redress power imbalances among survivors and between survivors, perpetrators, and key decision-makers.



Enabling environment
Constitutions & laws reflect international standards and uphold nondiscrimination, while budgets adequately resource design and implementation of laws and policies.



State Responsibility
The state is mandated to provide services for survivors, whether through government-run facilities or by resourcing non-governmental organizations to fill these gaps.



Transparent & Participatory Monitoring Mechanisms
Strong national and local accountability mechanisms provide opportunities for survivors & WROs to shape monitoring processes, including available baseline studies to assess and measure the quality of care provided.

[4] Adapted from UN Women, UNDP, UNODC, and OHCHR (2018).

For advocacy purposes, access to justice must be understood as an ecosystem that includes prevention, protection, redress, and accountability, alongside access to social, health, and economic support that enable survivors to pursue justice without further risk. Failures in any part of this ecosystem are not neutral gaps; they represent breaches of state responsibility.

Mapping the Links of Justice: NAPs, financing, and advocacy

Securing survivors' access to justice requires courage, creativity, and community. NAPs to EVAWG create political commitments, but do not deliver justice on their own. Budgets determine whether and how these commitments are resourced, prioritized, or quietly sidelined. Advocacy is the connective tissue that turns plans and numbers into pressure, ensuring that state action reflects women's realities rather than policy intent alone.

This mini-Pocketbook traces that chain deliberately: from describing how governments articulate commitments to EVAWG, to interrogating how those commitments are financed, and supporting WROs to leverage evidence, analysis, and collective voice to challenge gaps between duty and delivery to deliver meaningful change for women and girls.

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