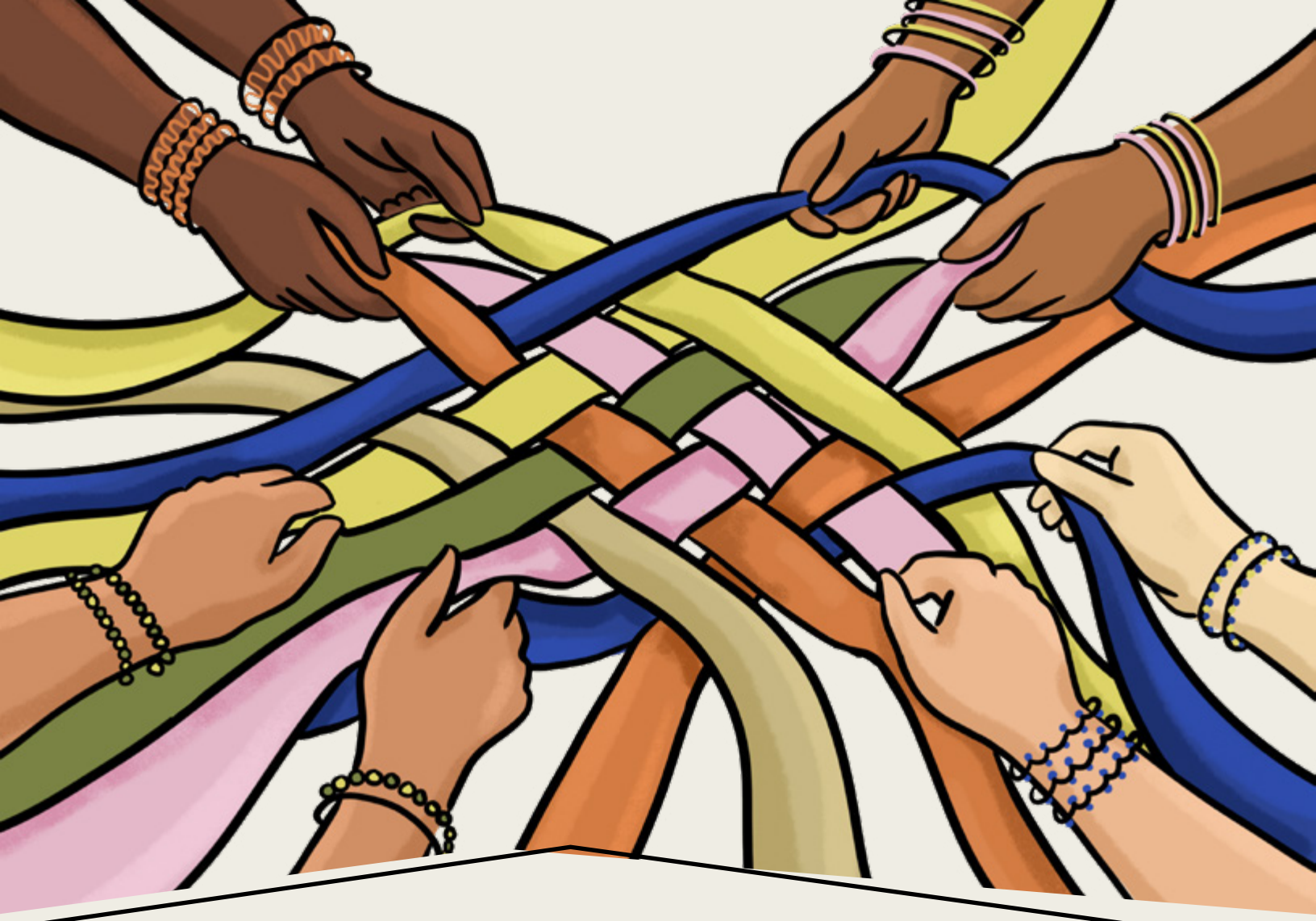


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Tip sheet 3

Pursuing strategic advocacy on access to justice in constrained environments.

A practical tip sheet for women's rights organisations and allies

Tip sheet 3

Pursuing strategic advocacy on access to justice in constrained environments.

Introduction

States are obligated to facilitate access to justice for VAWG survivors under international human rights law as indicated in different normative frameworks such as the CEDAW Committee (e.g. General Recommendation 33 and 35), Human Rights Committee, Committee against Torture, and Committee of Racial Discrimination).[1] While **80%** of states have adopted a broad range of EVAWG legislation, implementation is uneven.[2] Just **40%** of member states provide justice sector training, **22%** provide legal aid measures, and less than half provide psychosocial counseling for survivors.[3]

Feminist organizations play a critical role in advocating for justice reforms to close these gaps, especially in increasingly restrained circumstances. Today's advocacy context is marked by a deepening polycrisis. Across the world, women and gender diverse people face escalating anti-gender backlash. Diminished funding often fails to reach frontline service providers. Digital harm and technology-facilitated violence are rising at an unprecedented level.[4] These pressures are unfolding alongside growing authoritarianism and political volatility which continue to restrict the rights, participation and freedom of civil society. Protracted conflicts further obstruct access to timely and sustainable justice.

This tipsheet provides practical tools for feminist organizations and Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) to make strategic advocacy decisions seeking to strengthen survivors' access to justice in politically and economically restrictive environments.

1. How and when should we engage? Mapping your strategic advocacy to strengthen survivors' access to justice

Strategic advocacy requires choosing tactics that align with your power, address the political landscape and opportunities, complement efforts underway by partners and allies, and acknowledge your organization's risk tolerance.

To Defend, Strengthen or Transform: What is your advocacy objective?

WROs often must choose between pursuing structural or incremental change. We can distinguish between three levels of advocacy targets:

These questions matter because the boundaries of the plan determine the boundaries of accountability. If the plan excludes prevention, it will not be funded. If the plan does not specify survivor services, they remain discretionary. If the plan does not identify marginalised groups, implementation defaults to the needs of those easiest to reach.



Defending Gains

Preventing rollback aims to protect our feminist gains. An example of this might be challenging a budget cut on essential services for survivors or protecting specialized GBV courts or police desks.



Strengthening & Expansion

This includes improving existing initiatives, laws, budgets, and service mechanisms, such as introducing trauma-informed court protocols or shortening timelines for protection orders. This may look like launching a coalition to engage decision-makers to ensure that governments meet their commitments under the National Action Plan (NAP).



Transformative Change

This includes shifting systems, redistributing power and transforming norms. It may include training justice sector employees to redress harmful stereotypes or organizing independent and accountable administrative justice mechanisms and mediation services.[5]

Choosing to Disengage

You may reconsider pursuing your advocacy strategy if:

- Risk disproportionately affects survivors, activists, and/or staff.
- Your organization is already overstretched.
- Other organizations are actively working on the issue and have opportunities for collaboration
- The issue is symbolic but requires significant resources.
- You have minimal network support.

COUNTRY EXAMPLE

Access to justice through transformative norm change in Colombia

In Colombia, patriarchal gender norms held by justice officials undermine GBV legislation in practice through processes such as revictimization, lack of knowledge of survivors' rights, and institutional violence against female lawyers. Feminist organizations like Sisma Mujer chose to transform norms through 4 strategies: comprehensive litigation across multiple courts; advocacy and communications to raise the profile of judicial cases and build public recognition of survivors' rights; justice official and police training to redress gender biases and myths about GBV; and alliances with feminist & LGBTQI+ organizations nationally and internationally. Sisma Mujer's litigation on domestic violence cases produced judgments obliging judicial operators to "recognise the seriousness of domestic violence including, for example, the risk of femicide and applying an intersectional approach." Sexual harassment, previously treated by officials as a minor offence unworthy of state resources, was reclassified as a sexual crime. Survivors who received legal accompaniment recognized their right to access justice and "came to identify acts of institutional violence and encourage other women to report cases of GBV" — transforming norms among both survivors and institutions.[6]

A Practical Decision-Making Framework

After determining your advocacy objective(s), consider the potential impact, political opportunities, power & influence dynamics, risks, and existing capacity in your organization or movement. Assess the risks and opportunities associated with your advocacy focus by reviewing the questions below.

For instance, a topic with a high impact + high opportunity + medium risk may be a strong candidate for your advocacy strategy. On the other hand, if you have a topic with high impact + high risk + low leverage, you may need to reconsider your focus. Use the Collective Reflection Tool below as you consider different advocacy approaches. You can use this tool in a participatory team session of 60-90 minutes, first reflecting upon the categories independently and then building a shared analysis.

Pacing your work

In an environment defined by an onslaught of information, news, and communication, we often feel pulled to respond immediately to injustices we witness. However, strategic patience refers to our ability to pause and reflect without giving into pressure. Sometimes the most strategic decision is to delay public advocacy and instead strengthen alliances, collect more evidence, or quietly shift narratives.

CRITERIA	QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF
Impact	If we win, how will survivors' lives materially improve? Will this improve survivors' ability to report violence more safely? / Will this reduce financial or procedural barriers to justice? / Will this increase the accountability of service providers? Does this effort address root causes or symptoms of VAWG? Who benefits and who might be excluded (or harmed)? On a scale from 1-5, how transformative would this win be?
Political Opportunity	Is there a policy window (budget cycle, judicial reform, legislative session, etc.)? Has a recent case or incident created momentum for this focus? Is there public buy-in/concern for this issue? Is the political moment open, contested or hostile? What has changed in the last 6-12 months that makes this moment different?
Power & Influence	Who has the authority to decide? What do they care about (votes, reputation, stability, etc.)? What pressure points exist? Do we have access, allies, or other influence? **Consider mapping points of power & influence:** Formal power (legal authority) / Informal power (political influence) Narrative power (media) / Financial power (donors)
Risk	What backlash could occur? Who would be most impacted? If one staff member is targeted publicly tomorrow, do we have a plan? Could legal retaliation occur?
Capacity	What security, legal, and digital protection do we have to address the risk? Do we have adequate human and financial resources? Do we have existing relationships with justice institutions, response service providers, and other stakeholders responsible for survivors' timely access to justice?

COLLECTIVE REFLECTION TOOL

TOPIC	RATING[7]	NOTES
Impact	HIGH MEDIUM LOW	
Political Opportunity	HIGH MEDIUM LOW	
Power & Leverage	HIGH MEDIUM LOW	
Risk	HIGH MEDIUM LOW	
Capacity	HIGH MEDIUM LOW	

COLLECTIVE REFLECTION TOOL

TOPIC	RATING (High, Medium, Low)[7]	NOTES
Impact		
Political Opportunity		
Power & Leverage		
Risk		
Capacity		

2. Designing your narrative and communication plans

Narrative power, or our ability to shape how issues are framed, is fundamental to advocacy efforts. Access to justice is shaped not only by formal legal rules but also by how society perceives violence, survivors, and accountability, which influences which, if any, forms of VAWG are recognized and taken seriously. These perceptions affect how cases are reported, investigated, and pursued, meaning justice delivery is filtered through social judgments about credibility and legitimacy rather than applying the laws fairly. In response to the strategically deployed narrative strategies by anti-gender movements, WROs must be equally deliberate and strategic. Before designing your narrative arc, assess the current landscape:

1. Who is telling the story of VAWG and access to justice? (e.g. state media, anti-gender actors, journalists, survivor-led platforms)
2. What are the dominant frames? (e.g. public vs. private matter, singular instance vs. structural phenomenon, victim blaming vs. perpetrator accountability)
3. What frames are being weaponized? (e.g. foreign interference, Global North imposition, anti-family rhetoric)
4. Who are your target audiences and what do they believe? Consider:
   - Decision-makers you need to convince.
   - Allies you need to mobilize.
   - The public whose opinion can prompt state action.
   - Survivors whose wellbeing should always be centered.

Research demonstrates that values-based framing can move audiences more effectively than data. Leading with facts assumes that people have rational beliefs when in reality, people filter information through their existing values and frames[8]. In order to deploy evidence-based framing:

- Connect EVAWG and access to justice to values held by your intended audience, such as safety, dignity, accountability.
- Explicitly name structural failures; barriers to justice are not isolated incidents or disconnected cases, but manifestations of deeper systemic failures across institutions and service pathways.
- Anticipate counter-narratives before they arrive. If “anti-family” framing is common, redefine family safety through a survivor-centered lens that foregrounds dignity, safety and accountability. If accusations of foreign interference emerge, clearly communicate your mandate, partnerships and funding rationale in ways that preempt distortion and counter attempts to delegitimize the work.

Choose messengers and channels carefully.

Even the most carefully crafted framing can fail if delivered by a messenger lacking credibility. In Turkey, conservative women and members of the ruling party became influential messengers precisely because they participated in an unlikely conversation on VAWG. Especially in constrained environments, rotating, anonymizing, or collectivizing voices can help distribute risk and reduce exposure for individual activists. Similarly, understanding both the possibilities and the limitations of different channels, from open civic spaces (such as press engagement, social media, public campaigns) to more closed networks (such as faith or diasporic networks) shapes what can be said, by whom and to whom.

3. Anticipating and Preparing for Risk & Backlash[9]

Advocacy does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a dynamic and changing environment. Regardless of how much we prepare, our work in EVAWG is often met with resistance by politicians, anti-rights movements, the media, and society at large.



A. Identifying backlash[10]

Backlash comes in a variety of forms. For EVAWG advocacy, it might look like:

Online harassment and doxxing: targeted abuse, threats and misinformation

Survivor shaming: Discrediting survivors or defamation lawsuits

Smear campaigns: Accusations of being "anti-family" or foreign agents.

Political retaliation: Loss of access to decision-makers or exclusion from consultative spaces

Funding pressure: Donors withdrawing support or condemning controversial positions.[11]

JASS's Manual for Women Human Rights Defenders includes an exercise to create a basic protection plan (pgs 92-99).

B. How can we plan for backlash?

I. Movement-based protection

When advocacy is collective among aligned or affected groups, backlash has fewer individual targets.

- Feminist coalition/movement-building as a strategy: Risk should be distributed across a coalition that recognizes the power and vulnerability of its members.
- When larger, more institutionalized groups amplify demands, smaller groups are less exposed.
- Such movement-grounded approaches might include joint statements, shared press engagement, or rotating spokespeople.

II. Safety planning

Take steps to protect survivors, your organization's digital footprints, as well as individuals within your team.

- Develop a protection plan that identifies and anticipates potential risks in order to strengthen safety and reduce vulnerability.
- Create secure passwords and ensure two-factor authentication.
- Moderate social media engagement closely
- Develop protocols for responding to online abuse.
- Identify circumstances that warrant reporting, versus those that could be ignored.

III. Survivor protection

If advocacy involves survivor testimony, ensure that informed consent processes explicitly note potential backlash.

- Explore alternatives, such as anonymous testimonies or collections of stories.
- Prepare referral resources to share with survivors.
- Repeatedly remind survivors that they can withdraw consent if the situation escalates.

While many consent frameworks are designed for documentation or service delivery as opposed to advocacy, there are some tools available that can be adapted such as:

- Equality Now's Telling Stories, Driving Change toolkit covers ethical documentation of SGBV survivor testimony for advocacy, including informed consent, digital safety and survivor agency.
- Coalition for Just Reparations (c4JR)'s International Guidelines on Ethical Engagement with Survivors of SGBV directly addresses risks of backlash and retaliation in an advocacy context.

IV. Self and collective care

Backlash takes a physical and emotional toll on us that can lead to burnout, fear, and secondary trauma. Sustaining advocacy therefore also requires deliberate attention to care and wellbeing.[12]

- Create spaces for collective reflection and debrief.
- Rotate responsibilities, especially for jobs that are highly visible or involve significant emotional labor.
- Encourage rest, movement and moments of celebration, including recognition of small wins.
- Provide access to mental health services and psycho-social support where necessary.

V. Ongoing monitoring of escalation

Sometimes the political situation escalates beyond an organization or coalition's capacity to respond safely or effectively, requiring strategic adaptation. This may involve scaling back visibility, shifting tactics, or temporarily withdrawing where one individual becomes the primary target of attacks, coalition cohesion weakens, credible legal threats emerge, or civic and political space narrows significantly.



COUNTRY EXAMPLE

Rapid mobilization to challenge Latvia's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention

In October 2025, the Latvian parliament voted to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention just two years after ratifying it. Civil society organizations working on violence prevention and women's rights immediately faced disinformation and smear campaigns, and were excluded from parliamentary committee meetings on the issue. The Marta Centre, a Latvian NGO, organized protests that drew 10,000 people to Riga, alongside rallies in other European cities, the United States, and Australia. Citizens gathered over 60,000 signatures on a petition to the President, representing the largest in Latvian history. Equality Now and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe issued public statements and expressed concern, providing international solidarity to the domestic efforts. Due to strong civil society mobilization, the parliament decided not to proceed with the withdrawal. Instead the decision was postponed for the next parliament to consider. The joint advocacy contributed to a presidential veto returning the law to parliament, effectively pausing withdrawal until after the 2026 elections. Rapid, multi-track response with community mobilization, record petition drives, and international pressure can slow rollback even when domestic political space is contested.[13]

4. Monitoring & Documentation: Moving from "Did We Win?" to "What is Changing."

Monitoring and documenting feminist advocacy can be challenging, particularly when advocacy does not translate into concrete outcomes or visible impact. Change is often nonlinear, cumulative, and difficult to attribute. Even more, advocacy processes may not have a clear endpoint. Documenting these changes regularly can help you track shifts over time, identify emerging risks and opportunities, surface less visible forms of progress, and support ongoing learning and adaptation.

While monitoring your advocacy you might consider **internal monitoring** and **external monitoring.**

Using Digital Tools:

Setting alerts for draft laws, budget announcements or relevant press releases can help automate some of your monitoring activities.

Additionally, when collecting or storing data, it is necessary to use safeguards, especially for survivor information. Digital monitoring should increase safety, not create new risks.

Internal monitoring: What is working for us?

In internal monitoring, you focus on organizational learning and sustainability rather than donor needs. Consider:

STRATEGY

What tactics are generating traction?
What activities are consuming more energy with little visible impact?
Does our power mapping need to be updated?
Have targeted decision-makers changed?

SURVIVOR ALIGNMENT

Are survivors meaningfully engaged?
Are we prioritizing survivors' safety, security and consent?

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Has our capacity shifted (in time, skills or resources?)
Is our workload evenly distributed?
Are we overextended?

WELLBEING & SAFETY

Has backlash affected staff wellbeing?
Are individuals being disproportionately targeted?
Are existing digital security measures working?

Based on your assessment, you may need to refine objectives, drop ineffective tasks, reassign responsibilities, or address low morale.

External monitoring: What is shifting around us?

In external monitoring, you can concentrate on institutional and movement-level changes in the broader environment. Consider:

MOVEMENT & COALITION STRENGHT

Has your coalition grown?
Are you engaging with cross-movement actors?
Do activists feel supported?
Is civic space increasing or regressing?

INSTITUTIONAL & POLITICAL SHIFTS

Are government ministries such as courts or police seeking your input?
Are your recommendations reflected in draft texts?
Has funding increased?
Are there changes in court procedures?
Have services expanded to support survivors with disabilities?
Are there reductions in case processing time?
Is there an increase in protection orders?

NARRATIVE & CULTURAL SHIFTS

Are policymakers adopting your language?
Has the media shifted their tone?
Is EVAWG being framed as structural as opposed to individual?
Are anti-rights narratives intensifying?

COUNTRY EXAMPLE

Monitoring as Survival in Hungary[14]

Since 2010, Orban's government prevented feminist organizations from contributing to policymaking to end VAW by defunding them, replacing them with church-affiliated groups, and ending the formal consultations they regularly held with the government. As a result, Nők a Nőkért Együtt az Erőszak Ellen (NANE), a Hungarian organization working to end VAW since 1994, lost government funding and access, operating solely on individual donations and international funding. With domestic channels closed, NANE shifted to three independent monitoring tools:

A free, volunteer-run helpline became an independent source of survivor experience in the absence of official track.

Through a legal aid partnership with PATENT, a Hungarian legal aid organization, NANE tracked institutional behavior including how police apply restraining orders, how judges apply standard of proof in court hearings, and where institutional behavior diverges from legal obligation.

NANE and PATENT jointly submitted shadow reports to the UN CEDAW Committee and Universal Periodic Review, using monitoring findings to advocate to international accountability bodies when domestic consultative access was removed.

The organization redefined accountability infrastructure following state withdrawal, redirecting monitoring outputs to the remaining open channels.

5. Playing the long game: Persistence, strategy, and survivor-centered Justice

Strategic advocacy for justice reform requires clear political analysis, careful planning around risk and collective safety, proactive framing strategies, realistic goal-setting, and ongoing monitoring and survivor-centered accountability. While structural transformation is slow and contested, even incremental shifts, whether a budget increase, procedural reform, or protective measures, can meaningfully improve survivors' access to justice and support.

Acknowledgements

This piece was written by Leah Goldmann, reviewed by Joy Watson and members of the UN Women EVAW team, designed by Léa Drougard, and illustrated by Sarah Imran. Special thanks to the women's rights organizations who participated in COFEM's Learning and Dialogue Series that informed this piece, and UN Women and the European Union for funding the ACT Initiative.

Suggested Citation

Coalition of Feminists for Social Change. Tipsheet 3: Pursuing strategic advocacy on access to justice in constrained environments, *Accountability in Action: State Obligations on EVAWG Pocketbook (2026)*

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[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

[4] Tipping point: The chilling escalation of online violence against women in the public sphere. (2025) Posetti, J., Hellmueller, L., Williams, K., Renaud, P., Aboulez, N., and Shabbir, N., UN Women (New York).

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[7] Note that having a "high" rating in all categories is most conducive for engaging in the chosen advocacy strategy, except for risk which would ideally be closer to "low."

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