

# PERSPECTIVES ON ACTIVISM, MOBILIZATION, AND MOVEMENT BUILDING FOR ABORTION RIGHTS:

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## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Commissioned By  
The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU)  
By Marissa Billowitz  
October, 2024



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This exploratory study examines collaboration between NGOs and grassroots activists within the abortion rights movement in different global contexts, uncovering the dynamics that contribute to effective advocacy and movement building. Abortion rights are critical to gender equality, yet activists around the world encounter complex challenges, from legal restrictions to societal stigma. By documenting the perspectives of civil society organizations, this report provides inputs to encourage reflection and learning on how to support more effective movement-building.

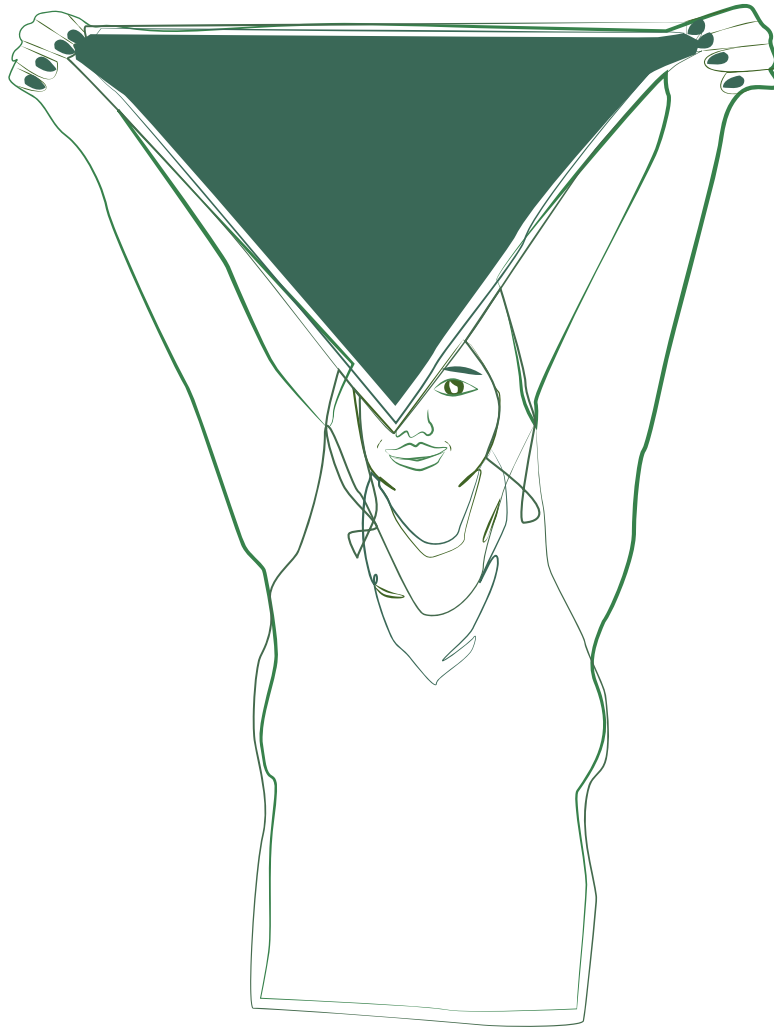
Findings show that partnerships can benefit all parties, as NGOs bring resources and capacity-building opportunities that strengthen grassroots work. In turn, activists provide vital local knowledge and networks, increasing the reach and relevance of advocacy efforts. These collaborations, however, are not without challenges; grassroots groups often face resource constraints, and power imbalances sometimes arise between larger organizations and local activists. Moreover, cultural and social stigma around abortion can hinder public engagement and advocacy momentum, necessitating sensitive, adaptable approaches.

The report recommends a framework for more equitable partnerships, advocating for direct financial support, open communication, and respect for activist autonomy. By engaging in joint campaigns and prioritizing intersectional approaches, NGOs and activists can create a more resilient, inclusive movement. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of adaptable, resourceful partnerships in advancing reproductive rights and highlights the need for ongoing reflection to sustain impactful advocacy in the face of evolving social and political landscapes.

Since 1933, RFSU has worked to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) globally, empowering people to improve their lives. As an independent nonprofit, free from political or religious ties, we support nearly 50 partners and networks across Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. We advocate for sustained SRHR commitments in Swedish foreign policy, the EU, and the UN while promoting an open, informed approach to sexuality and relationships. Guided by the belief that sexuality is central to individuals and society, we aim to combat prejudice, reduce ignorance, and enhance sexual health worldwide, championing freedom, choice, and human rights.

The Learning4Change platform is created to facilitate opportunities for knowledgesharing and mutual learning between partners, including RFSU, integrating evidence from practice and results in order to encourage innovation, and improved performance. The Learning4Change Platform has three Clusters that focuses on three thematic areas; Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), Safe and legal abortion and Sexuality and non-discrimination.

The Abortion cluster consists of around 15 organizations engaged in abortion rights and are based in all regions that RFSU have partners. In 2023, the Abortion Cluster chose to focus the coming years on three key themes related to abortion: activism, opposition, and stigma, selected to inspire collective learning and improve advocacy efforts. This exploratory study represents the first of the three themes, a mapping and documentation of its partners' efforts around activism and mobilization.



## BACKGROUND

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Abortion rights are fundamental to gender equality and reproductive health, reflecting the broader struggle for women's autonomy and the rights of all people capable of pregnancy to make informed choices about their bodies. Access to safe and legal abortion services is crucial for protecting the health of women, reducing maternal mortality, and ensuring that individuals can exercise their reproductive rights without fear of stigma or legal repercussions. The movement for abortion rights is diverse and varies significantly across the globe, shaped by cultural, political, and social contexts. In some regions, activists face formidable legal barriers and societal stigma, while in others, they benefit from supportive frameworks that promote reproductive health. This report explores the multifaceted nature of the abortion rights movement, highlighting the experiences and collaborations of activists and organizations working tirelessly to advocate for safe and accessible abortion services in their communities.

This study seeks to **collect and compile information from a selection of civil society organizations<sup>1</sup> regarding their work with activism, mobilization, and movement building, opportunities and challenges they see in their countries, and how they work in practice with these themes.** This report describes the findings from a series of interviews with civil society organizations and activists engaged in the abortion movement in countries around the world. Please see the Annex for more information about the methodology and participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this report refers to more established organizations as “NGOs” or “civil society organizations” although we recognize that there is overlap in this nomenclature with the activist and grassroots organizations.

# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Although interviews explored participants' definitions of activism, in this section, some key concepts are defined as they pertain to abortion rights advocacy and this study.

## Activism

**ACTIVISM** refers to direct, intentional actions taken by individuals or groups to bring about social, political, or environmental change. It often involves efforts to challenge existing power structures and advocate for marginalized communities. In the context of abortion rights, activism includes efforts to increase access to safe and legal abortion, reduce stigma, and advocate for women's bodily autonomy. Tarrow (1994) defines activism as "collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities." This concept is central to the work of Learning 4 Change partners, who often operate in contexts where abortion is stigmatized or legally restricted.

## Mobilization

**MOBILIZATION** is the process through which individuals or groups are organized to take collective action toward a shared goal. It involves both the recruitment of participants and the coordination of resources and strategies to achieve social change. Mobilization often serves as a precursor to broader activism, facilitating the

engagement of community members and creating networks of support. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) describe mobilization as the "means through which collective actors acquire and deploy resources in order to advance their interests." In the case of the organizations in this study, mobilization might include organizing community campaigns, educational outreach, or grassroots efforts to build support for abortion rights in restrictive environments.

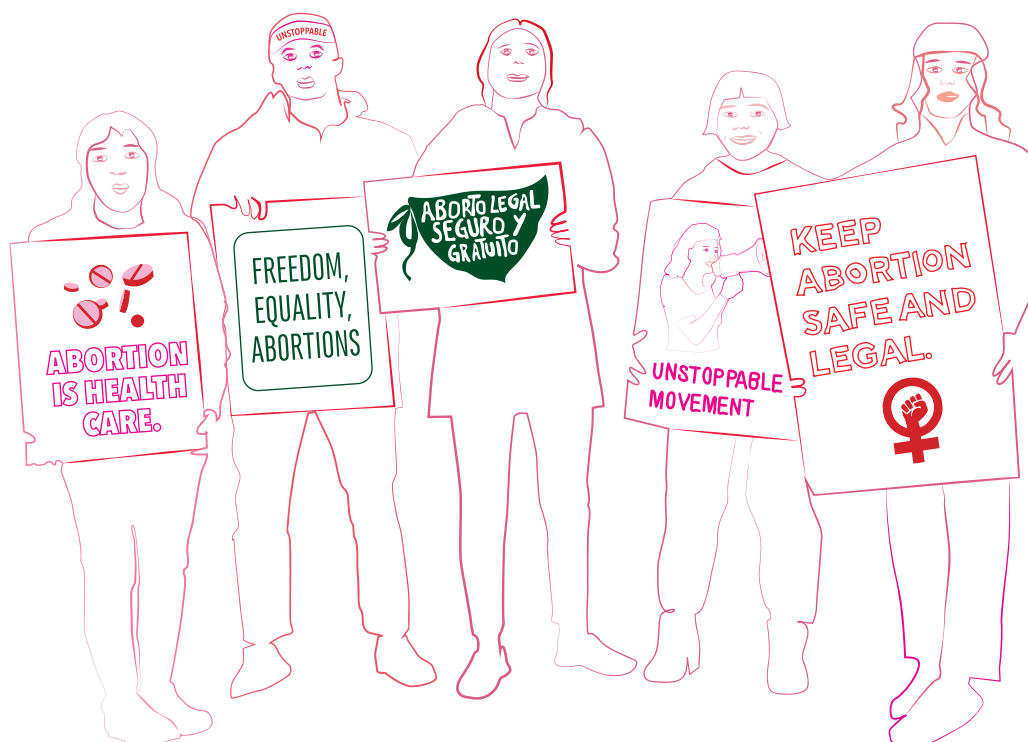
## Social Movement

A **SOCIAL MOVEMENT** is a sustained, organized effort by a group of people to promote or resist change in society, particularly in the realm of social and political rights. Social movements often emerge from mobilized groups and extend over time, involving a variety of tactics such as protests, advocacy, and public education. Social movements are not one-off events but continuous efforts aimed at systemic change. According to Tilly (1978), social movements are defined by “a series of contentious performances, displays, and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on others.” The abortion rights movements within different countries and regions, fit within this framework as a collective effort to challenge legal and societal barriers to safe, legal abortion and reduce the stigma surrounding reproductive rights.

## Movement building

**MOVEMENT BUILDING** refers to the deliberate process of creating and nurturing a collective, organized group of people and organizations who work together towards achieving shared goals, often around social or political change. It involves connecting individuals and smaller groups into a larger network or coalition, fostering solidarity, and developing a long-term strategy for creating structural change. Movement building goes beyond short-term mobilization or activism, focusing on building the capacity, infrastructure, and unity needed for sustained efforts over time. Movement building is particularly relevant in the context of social justice, where change is often complex, long-term, and requires the coordination of diverse actors, including grassroots organizations, activists, policymakers, and allies. It is characterized by strategic collaboration, mutual learning, and continuous expansion of the movement’s influence and resources. (Ganz, 2010; Sen, 2003; Staggenborg, 2011)

Within the abortion rights movement, these concepts are relevant as achieving a favorable legal framework as well as real access to abortion services or self-managed abortion, requires a variety of actors within any context. The participants in this study work mostly in more established non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and contributing to a larger movement requires collaborations with grassroots activists, among others.



## WAYS OF COLLABORATING WITHIN A MOVEMENT

As within any movement, mobilization, engagement between grassroots activists and formal civil society organizations, and movement building are essential tools for countering resistance and driving meaningful change in the fight for abortion rights and reproductive health. By mobilizing communities and fostering grassroots activism, civil society organizations can use their platforms to amplify voices that are often marginalized, creating a louder and broader front against opposition. Engaging with activists not only strengthens the movement but also cultivates a sense of shared purpose and solidarity among diverse groups. This collaborative approach enables the exchange of ideas, strategies, and resources, enhancing the overall effectiveness of advocacy efforts. Movement building fosters resilience, allowing activists to adapt to challenges and persist in their efforts despite societal stigma or legal barriers. Together, these strategies empower individuals and communities to challenge oppressive systems, advocate for their rights, and ultimately create a more equitable landscape for reproductive health and justice.

### How to Engage with Activists

#### Coalitions

Almost all of the study participants are involved in coalitions dedicated to advancing or protecting abortion rights in their countries. These coalitions may focus specifically on abortion or address sexual and reproductive health and rights more broadly. By creating advocacy strategies around their topics, these coalitions offer opportunities for more formal NGOs or larger organizations to interact with activists from non-formal collectives or smaller organizations. Many of these coalitions have decision-making governance structures, which help foster more equal relationships, despite larger organizations being better resourced. Other coalitions, such as those mentioned by participants from Liberia and India, are less formal. In Liberia, a working group on access to safe abortion has been formed, consisting of diverse individuals and organizations, including NGOs and grassroots activists. This group meets regularly to share ideas and coordinate advocacy efforts.



A notable exception to coalition work is Georgia, where collaboration is not characterized by formal coalitions. Even among organizations working on reproductive health, participants expressed that their colleagues are reluctant to engage in the abortion movement due to stigma, and organizations primarily work with a small number of individuals rather than through a coalition of other organizations.

### **Joint advocacy campaigns**

Civil society organizations collaborate with grassroots collectives and activists on joint advocacy efforts, which may not be connected to ongoing coalitions. Organizations like Pinsan in the Philippines have used post-abortion care as an entry point for broader discussions about abortion rights. They collaborate with local activists to organize awareness campaigns that highlight the importance of post-abortion care while simultaneously addressing the stigma surrounding abortion.

In various countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, India, Mexico, and Nepal activists and NGOs come together to organize events on the 28th of September, Global Day of Action for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion, to advocate for safe and legal abortion access. For instance, in Argentina, large public demonstrations are held to push for legislative changes, while in Mexico, local collectives mobilize to raise awareness about the need for safe abortion services. In Liberia, the informal working group on access to safe abortion has organized campaigns to advocate for changes in public health laws to ensure safe access to abortion services. This collaboration has involved mobilizing information and resources to effectively target opposition. In the Philippines, organizations like Pinsan and other feminist collectives have worked together to advocate for the decriminalization of abortion. They have organized joint campaigns that include public demonstrations, educational workshops, and community outreach to raise awareness about reproductive rights and the need for legal reforms.

### **Capacity building projects**

The NGOs that participated in this study have initiated projects aimed at building the advocacy capacities of grassroots women's rights organizations and youth-led organizations. This includes training on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) while integrating abortion advocacy into broader health agendas. For example, in Bolivia, CDD has worked to integrate the abortion agenda into broader discussions on rights and health with various groups, including those focused on indigenous rights and LGBTQ+ rights. In the Philippines, training sessions on policy advocacy and resource mobilization are part of the efforts to strengthen local organizations' capabilities in addressing reproductive rights. In India, Common-Health, in collaboration with CREA Abortion, has conducted training institutes with grassroots organizations to build their capacity to conduct local advocacy.

### **Provision of resources for grassroots movements**

In addition to capacity building, NGOs actively support grassroots movements by providing economic resources as well as platforms for activists to voice their concerns and experiences, sometimes allowing for a greater reach with their messages. CHI in Liberia, for example, engages with informal working groups focused on access to safe abortion, providing support in the form of small grants to conduct awareness-raising activities and dialogues on the decriminalization of abortion. This financial support enables grassroots activists to engage more effectively with their communities and advocate for change. In the Philippines, WGNRR also provides resources to community-based organizations for conducting stakeholders' meetings on abortion-related issues. CDD Bolivia also offers economic resources to help smaller organizations in the movement organize campaigns and raise awareness about reproductive rights. TICAH, a grassroots-focused organization in Kenya has engaged with larger national and international NGOs that provide support and resources for local activism. These collaborations aim to build capacity and ensure that local voices are amplified in broader advocacy efforts.

### **Collaboration on self-managed abortion and referrals to services**

Another important way in which NGOs collaborate with grassroots activism is by engaging with networks that accompany people seeking abortions, whether self-managed with medication or through referrals to services. Organizations such as the Mama Network, an African network that seeks to provide access to self-managed abortion and in which TICAH participates, mobilize resources and coordinate efforts to provide information and support for women seeking self-managed abortions. They also run a hotline that provides information and refers individuals to services. While TICAH and the Mama Network, which are more grassroots in their approach, are very open about this work, some more formal NGOs may be less likely to publicize these connections because of legal restrictions and stigma. In Mexico, the Philippines, and Uruguay, NGO participants in this study collaborate with grassroots networks that provide accompaniment to people seeking self-managed abortion, offering services or referrals for post-abortion care.

### **Participation in public mobilization**

NGOs also participate in large mobilizations with grassroots activists. In Argentina, during the Green Wave movement, they helped organize and attended large public demonstrations, which were pivotal in raising awareness and pushing for legislative change. The movement saw significant participation from youth and women's groups, showcasing a united front in advocating for reproductive rights. In Bolivia, various organizations came together to support the Pacto Nacional por la Despenalización del Aborto. This coalition organized public demonstrations and awareness campaigns to advocate for the decriminalization of abortion, highlighting the collective strength of grassroots movements.

### **Solidarity actions**







Some NGOs, like RFSU as a national Swedish organization, have engaged in solidarity work, such as fundraising for activists in other countries facing legal challenges, like those in Poland.

### **Intersectional approaches**

Though more of a "how" than a "what," it is worth mentioning that the NGOs in this study collaborate with various groups outside of the immediate SRHR circle, including those focused on disability rights and Indigenous peoples, to ensure that abortion rights are addressed within broader social justice frameworks, and that the abortion movement itself is inclusive.

## Benefits of Collaboration with Grassroots Actors

Collaboration between NGOs and grassroots activists can benefit both parties, enhancing the scope and effectiveness of their advocacy work. Both NGOs and grassroots activists cited the following as benefits of collaborating with activists and more grassroots organizations:

-  **Local knowledge and advocacy:** Grassroots activists possess a deep understanding of their communities, enabling NGOs to advocate effectively at the local level. By partnering with these local activists, NGOs can extend their reach into remote or marginalized regions, where activists play a crucial role in localizing advocacy agendas and making connections.
-  **Coordination and mobilization:** Successful coordination among diverse groups enhances the mobilization of information and targeting of opposition, leading to effective advocacy efforts. Long-term partnerships yield significant results, as sustained collaborations foster a better understanding of local needs.
-  **Capacity building:** NGOs provide valuable training and resources to activists, strengthening their advocacy and other capabilities. Workshops on advocacy strategies can enhance activists' work, and training in resource mobilization equips them with essential skills and tools for effective skills to sustain the movement.
-  **Support systems for activists:** Collaborating with NGOs can offer activists a supportive foundation that encourages their continued commitment to advocacy efforts, and can provide protection in some cases.
-  **Collective advocacy:** Joint efforts between NGOs and activists mobilize larger networks of support, resulting in more impactful advocacy. Collective actions, such as campaigns for abortion rights, demonstrate the power of a united voice in influencing social and legal change. Grassroot activists see the benefits of their collaboration with better resources partners for increased visibility of the issues and communities that matter to them.
-  **Intersectional approaches:** Collaborations often incorporate an intersectional understanding of issues, engaging diverse groups, including those focused on disability rights and indigenous peoples. This inclusivity ensures that advocacy addresses the interconnectedness of various forms of discrimination and human rights violations.





## Challenges

Though participants overall were supportive of such collaborations, these were the challenges that they highlighted that can impede the success of partnerships between NGOs and activists:

-  **Limited representation:** Grassroots abortion activists often struggle to authentically bring their voices to international platforms, which can dilute the impact of their advocacy. This can occur especially if their messages are being presented by others, or their content is being edited by others.
-  **Resource constraints:** Many grassroots organizations face sustainability issues and lack the necessary funding to fully engage in ongoing advocacy efforts, making it difficult to engage with other actors regularly.
-  **Bureaucratic hurdles:** Navigating funding processes can be particularly challenging for grassroots movements, especially those that are not legally registered. These bureaucratic obstacles can significantly slow down advocacy efforts.
-  **Power dynamics:** Imbalances between larger NGOs and smaller grassroots organizations can create tensions, particularly when NGOs seek or appear to take credit for joint efforts. This can lead to conflicts over attribution, with activists feeling overshadowed or underrepresented. In addition, the imbalance in budget availability can exacerbate an uneven power relationship.
-  **Cultural and social stigmas:** Activists addressing sensitive issues, such as abortion rights, often encounter resistance due to deeply ingrained social stigmas. Some organizations may hesitate to engage in advocacy for fear of backlash from religious or conservative groups.
-  **Strategic differences:** Differences in communication styles and strategies can hinder collaboration even within the same movement. For example, in a recent webinar, the Shout Your Abortion organization in the United States highlighted that it can be difficult to collaborate with more mainstream abortion rights organizations because they are not aligned on messaging. Grassroots organizations can push the envelope more on language, including using humor and irreverence, whereas more established NGOs may worry about alienating their political allies if they adopt such messaging.
-  **Challenges in mobilizing the public:** In many settings, it can be challenging to mobilize the public to engage as abortion rights activists because of stigma or other cultural factors. Conversely, RFSU highlighted that in Sweden, despite abortion rights facing setbacks, it is difficult to engage the public because they take abortion rights for granted.

## Protection of Activists as Human Rights Defenders

More formal NGOs in some places play a role in protecting activists, especially those engaged in sensitive areas such as reproductive rights. It is important to note that many of the NGO staff that participated in this study are also considered human rights defenders and activists, and face these security concerns themselves. Several protective measures were identified:

-  **Supportive environment:** NGOs create environments that ensure activists are respected and valued, particularly in contexts where they may face societal stigma or legal challenges. Some organizations reported that they have not encountered significant opposition, allowing them to focus more on supporting activists.
-  **Digital security measures:** Activists often face risks in their work, particularly with increasing threats on social media and online spaces. NGOs help mitigate these risks by implementing digital security protocols, including training activists on secure communication and ensuring safe channels for information exchange.
-  **Training and capacity building on security:** Some NGOs offer security training, particularly for women human rights defenders. This training helps activists recognize and manage risks they may face, thus reducing vulnerabilities. For example, some organizations conduct integrated security training to protect activists from various threats.
-  **Cautious public engagement:** In certain cases, NGOs are careful to avoid using institutional logos or overt branding in public protests or demonstrations to protect activists' identities and ensure their autonomy. This helps shield activists from potential retaliation or scrutiny.

## Variables to consider in collaborations

The study explored variables that should be taken into consideration for NGO and grassroots activist collaborations. Here are some of the themes that emerged:

**Definition of activism:** In addition to the above findings on the types of collaborations between RFSU partners and grassroots activists, this study also found that ideas about activism vary within different contexts.

*“For us, activism has a face; it represents the inequalities, violence, and lack of rights in our communities.”* – Study participant

In some settings, an activist includes anyone advocating for women’s rights and bodily autonomy, while in others, the term may have more specific connotations. For example, in the Philippines, activists are often seen as those who engage critically with the government, while advocates may work more within the system. This distinction can affect how collaborations are structured. Indeed, almost everyone who participated in the study considered themselves an activist. Interestingly, some noted that activists are those that, no matter what profession they are in, will participate in the abortion rights movement. They noted that there are staff working at reproductive health NGOs for whom the work is simply their job. This distinction can affect how collaborations are structured. These differences, between those for whom social justice and rights are a fundamental passion, and those who are in the movement for other reasons, should be taken into account when considering how collaborations can be successful.

Despite some evidence from other studies that grassroots activists may be younger than their NGO counterparts (Fondo Semillas, 2023), this study did not find any evidence to that effect. However, age was mentioned as a consideration in power dynamics.

**Power dynamics:** Power relationships based on age, gender, and organizational size can impact collaborations. Younger activists may have different priorities and approaches compared to older, more established activists. Additionally, larger NGOs may dominate discussions, potentially sidelining grassroots voices. An example from the interviews indicated that youth organizations may engage in more fluid and creative forms of activism, such as theater and music, while older organizations may focus on traditional protests.

**Legal status and recognition:** The legal status of organizations can affect their ability to collaborate effectively. Many grassroots movements operate without formal registration, which can limit their access to funding and resources. This was highlighted by activists who noted that unregistered groups face significant barriers in securing support from larger NGOs.

**Intersectionality:** Understanding the intersectionality of issues is crucial. Activists may be involved in multiple movements (e.g., disability rights, gender rights, etc.), and recognizing these intersections can enhance collaboration. For instance, one activist mentioned the importance of including diverse voices from various sectors to create a more comprehensive advocacy agenda.

**Cultural context and sensitivity:** The cultural context of activism, including societal norms and taboos, plays a significant role in shaping advocacy strategies. Activists working in conservative environments may need to navigate these cultural sensitivities carefully to avoid backlash. For example, introducing abortion rights in communities with strong religious beliefs can be particularly challenging, requiring nuanced approaches.

## CASE STUDIES

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### **Case Study:** **FUSA and Grassroots Activists in Buenos Aires Province**

FUSA is a leading organization in Argentina that focuses on sexual and reproductive health and rights service provision and advocacy. FUSA began a partnership with regional grassroots activists participating in the “Marea Verde” national abortion rights movement when local activists in towns outside of the capital city, in the Buenos Aires Province reached out for support in monitoring the implementation of reproductive health laws. The activists were documenting significant barriers in accessing abortion services, and FUSA’s involvement provided much-needed structure and resources. This collaborative effort was driven by a shared recognition of the challenges posed by restrictive policies and inadequate health infrastructure in the provinces.

Building on this initial collaboration, FUSA and the activists launched a project to introduce comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in secondary schools. While the activists were embedded in the local communities, their credibility was often questioned by conservative authorities. By partnering with FUSA, an established NGO with a national presence, the activists were able to gain access to schools, where they organized workshops for adolescents. These workshops went beyond traditional sex education by creating spaces for open discussions about identity, rights, and sexuality, which were otherwise silenced by local societal norms.

Despite these advances, the activists frequently encountered resistance from local governments and conservative groups, who were hostile toward discussions of sexual and reproductive health and abortion in particular. In some instances, local regulations barred activists from monitoring health centers directly, forcing them to adopt creative tactics like posing as clients to gather data on access to services. The partnership with FUSA proved instrumental in overcoming these challenges, as it provided both logistical support and a shield of legitimacy that allowed the activists to continue their work in difficult environments.

For the activists, working with FUSA has been transformative. They expressed that they felt more confident and empowered in their advocacy efforts, knowing they had a supportive organization behind them. FUSA, on the other hand, benefited from the activists’ deep understanding of local issues and grassroots connections, which enabled the NGO to adapt its national advocacy strategies to meet specific community needs. The activists also expressed that FUSA always treated them as equals, and allowed them to take the lead on their project strategies.

This collaboration demonstrates how formal NGOs and grassroots activists can complement each other, with FUSA providing the resources and institutional backing, while the activists offer the local knowledge and on-the-ground presence necessary to drive meaningful change.



## Case Study: Collaboration Between NGOs and Activists in Georgia

In Georgia, the collaboration between NGOs and activists involved in reproductive health and abortion advocacy presents a unique set of dynamics. The challenges and opportunities for collaboration highlight the complexities of working in a country where stigma and legal barriers shape the advocacy landscape.

Unlike in many countries where coalitions are a primary vehicle for advocacy, activists in Georgia often operate in small, fragmented groups. Although around 25 organizations are involved in reproductive health issues, only a few focus explicitly on abortion advocacy. Stigma surrounding abortion discourages many groups from engaging fully in this space, leaving a small number of committed activists to lead the charge.

In Georgia, activism is often driven by personal networks rather than formal coalitions. Due to the country's small size, many activists know each other, facilitating a degree of informal collaboration based on their activist identity more than their institutional affiliation. While this can be beneficial for quick communication and coordination, it also limits the scale of the movement. There is a lack of structured networks or formalized coalitions that could provide the broader organizational strength needed to challenge deeply entrenched stigmas around abortion.

One innovative aspect of the collaboration in Georgia is the involvement of medical professionals in advocacy efforts. Activists have recognized the critical role that healthcare providers play in the abortion debate, and they have made concerted efforts to engage doctors in their discussions. These collaborations aim to ensure that medical professionals are informed about the legal and ethical dimensions of abortion, promoting stigma-free care for patients.

The legal changes in Georgia in 2023 around abortion access have prompted activists to organize strategic discussions and meetings with stakeholders, including doctors and legal experts. These meetings aim to assess the impact of the new regulations and craft responses that balance education and advocacy. While activists strive to raise awareness about abortion rights, the legal restrictions on promoting abortion create significant barriers. Activists must walk a fine line, focusing on education and awareness-raising while avoiding direct promotion, which could lead to penalties. This makes it difficult to engage in open, broad-scale advocacy or movement-building efforts.

One of the most effective tools for Georgia's activists has been the use of storytelling to humanize the abortion issue. By sharing personal experiences of abortion, activists hope to reduce stigma and foster greater empathy among the public. These efforts, while still in their early stages, represent a key strategy for shifting public attitudes and challenging the cultural taboos surrounding abortion.

The collaborative efforts among activists within the Georgia abortion movement are characterized by a deep understanding of the local context, particularly the constraints posed by stigma and legal restrictions. While formal coalitions are limited, activists are finding ways to work together through personal networks and targeted strategies. The involvement of medical professionals and the focus on education and storytelling illustrate the creativity and resilience of the movement, even in a challenging advocacy environment.



## LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The following recommendations for fostering good collaboration between NGOs and grassroots activists are based on lessons learned explored in this study and insights gathered through data analysis:

- 1 **Map and connect with other organizations:** NGOs should actively seek out and connect with grassroots organizations and activists in various regions. This mapping can help identify potential collaborators and expand the network of support.
- 2 **Establish a horizontal relationship:** It is crucial to maintain a relationship based on equality and mutual respect. Activists should feel that their contributions are valued and that they have a voice in the collaboration. If the relationship includes a financial element, make efforts to follow the lead of the grassroots actors.
- 3 **Provide financial support:** Economic collaboration is essential. NGOs should offer financial support that allows activists to cover their costs, such as materials for workshops and honorariums for their time, as many are volunteers. This support enables activists to focus on their work without financial strain.
- 4 **Encourage autonomy:** NGOs should allow activists the freedom to develop and implement their projects. This autonomy fosters creativity and ensures that the initiatives are relevant to the community's needs.
- 5 **Be flexible to creativity:** Grassroots activists may have different messaging and strategies that garner support from those that NGOs have been unable to reach. NGOs may be able to fund or provide platforms for those strategies even if they do not feel they can adopt them publicly with their institutional name on them.
- 6 **Facilitate capacity building:** NGOs should provide training and resources that help activists enhance their skills. This can include workshops on social media, project management, advocacy strategies, and fundraising. It is important to offer topics that the activists themselves have identified as important.
- 7 **Promote open communication:** Clear and transparent communication is vital. Both parties should regularly discuss expectations, project goals, and any challenges that arise. This openness helps prevent misunderstandings and builds trust.
- 8 **Engage in joint activities:** NGOs and activists should collaborate on events, campaigns, and outreach efforts. This joint engagement not only strengthens the partnership but also amplifies the impact of their work.
- 9 **Recognize and celebrate achievements:** Acknowledging the successes of collaborative efforts fosters a positive environment and motivates all parties involved. Celebrating milestones can strengthen the partnership and encourage continued collaboration.

## LIMITATIONS

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This study was entirely exploratory and intended to inform learning and reflection about movement building, examining the experiences of organizations associated with RFSU. The findings may not be generalizable or represent the diverse experiences and challenges faced by other actors within abortion movements, as cultural, political, and legal contexts vary significantly. Additionally, the insights are based on interviews with a limited number of participants, most of whom work in more established NGOs, which may not capture the full spectrum of perspectives within the abortion rights movements. Acknowledging these limitations highlights the need for ongoing learning exercises to capture the complexities of the abortion rights movement more comprehensively.

## CONCLUSION

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This report has explored how NGOs engage in collaboration with grassroots activists within the context of abortion rights advocacy. The findings highlight the significant benefits that arise from these partnerships, including enhanced local knowledge, increased visibility for critical issues, and the pooling of resources that can amplify advocacy efforts. By working together, NGOs and activists can create a more robust and effective movement for social change, particularly in challenging environments where stigma and legal barriers persist.

However, the study also identifies several challenges that can impede successful collaboration. Issues such as power dynamics, resource constraints, and cultural sensitivities must be navigated carefully to ensure that the voices of grassroots activists are not overshadowed by larger organizations. The importance of establishing horizontal relationships based on mutual respect and open communication cannot be overstated, as these elements are crucial for fostering trust and collaboration.

The recommendations provided in this report emphasize the need for more formal NGOs in the abortion movement to support grassroots activists through financial backing, capacity building, and the creation of supportive environments that prioritize the safety and autonomy of activists. By recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by grassroots movements, NGOs can play a pivotal role in advancing human rights and social justice.

The collaboration between NGOs and activists is not only beneficial but essential for driving meaningful change in society. As these partnerships evolve, ongoing reflection and adaptation will be necessary to ensure that they remain effective and responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

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## ANNEX

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In 2023, the RFSU Learning 4 Change Abortion Cluster chose to focus on three key themes related to abortion: activism, opposition, and stigma, selected to inspire collective learning and improve advocacy efforts. This exploratory study represents the first of the three themes, a mapping and documentation of its partners' efforts around activism and mobilization. The design and implementation of the study are guided by the Activism Sub-Working Group within the cluster.

The guiding questions for this study, designed in collaboration with the Activism Sub-Working Group were the following:

- 1 How are NGOs engaging with activists or non-formal collectives and what can we learn from it? *This is the study's overarching question.*
  - a. What has worked and what has not?
  - b. What are the benefits (to NGOs and/or to activists) of collaboration and how do they meet each others' needs?
  - c. How is the protection of activists as human rights defenders involved in these relationships?
  - d. What are the challenges to these collaborations?
  - e. What are other variables affecting these relationships that we should consider?

This report seeks to document the findings that respond to these questions through the methodology described below.



## METHODOLOGY

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### Design Session with the Working Group

The study was based on a participatory design. In May 2024, an interactive design session using the platform Miro was held with members of the Learning 4 Change Abortion Cluster Working Group on Activism to receive input on the study design, specifically on overarching study questions, interview questions, and criteria for those to be interviewed. In that session and through written feedback following it, an interview guide, which turned the study questions into questions to be answered by participants, was developed to explore how partner organizations engage in activism, movement-building, and mobilization in their respective regions. The guide included both structured and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to share detailed perspectives on challenges, opportunities, and strategies.

### Interviews

The consultant conducted 12 semi-structured online interviews with 10 RFSU partner organizations and three activists from two grassroots organizations, representing a diverse range of regional and political contexts. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, providing in-depth insights into the local dynamics of activism. These interviews were held virtually to accommodate geographic diversity. In one case, a participant sent written answers due to a poor connection for the online interview. Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed to identify common themes, challenges, and successful practices, as well as lingering questions for future studies.

The participating organizations were:

- Beyond Beijing Committee (BBC) **NEPAL**
- Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD) **BOLIVIA**
- CommonHealth Coalition for Maternal-Neonatal Health and Safe Abortion **INDIA**
- FUSA **ARGENTINA**
- Iniciativas Sanitarias **URUGUAY**
- Marea Verde - Provincia de Buenos Aires, **ARGENTINA**
- Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar (Mexfam) **MEXICO**
- Riksförbundet för Sexuell Upplysning (RFSU) - **SWEDEN**
- Community Healthcare Initiative (CHI) **LIBERIA**
- Philippine Safe Abortion Advocacy Network (Pinsan) - Philippines / Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) **PHILIPPINES/Global**

Interviews were supplemented by the review of secondary sources as well as participation in webinars related to the study questions.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was systematically analyzed using a thematic analysis approach as this was an exploratory study. Responses from the interviews were categorized to identify key patterns in activism, mobilization, and movement-building strategies across regions. The analysis focused on uncovering common challenges faced by organizations, as well as innovative solutions that have emerged from their work. Insights were synthesized into a structured narrative that highlights major themes and specific case studies for illustration. This methodology ensured that the findings were grounded in the lived experiences of the cluster members while also providing actionable insights for RFSU and other partners involved in similar advocacy and movement-building efforts.

## Study questions and Interview questions

Study questions	Interview questions
How are NGOs engaging with activists or non formal collectives and what can we learn from it?	Tell me about your experience collaborating with abortion rights activists. [Probe for the circumstances of the collaboration, number of years]
What has worked and what has not?	What has been most successful about the collaboration?
	What has been least successful about the collaboration?
What are the benefits (to NGOs and/or to activists/movements) of collaboration and how do they meet each others' needs (ex. Providing research that can be used for advocacy)?	How has this collaboration benefited your organization? How has it benefited the activists/collective, from your perspective? [Probe for, are there concrete things that one provide the other, such as funding, research, tools, legitimacy]
How is the protection of activists as human rights defenders involved in these relationships?	How are activists protected within these relationships? How has your organization been involved in ensuring their safety and protection?
What are the challenges to these collaborations?	Have you encountered any challenges in these collaborations? If so, please describe them.
What are other variables affecting these relationships that we should consider? (eg. different concepts of "activist"; regional; power relationships based on age or other)?	What does the term "activist" mean to you/in your context? Are there any issues of power that you encounter in these relationships (for example, due to age differences or differences in types of expertise)?
Other	What are the primary lessons you have learned from these collaborations? Is there anything you would do differently in the future based on your past experiences? What would you advise other RFSU partners seeking to collaborate with activists in the abortion movement?



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