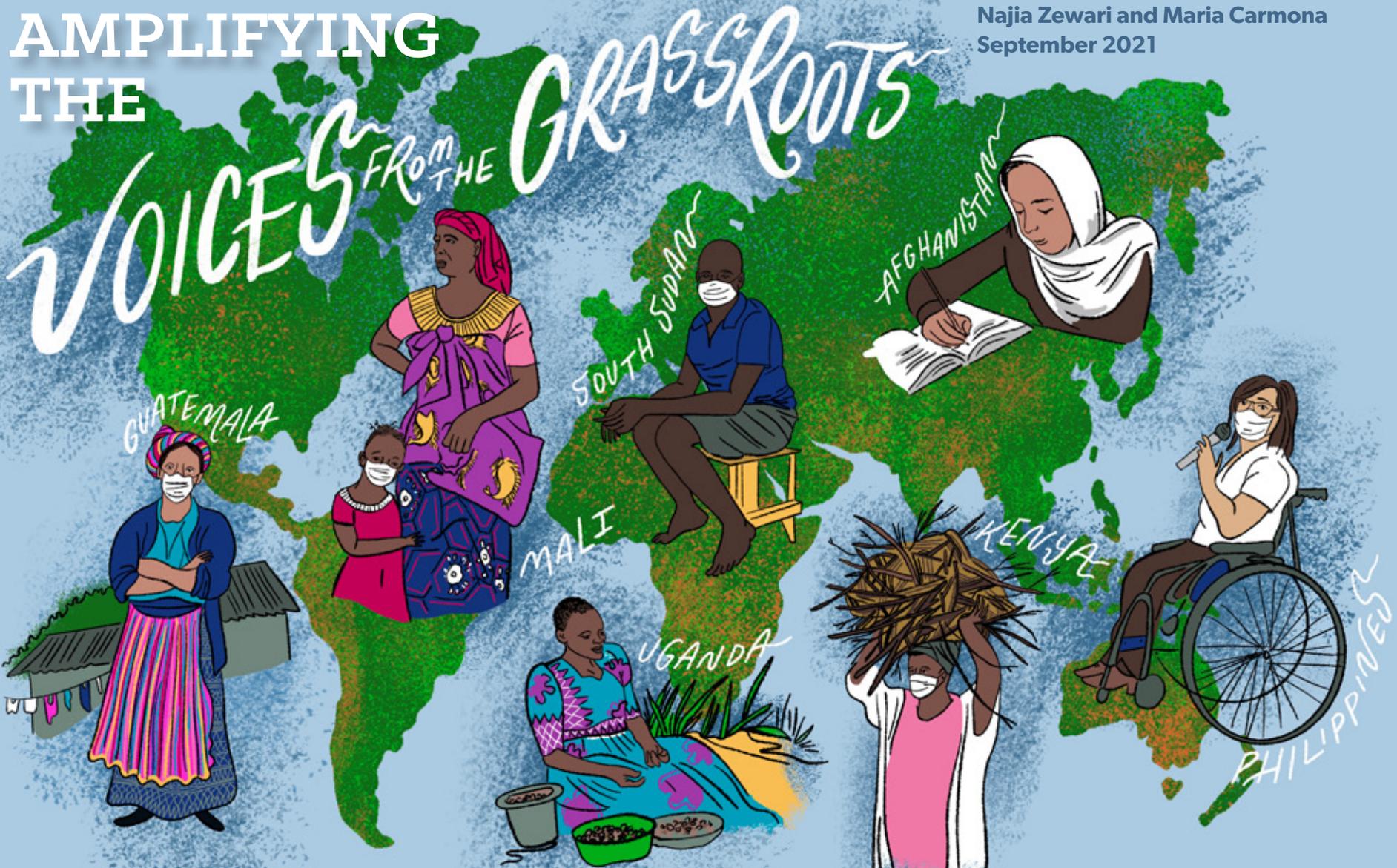


AMPLIFYING THE

Najia Zewari and Maria Carmona
September 2021



A REFLECTION PIECE ON THE VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS PROJECT



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Najia Zewari

Najia is the founder of the Global Women's Network (GWN). GWN is a grassroots initiative organized out of many consultations with immigrant and refugee women from diverse ethno-cultural communities in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She has a wealth of international experience, working with non-government organizations and the United Nations in Afghanistan and Pakistan on gender equality, advocacy, institutional capacity development, and policy and law reform. Since she came to Canada eight years ago, she has been transferring the knowledge and experiences she has gained with the communities of the GWN. She has faced many struggles and turbulent experiences as a woman, but she drew her strength from these, sustaining her passion and commitment to peace, social justice, and gender equality.

Maria Carmona

Maria is relatively new to the gender equality space. Before coming to Canada in 2017 and while living in the Philippines, she felt empowered as a woman and did not experience discrimination on the basis of her gender. While pursuing graduate studies in international development at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada and through her interactions with the Ontario Council for International Cooperation (OCIC) and its members, she came to learn more about the challenges faced by women around the world. She also learned that multiple social dimensions such as gender, color, race, culture, language, education, economic status, age, etc. intersect and together dictate an individual's position in society. As an empowered woman, she feels she has a role to play in uplifting other women and girls who do not have the same privileges and opportunities as her and in contributing to making this world more equitable and just.

About the Voices from the Grassroots working group of the Gender Equality Hub

Najia and Maria are part of the Voices from the Grassroots (VfG) project initiated by organizational and individual members of the Gender Equality Hub (GE Hub) of the OCIC in April 2020. The objective of the VfG project was to document the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of women and girls in Afghanistan, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Mali, Philippines, South Sudan, and Uganda. The project's overarching goal is to amplify the voices of women and girls from these countries through stories of their lived experiences and their messages to world leaders, captured through a digital flipbook and shared through virtual events and social media campaigns. This reflection piece distills key themes and lessons learned from the VfG project and recommends ways by which various stakeholders can take action. The ideas and opinions expressed in this reflection piece are the authors' and do not necessarily represent that of the GE Hub and OCIC.

AUTHORS' NOTES

1. "Global North" vis-à-vis "Global South," "developed" vis-a-vis "developing" or "less-developed" or "underdeveloped" countries are terminologies used throughout this reflection piece for lack of better and more neutral terms to use. These terms are descriptive of the current development setting where the 'North' (considered here to be Canada, the United States of America, and much of Europe) has ready access to financial resources and the 'South' (in this context, considered to be Central and South America, Africa, and Asia) has access to natural and human resources (albeit devalued). The use of these terms in this reflection piece should not be seen as in conflict with the authors' conviction and position in the Recommendation section i.e., that there should be an effort to change these jargons (which reinforce the power imbalances between those who have the financial resources and those who are in need).
2. The authors acknowledge that true gender equality should move beyond a binary (male and female) understanding of gender and gender identities, embracing gender as a spectrum of identities. However, the scope of this reflection piece (as well as the VfG project) was limited to the gender binary, considering the current capacity of the authors (and the VfG team) to analyze gender equality issues. Exploring the unique challenges and barriers faced by individuals who do not identify within the gender binary, as well as the compounded oppressions they face as a result of identifying outside of the binary, can be an area for further research in future iterations of the VfG project.

KEY MESSAGES

- **COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities and pushed vulnerable and marginalized groups further to the periphery of society.**
- **These unprecedented times invoke us to rethink the way we do things and to be bold to do things differently.**
- **Voices from the grassroots call for increased gender-responsive approaches in all sectors and at all levels in rebuilding societies after the pandemic and dismantling deep-seated structural inequalities.**

BACKGROUND

In 2020, individual members of the Ontario Council for International Cooperation (OCIC), Gender Equality Hub (GE Hub) and those representing the OCIC member organizations Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO-SACO), World Accord, World Renew and Global Women's Network worked together to document the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable women and girls from Afghanistan, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Mali, Philippines, Uganda, and South Sudan. Dubbed "Voices from the Grassroots" (VfG), this project allowed like-minded members committed to global social justice, human dignity, and participation for all to collaborate and take concrete action. The project also aimed to elicit action to address immediate challenges of the pandemic, as well as systemic and long-term gender equality issues. This includes advocating for policies and programs that are gender-responsive, equitable and inclusive, and where women and girls are placed front and center.

The group tapped into the power of storytelling and captured the voices of women and girls through a digital flipbook and a series of virtual events, specifically held in commemoration of International Human Rights Day (December 2020) and International Development Week in Canada (February 2021). The VfG project was also featured in a session of the NGO CSW 65 Virtual Forum that ran parallel to the official session of the 65th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in March 2021.

This reflection piece analyzes and draws key themes from the stories and three virtual events, and it distills lessons learned from the processes, highlighting the organic self-led, experimental, and volunteer-based work of organizational and individual members of OCIC. The authors also outline potential ways forward to create greater awareness amongst development partners in Canada on the gendered impacts of COVID-19, to advocate for more gender-inclusive approaches as countries build back from the pandemic, to address systemic inequalities, and to strengthen relationships and collaboration with and among the women and girls from the grassroots.



COMMON THEMES

1. **While COVID-19 was primarily a health issue, the ripple effects were complex and extended to economic and social aspects.**

Poverty and food insecurity were prevalent in the eight countries featured in the VfG project. Poverty levels have been reported to increase across the globe as economies slowed down due to the pandemic. Interviewees for the project have spoken of impacts such as job and income loss, resulting in increased debt loads, food insecurity, and hunger. Most cannot afford to buy medicine, nutritious food, hygiene materials, and masks to protect themselves.

“Because of this lockdown, domestic violence in my village has increased. There is a lot of tension at home because men are unable to provide for their homes and families.”

- Among Luckery, Uganda

The interviewees reported heightened levels of gender-based violence due to lockdowns, as women spent more time at home with their aggressors. As people lost their jobs and incomes, they released their frustration against women. There were also reports of increased numbers of sexual assault towards young girls and a rise in teenage pregnancies. Lockdowns made it more difficult for women and girls to access women’s support centers and shelters. Health care systems were overwhelmed, and travel restrictions made it more difficult for women to access reproductive health services. Mental stress and trauma because of the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns were also widely observed.

Increased restlessness and crime amongst boys were reported. Youth experienced disruptions in education due to the closure of schools and technological and financial challenges for those who have had to shift to virtual classes. This was observed in those who did not have the technology to access virtual classes and had to incur additional costs to acquire this technology. Some individuals needed to travel to different locations in order to access adequate technology.

Health workers interviewed for the project observed that frontline health workers were overworked, underpaid, and vulnerable to the virus due to the lack of sufficient personal protective equipment.

COVID-19 also overshadowed other pre-existing problems in the eight countries presented in the VfG project. Malaria continues to be a health burden in Africa. Kenya, Mali, Uganda, and South Sudan, Honduras, Guatemala, and the Philippines have been grappling with the impacts of climate change such as floods and droughts. The adverse effects of COVID-19 compounded political conflicts in Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan, where women already face the risk of losing their lives, mobility challenges, and limited access to employment and health services. Corruption in governments and the poor delivery of public services continue to undermine women’s and girls’ human right to access an adequate standard of living.

“We are a poor country, and the pandemic has introduced many other challenges to people in my country. Afghanistan’s situation is critical not only due to COVID-19, but also because of existing war and unrest.”

- Shahla, a doctor in Afghanistan

“The problem that has affected me most is missing lessons and not having enough support to take care of myself and my nine siblings.”

- Carolyn, a 14-year-old girl from South Sudan currently living in a refugee camp in Uganda

2. COVID-19 deepened pre-existing inequalities and had disproportionate impacts on countries and communities, particularly on those who identify within different genders, races and ethnicities, age, education, and abilities.

COVID-19 highlighted the reality that disasters, epidemics/pandemics, and national and global economic recessions exacerbate inequalities and push vulnerable and marginalized groups further to the periphery of society. Poor

women are the most vulnerable because they have limited means to cope. Women working in the informal sector who lost their livelihood during the pandemic have few or no social safety nets. The impact of COVID-19 on a white woman living in Canada is different from that of a Black woman from a rural area in Kenya who earns income as a food vendor, or a blind woman living in the Philippines who makes her living as a massage therapist, or an Indigenous woman living in a remote farming village in Guatemala, or a woman living in a conflict zone in Afghanistan, or a young girl from South Sudan living in a refugee camp in Uganda – all of whom have limited

“I feel that the challenges I’m facing here in Canada are minor compared to those being experienced by other women in developing countries. I feel privileged and lucky to be who I am, to have my family like mine, and to live in Canada.”

- Reflections from participants, Voices from the Grassroots, International Human Rights Day virtual event

access to social protection services and are not considered a priority for their governments. While the Canadian government provided an emergency response benefit (CERB) to Canadians who lost jobs during the pandemic, governments in developing and less-developed countries do not have the fiscal capacity to provide this same benefit to their citizens.

Women faced increased unpaid workloads at home to care for children who have stopped schooling or to oversee home schooling, to take care of the sick, and to find ways to bring food to the table. More underage girls were forced to work to feed their families.

According to first-hand accounts from interviewees, COVID-19 exacerbated inequality and discrimination especially for people with disabilities (PWDs), the elderly, and Indigenous women.

“The situation is much worse for Indigenous people who are not a part of the government’s political agenda but have still managed to endure.”

- Melida, Mujeres en Acción, Guatemala



3. Women's and girls' resilience was displayed as they responded to the impacts of COVID-19.

The women and girls of the VfG project, like everyone, experienced fear and frustration from the stark impacts of the pandemic but took it upon themselves to find a solution for their families and even for their communities.

Fatuma Ali, a food vendor from a rural area in Kenya, and Among Luckery, who had a small-scale trading business in Uganda prior to the pandemic, had to find other means of livelihood when markets shut down due to lockdowns imposed in their countries. Carolyn, a 14-year-old girl from South Sudan living in a refugee camp in Uganda, unselfishly resorted to washing clothes and fetching water to earn and help feed her nine siblings.

Marzia, together with the civil society network in Kunduz Province, mobilized women and youth to raise awareness on COVID-19 and distributed food and health packs to families, especially to women-led households.

Carmen Zubiaga, a woman with physical disability from the Philippines, mobilized donations of food packs and medicines in response to calls for help from other persons with disability (PWDs). She also started online groups as a way of connecting PWD groups virtually amidst the lockdown to provide emotional and mental support. Rina de Luna, an organic farming advocate from the Philippines, started a community garden for and with urban poor women to help address food insecurity and as an alternative source of income for its members. This initiative is also empowering grassroots women in their new role as community leaders.

Gladis Noemi Cujcuj, together with World Accord and colleagues at **Mujeres en Acción** (MeA), an organization working with rural Indigenous women in the highlands of Guatemala, coordinated with government ministries to provide support to women-led vegetable gardens during the pandemic. Nuvia Roseny Ortega Burgos of the **Programa de Reconstrucción Rural** (PRR) in Honduras coordinated the Future Security in the Face of COVID-19 project in partnership with World Accord and Seeds of Change Honduras.

Under the leadership of Barbara Kayanja, World Renew in East Africa continued to provide targeted training to develop women leaders in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan. They have been using a community-led development approach where women, girls, and marginalized groups are at the decision-making table as countries build back from COVID-19.

These responses by women at the household and grassroots level are great examples of effective women-led initiatives. The leadership of women shone in their various roles as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, caregivers, and community leaders. These women have demonstrated new solutions for new realities. They are building resilience and championing gender-inclusive and gender-sensitive advocacy. They are building connections and relationships and promoting women's solidarity amidst this crisis.

“In spite of all that has happened, Indigenous women in Guatemala were able to move forward and provide support to each other.”

- Gladis Noemi Cujcuj, **Mujeres en Acción, Guatemala**

“Women are helping each other, raising solidarity. Women are strong, courageous, adaptive to changes, and proactive to find solutions for their households and communities.”

- Reflection from a participant, **Voices from the Grassroots, International Development Week virtual event**

“I felt inspired by the kind of leadership and the community work the women speakers have shared during the discussion.”

- Reflection from a participant, **Voices from the Grassroots, International Development Week virtual event**

4. Women and girls need platforms such as the Voices from the Grassroots so they can be heard, call people to action, and build solidarity.

The VfG project allowed women to share their challenges, stories of resilience, and messages to world leaders with the international development community in Canada during events held in commemoration of International Human Rights Day and International Development Week and to a wider international audience during the UN Commission on the Status of Women NGO virtual parallel session.

Women's and girls' voices need to be heard because their concerns are most often trivialized, ignored, and forgotten in a world where inequality is widespread and where men predominantly wield positions of power in the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious spheres. We need to provide platforms such as VfG to make women and girls more visible and to value them and their opinions and ideas. Providing a space where these voices from the grassroots can be heard freely is a means to empower these women and girls to enable them to participate in decision-making more actively and in finding solutions for the issues they are facing. Women have the capacity to drive change and transform societies. This pandemic is an opportune time to allow women to take the lead at decision-making tables. The VfG project documented how women and girls led initiatives and exercise their decision-making power in response to the challenges that women and marginalized individuals faced due to the pandemic, as well as to address gender equality more broadly.

Marzia, a women's rights activist from Afghanistan, took the lead in advocacy efforts to help her community e.g., raising awareness about the virus and how to prevent it, pushing to make more health care services available for those infected, and raising awareness on how to prevent domestic violence. Marzia did all these while living in the middle of unrest and conflict and while she was taking care of her new-born child. Marzia's work is truly admirable in the context of a patrilineal society where women face oppression, do not have rights equal to men, and do not have a voice.

Gladis Noemi Cujcuj from Guatemala and Nuvia Roseny Ortega Burgos from Honduras are young women who are at the forefront of the work towards the economic empowerment of and advocating for marginalized rural and

Indigenous women. Their work with grassroots communities became even more relevant and impactful during the pandemic because of the lack of government support to remote communities. As young feminist leaders, they are already making their mark towards gender equality in their respective countries, where cases of violence against women and girls and femicide are among the highest in the world.

The leadership of Rina de Luna from the Philippines shone brighter when she started a small community garden project to help address food insecurity and to provide the much-needed support system for women in her community. In a span of a few months, and through collaboration with local governments and agencies, seed companies, private individuals, volunteers, and a grassroots organization for the urban poor, several community gardens for urban poor women in the provinces of Laguna, Batangas, and Tarlac were established. The women were given hands-on training in organic farming, project management, and community organizing. The involvement of the women in the community gardens created a sense of belonging and paved the way to build their confidence and empower them. These women are now being recognized as leaders in their communities.

Bless Adriano is a blind young woman from the Philippines who reconnected with other advocates for disability inclusion during the pandemic. She became one of the pioneering members and was elected president of a group of youth with disabilities working to increase awareness on disability rights. Carmen Zubiaga had a long career in government, the United Nations, and civil society organizations working towards disability-inclusive policies and programs. The pandemic inspired her to use computer technology, the internet, and social media as tools to connect with more people and to advance her advocacies. She recently created a national NGO to amplify the voice of PWDs and increase their participation in the political realm.



“VfG provides the platform for women and grassroots organizations to share [with] a bigger audience about what they are doing and how it is transforming lives.”

- Reflection from a participant, Voices from the Grassroots, International Development Week virtual event

Individuals and organizations who are seeing positive impacts and change need to be given a larger platform for their voice—what’s being done in one place may be applicable in many others. If people aren’t aware though and don’t form those networks, then those successes can’t be shared as they could/should be.”

- Reflection from a participant, Voices from the Grassroots, International Development Week virtual event

“What is impactful is the indirect mentoring provided in the activity for women. I think there is a lack of more empowered women’s groups in the community. To learn that women can be change-makers and change-leaders for me is a powerful message.”

- Reflection from a partner, Voices from the Grassroots project

Carolyn, a girl from South Sudan, not only helped her family earn a living during the pandemic but also took the initiative of teaching young girls and boys in her community about the importance of hygiene. At her young age, we could already see her potential for leadership in her home as well as in her community.

Marie Haruona and Barbara Kayanja of World Renew’s West Africa and East Africa Regional Teams, respectively, are recognized by their organization as gender champions. They have consistently been working with vulnerable women and girls and are making significant contributions to gender-transformative programming. They are not only building the capacity of women in communities, but also serving as role models to other women in their organization and networks.

The VfG provided a platform to raise awareness on the exemplary efforts of these women. By sharing their stories through the digital flipbook and virtual events, countless lives are being touched and more people around the world are being inspired.

The VfG project was very well-received based on an average of 84 registrations per virtual event, 781 digital flipbook views in the first six weeks of its official launch, as well as feedback received from breakout sessions and post-event surveys. Survey results showed that 83% of the respondents found the sessions “very valuable” and 17% said the sessions were “valuable.” All survey respondents said they would be able to use the information from the virtual events in their work within the next 12 months. Sixty-four percent (64%) of the respondents to the survey for contributors (interviewees, local partners, coordinators, researchers) said they were “very satisfied” with their involvement, and 36% said they were “satisfied.” All respondents shared that they want to continue their involvement with the VfG project in the future by attending training, taking part in knowledge exchanges, speaking on panels, contributing to thought pieces, coordination work, and writing proposals.

Audiences appreciated that stories were unfiltered and were told in the women’s and girls’ own context, voice, and language. Selected women and girls from the grassroots, coordinators, and researchers involved in gathering the stories on the ground were invited to speak during the three virtual events. The VfG team thought that allowing them to speak and share their lived experiences and messages directly to the audience is to truly embody the meaning of “amplifying the voice” of the women and girls from the grassroots. There have been many

virtual events held in the past several months featuring the impacts of COVID-19 on women, but these were not as powerful and effective as the VfG events where the audience had the opportunity to meet and hear the women and girls “in the flesh.” This approach is consistent with the VfG team’s efforts to present the stories in their purest, most raw, and authentic form to the fullest extent possible.

The VfG team also believes that language should not be a barrier for women and girls to share their messages with the world. The questionnaires for the interviews were translated into French, Spanish, Pashto, and Tagalog, and the interview results were translated from these languages to English. This was to ensure a level of comfort for the researchers as they asked questions and for interviewees as they provided their answers in their own languages. A short video on the VfG project was produced highlighting some of the voices, with some of the interviewees speaking in their native languages. English subtitles were provided as needed in the final video output. Interpretation services were likewise provided during events to make the virtual events more inclusive, creating a more comfortable space for speakers who were not native English speakers to share their presentations in their own language and for non-native English-speaking audiences to participate. With the financial support provided by OCIC for translation services, the VfG project was able to capture a wider variety of stories spanning Central America, Eastern and Western Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia. Simultaneous interpretation into multiple languages, including English, French, Spanish, and Dari allowed these stories to be heard not only in Canada but across the globe as well.

VfG members thought that providing a space for reflection and discussion during the virtual events would be more powerful and effective to inspire and call people to action. After listening to the speakers, participants had the opportunity to share their feelings, insights, and action plans through breakout rooms. Some of the plans of action from participants included issuing a statement and call to action on gender equality in line with International Human Rights Day; sharing these stories in their own circles of influence and continuing the conversations; sharing these stories with Members of Parliament; making financial contributions to some of the grassroots initiatives; and continuing to amplify the voices of the women and girls by sustained interest and involvement in the VfG project.

Several of the women and girls from the grassroots who were involved in the project reflect that there is a common thread among the experiences, challenges,

dreams, goals, and resilience of women from across different geographic and cultural contexts. The disruption in education faced by youth in Uganda was also echoed by students interviewed for the project in Kenya and the Philippines. Several of the interviewees observed that elderly and disabled persons were the most vulnerable during the pandemic. Those who faced job loss, financial problems, and food insecurity all experienced mental and emotional stress. But these women and girls showed their resilience and found ways to adapt to the situation, regardless of their context. The story of how Carolyn, the 14-year-old schoolgirl from South Sudan, found ways to earn and help feed her siblings was particularly a source of admiration and inspiration to other participants in the VfG project. Gladis Noemi Cujcuj from Guatemala said the collaboration to establish community gardens in the Philippines was a good model for them to follow in their work with women in Indigenous and agricultural communities at home in Guatemala. Women living in conflict situations such as Shahla, Marzia, and Zakia from Afghanistan and Marie Haruona from Mali were further weighed down by the impacts of the pandemic, but they all persevered with their work as doctors, nurses, community workers, and women’s rights advocates. This common thread of similar struggles, despite immensely different contexts and countries, was underlined most poignantly during the virtual events. Speakers during virtual events shared that they appreciate the opportunity to talk with and hear from women from other countries. Zakia from Afghanistan reflected that she had never before thought that women in other parts of the world experienced the same issues she is facing in her country. This was the very first time she ever had contact with women from other countries and this gave her a sense of awe and comfort that she is not alone. For Rina de Luna, participation in the VfG paved the way for more partnerships to support work with women and other communities. The VfG project was truly an effective means of bringing people together, uniting women and girls through shared experiences and aspirations, and building solidarity towards the common goal of gender-responsive approaches to the impacts of COVID-19.



“It was my first-ever experience talking and hearing from women far away from my country. I noticed that we share common problems, and I learned a lot from them.”

- Zakia, Afghanistan

“It is an honor to be a part of the voices of so many women in Honduras who do not have the opportunity to access these spaces and to be able to share their ideas.”

- Nuvia Roseny Ortega Burgos, Programa de Reconstrucción Rural, Honduras

“This moves me to try to amplify women’s voices when and where I have the chance. At the same time, I am inspired because they are determined to do something to address the challenges they are facing.”

- Reflection from a participant, Voices from the Grassroots, International Human Rights Day virtual event

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Gender equality, the overarching theme of the Voices from the Grassroots, is at the core of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Gender Equality Hub (GE Hub) was convened in October 2019 as part of the OCIC’s Capacity-Building and Learning Program. The aim of the GE hub is to be a community of learning and practice to facilitate multi-sectoral and stakeholder dialogues, knowledge exchange and mobilization to advance gender equality. The Hub actively examines how a gender transformative and intersectional approach can shape development work, identify current gaps and challenges, and mobilize around current opportunities (OCIC, 2019).

In April 2020, individual and organizational members of the GE Hub (World Accord, Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO-SACO), Global Women’s Network and World Renew) represented by Sara Awad, Maria Carmona, Isabelle Hachette, Celestine Muli, Julian Muturia, Maggie Zeng, and Najia Zewari came together to work on this project with the aim of creating space for grassroots women and girls from the Global South to share their experiences of how the COVID-19 health crisis has affected their lives with the world. In the months that followed, the group worked on the finer details of the project from conceptualization and planning, to gathering the stories, to working with OCIC and a graphic artist to complete the digital flipbook, up to launching and promoting the final product through virtual events. The whole experience was not without challenges, but, driven by their commitment to gender equality and sustainable and inclusive development, the members of the group forged on and completed the digital flipbook in February 2021.

Gender equality (SDG 5) was the driving force and overarching theme of the VfG project. The VfG team believes that efforts towards the attainment of gender equality remain central to the achievement of the SDGs as a whole. Based on the stories that were gathered, COVID-19 had economic and social impacts that eroded the gains towards the attainment of other SDGs, i.e., Goals 1: No Poverty,

2: Zero Hunger, 3: Good Health and Wellbeing, 4: Quality Education, 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, 10: Reduced Inequalities, and 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The pandemic has reinforced the need for partnerships across sectors and among various stakeholders and actors to tackle global challenges. The collaborative effort between OCIC, Gender Equality Hub members, local organizations, community partners, researchers and coordinators, and the women and girls to achieve the objectives of the VfG project was a demonstration of Goal 17: Partnership for the Goals.

2. The women and girls from the grassroots have spoken and we have heard. It is now time for action. These unprecedented times call for unprecedented measures.

These voices from the grassroots call upon us for increased gender-responsive approaches by all sectors and at all levels in rebuilding societies after the pandemic and in dismantling deep-seated structural inequalities. Governments and development actors need to think of a different way of doing things in this new normal. Some of the key themes and areas of action for different stakeholders that were highlighted by these women and girls, by participants in the virtual events, and by members of this working group include the following:

- (i) *Break patriarchal cultures and societal norms where men have the control of resources and power to make decisions at home, in communities, companies, organizations, and government.*

Governments/Policy makers:

- Women and girls need economic empowerment through increased access to income-generating opportunities. There is a need to increase participation of women in the formal labour market rather than informal employment through means such as providing vocational training and skills development targeted for women. Another approach is to provide rewards or incentives (e.g., tax breaks) to companies or employers who are hiring

significant numbers of women in their workforce and/or who have a large composition of females in management positions.

- Laws on ownership of assets such as land and inheritance rights regulations should be reviewed and reformed to ensure that women have equal rights and access to assets as men.
- Enact laws that enforce equal access to financial services (opening an account at a formal financial institution, accessing loans) by both men and women.
- Prioritize technical and financial support for women's cooperatives and incentives for business start-ups led by women, especially for those in Indigenous and remote settings.
- Ensure women's economic engagement in certain countries that are challenged by extremist groups.
- Recognize the value of women's unpaid work (household work, childcare, educating children, taking care of the sick and the elderly, etc.) as important to the country's economy and the wellbeing of individuals and societies. This should be a major consideration in economic analysis, gender analysis, policymaking, and programming.

“We need to ensure voices/stories from vulnerable communities are not only heard but amplified and directed at decision makers and power brokers.”

- Reflection from a participant, **Voices from the Grassroots, International Human Rights Day virtual event**

“I intend to share this with my [Member of Parliament] and key [Members of Parliament] sitting on the House Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.”

- Reflection from a participant, **Voices from the Grassroots, International Human Rights Day virtual event**

“I call on everyone who is better placed to listen to what the women are saying, to be present, to understand them, and to support them towards a just world they would like to create.”

- Barbara Kayanja, **Regional Director of World Renew for Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan**

Communities and households:

- Increase awareness among young girls about their human rights and their value as individuals, starting from the home.
- Provide young women and girls opportunities to enhance their education, build their skills and capacity to be leaders. Increase awareness about women's and girl's rights among men and boys. Men and boys need to be women's allies by, for example, sharing the workload at home to free up the time for women to pursue paid employment, education, self-improvement.
- Change patriarchal attitudes and behaviours through public communication campaigns driven by schools, community, church leaders, and other religious institutions.

(ii) *To truly embrace equality and to achieve the SDGs, we should work to decolonize aid and break down systems of structural racism that pervade the international development system. It is our collective responsibility to transform the sector and to shift power and resources to local actors.*

Donor countries/agencies and international development organizations:

- Aid and international development should be geared towards building the capacity of Global South countries to be more resilient, weaning them rather than making them dependent on Global North donors and creditors.
- Effort should be made to change the jargons that reinforce neocolonial dynamics between the countries with the financial resources ("Global North," "the West," "developed countries," "First World," "donors," etc.) and those with natural and human resources ("Global South," "the East," "underdeveloped countries," "Third World," "beneficiaries," etc.)
- Embrace inclusive approaches such as participatory grant making where decision-making on the amount, purpose, term, payment schedules, etc. is ceded by those providing financial resources to local/community organizations and/or individuals receiving the financial assistance. Participatory grant making is more collaborative and aims to involve the grantee in any or all the pre-grant, granting, and post-grant stages. Participatory approaches promote equity and inclusion in development processes and outcomes.

- Review and reform indicators of aid effectiveness which are currently based on business management principles i.e., "value for money." The more important questions to ask are "Whose needs are being met?", "Who determines these needs?", and "Have these needs been met?"

Multisectoral:

- Collaborate on solutions to end violence against women.
- In the context of war, redefine development needs. Impose accountability for the loss of lives in all conflict zones.
- Advocate for disability inclusion in international development as a cross-cutting theme, similar to gender equality.

(iii) *Put gender equality at the front and center of programmatic and advocacy actions to address the impacts of COVID-19.*

Governments/Polymakers, donor countries/agencies, international development organizations, private sector:

- Work towards the equitable and timely distribution of vaccines, with particular attention to vulnerable groups such as women and girls especially those in remote settings, the elderly, and persons with disability. There is a surplus of vaccines, and many countries in the Global South are in dire need. Build the capacity of countries to be more resilient in facing health crises such as pandemics through knowledge and technology exchange for the development of vaccines. This will enable developing countries to have the capacity to develop and manufacture vaccines on their own.
- Governments should put in place economic and social safety nets to help women and girls to cope when disaster strikes. A universal health care system is a must to provide free and quality health care for all. Unemployment insurance and stop-gap measures such as the Canadian CERB are needed to help address loss of income. Donor countries, multilateral agencies, and

"With women in leadership, we can move towards achieving equality in this era of the pandemic."

- Barbara Kyanja, Regional Director of World Renew for Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan

“Sometimes the greatest capacity to elicit change comes from those places we might not expect and that providing community funding and support is needed as grassroots initiatives aren’t as weighed down by bureaucracy and delays.”

- Reflection from a participant, Voices from the Grassroots, International Development Week virtual event

banks should provide incentives for developing and underdeveloped countries that have strong social protection services to encourage those who don’t to invest into these services.

- Governments should provide just compensation and benefits (e.g., life insurance) for frontline health workers and equip them with sufficient PPE. Women comprise 70% of the global health and social care workforce (World Health Organization), and they need to be protected as they are on the frontlines in the battle against COVID-19.
- Capacity can also be developed about general knowledge of hygiene and sanitation in order to mitigate the effects of health crises like COVID-19.
- Governments to plan well about the

reopening of schools, ensuring a safe environment for students and teachers. Provide for students’ technology needs e.g., tablets and internet connection, if virtual classes will continue to be the mode of teaching. Provide just compensation for teachers and equip them as they undertake the difficult task of revising school curricula to keep up with the changing times.

- Increase financial and technical support for community-led and women-led efforts, including in rural, Indigenous, and remote settings. Community-based organizations are normally the first responders when crises strike, as we have seen during the pandemic. Make women, girls, and marginalized groups part of the solution by engaging with them, knowing them more, and working with them to find solutions. They have the most knowledge about their contexts, and oftentimes, they also have the knowledge on what solutions will work.

Individuals:

As individuals, we can take action by:

- Learning more and deepening our understanding about gender equality issues by attending webinars, doing our own research, and joining groups working to bring about change;
- Sharing about these stories to our circles of influence;
- Advocating with governments and policymakers on the issues that women and girls face, as outlined in this section of the reflection piece;
- Giving financial support to women-led grassroots initiatives;
- Putting the knowledge of gender equality into practice within our own families.



3. The Voices from the Grassroots team envisions the storytelling project to be just the beginning of collaborative work towards amplifying the voices of women and girls from the grassroots.

Here are some best practices learned from the process for completing the project:

- The VfG working group had a unique set-up that proved to be effective. Members (both OCIC organizational and individual members) come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse perspectives but are united by a common passion and commitment to gender equality. It is volunteer-based but members of the team also gained hands-on experience in storytelling, research, project management, and communication and engagement. Through organic self-leadership and co-creation, the members discovered together the “what, why, and how” of the project. For those collaborating to amplify women’s voices—be bold, be creative, be innovative in finding ways of working together.
- Weekly meetings of the VfG team helped the members to flesh out the details of the project and sustain engagement. The meetings also provided a venue for the members to bond and build personal relationships. OCIC played a crucial role in scheduling zoom meetings and doing occasional “team temperature checks” to make sure the team members do not feel overwhelmed and burnt out.

“The VfG project has been a collective journey between women globally, happening in tandem to each of our personal, social, economic and institutional experiences of the pandemic and its consequences. It has been a space to bear witness, to build solidarity and connection, to build awareness across geographies and lived experiences, and to hold space and celebrate leadership and initiative, despite the challenging context.”

- Kimberly Gibbons, Executive Director, Ontario Council for International Cooperation

- Early on, the group did an inventory of the individual members’ expertise, skills, strengths, and resources that each one could bring to the table. This helped to manage expectations and identify other potential sources where there were gaps.
- Record-keeping and note-taking were essential for smooth communications within the group and to make sure ideas were not lost.
- The members of the team also had the opportunity to coach and mentor local partners, researchers, coordinators, and women who were invited to speak during the virtual events.
- Translation services were key to make the VfG project and the virtual events more inclusive and to ensure participation by those who are not native English speakers.
- The VfG team and OCIC treated sensitive information and identities of vulnerable women and girls with utmost confidentiality. A consent form was signed by interviewees to ensure that the VfG project only discloses information within the bounds of what the interviewees felt comfortable and safe to share.
- Interviewees, researchers, and speakers appreciated the honoraria they received for contributing to the project. Any project involving interviewing women and girls from the grassroots should have a budget allocation to compensate the women and girls for time spent in contributing to the project. Oftentimes, the time they spend to contribute to the project means they would have to forego an income-generating activity, and women and girls should be fairly compensated for the emotional labour they take on by sharing their stories.
- OCIC’s logistical, financial, and technical support provided a strong backbone for the project. The overall benefit of the project far outweighs the minimal cost of no more than C\$6,000 to produce the digital flipbook, a short promotional video, and the three virtual events.

Below are some of the potential ways forward that the VfG working group envisions:

- There is a need to build strategic alliances and harmonize work among organizations and coalitions doing similar work of amplifying voices from the grassroots.
- The government and funding agencies should increase support for small and medium organizations (SMOs) in Canada who are immersed in and have strong connections with local organizations and communities. The SMOs

- have information about local contexts at their fingertips and have a better understanding of on-the-ground realities and traditional practices. They can also attract support from bigger organizations and international communities.
- Engage and involve diaspora communities as they are key to linking the international development community in Canada to the grassroots in the Global South. As evidenced by the VfG project, members of the working group used their contacts at the grassroots level to gather a rich collection of stories from diverse contexts (including rural women, Indigenous women, urban poor, a young woman living in a shelter, women in fragile and conflict-affected situations, women with disabilities, a school girl living in a refugee camp, a university student, health workers, gender equality advocates, women working in local NGOs, academics, and women in leadership positions).
- Engage with new actors such as women of influence in Canada, women entrepreneurs, women’s professional associations, diaspora holding influential and political positions, artists (musicians, dancers, visual artists, graphic designers, photographers, filmmakers), media (television, radio, social media influencers).
- Women should be given the opportunity to engage with women from around the world who are also experiencing similar situations and provide avenues for collaboration and learning from each other. Facilitating North-South and South-South collaboration through strengthening networks, resources, and technology to provide a platform where these women can engage with each other is a key part of this. Providing opportunities for meaningful engagement, albeit virtually, in an international setting is an experience that will go a long way in building self-confidence and empowering these women and girls who do not have opportunities to access such spaces given normal circumstances.
- Sustain the conversations that have been initiated through the VfG project. Make the voices of the women count and influence policies and programs. Provide financial and technical resources to support the advocacy of women and girls of the VfG project and beyond. Use the digital flipbook as a tool for the advocacy work of women and girls. Translate materials in local languages. Sustain capacity building and mentoring for women and girls of the VfG. Future projects should be driven by the participants themselves.

“Although obviously resources and funding are needed to get many projects off the ground, what’s really needed is a shared sense of willingness and motivation to see change.”

- Reflection from a participant, Voices from the Grassroots, International Human Rights Day virtual event

Figure 1 shows the central role of the GE Hub and OCIC in facilitating North-South, South-South, and North-South-South knowledge exchange and collaboration to achieve gender equality. The VfG project is an example of how the GE Hub and OCIC provided a platform to enable women and girls from the grassroots in the Global South countries to share their stories to the Global North - Canadian stakeholders as well as the global community more broadly. The VfG project also opened up opportunities for women and girls from the eight countries to engage with each other. The VfG team envisions the VfG project to be just the beginning of more engagement and collaboration between North-South, South-South, North-South-South towards the goal of gender equality.

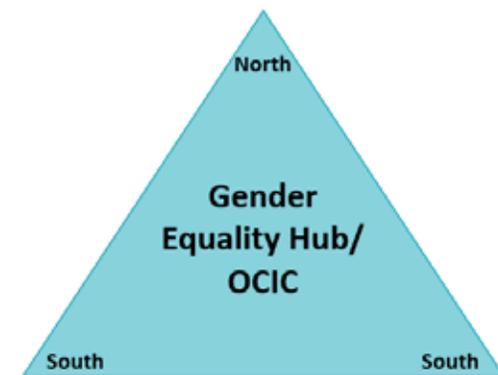


Figure 1: Visualization of the central role of the Gender Equality Hub/OCIC in facilitating North-South, South-South, and North-South-South collaboration across sectors and countries

Figure 2 shows the different “spheres of influence” or stakeholders in the goal of gender equality, as well as the central role of the GE Hub and OCIC in linking these stakeholders together. The interconnectedness of the circles is reflective of global solidarity, partnerships, and cooperation. The VfG project is an example of an initiative that can potentially strengthen global efforts towards realizing gender equality and inclusive and sustainable development.

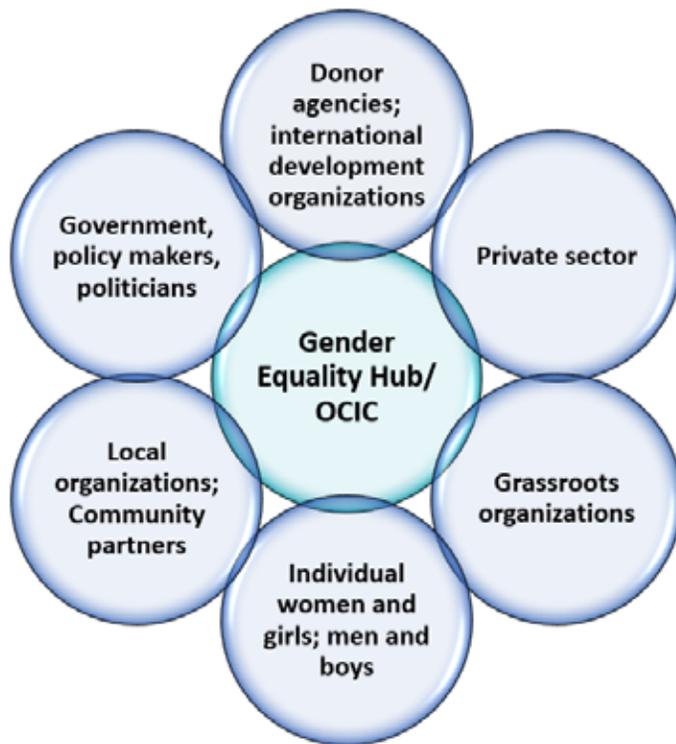


Figure 2: Visualization of the central role of the Gender Equality Hub/OCIC in facilitating collaboration across different spheres of influence

Conclusion

There are many reports about the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls, but first-hand accounts of their lived experiences captured through Voices from the Grassroots help us understand the situation better. As we rebuild societies after the pandemic and as we work to dismantle inequality in all its forms and shades, let us continue to amplify and listen to the voices of the women and girls from the grassroots and take action to ensure no one is left behind by 2030 and beyond.

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