WOMEN FOR WOMEN
INTERNATIONAL

Change Agents: Taking Action

Women for Women International's Change Agents Programme

Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Photo credit: Sefa Nkansa

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Introduction

Since 2017 – across Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan, Rwanda, Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – Women for Women International has designed, tested, scaled and adapted a grassroots advocacy approach. Through this approach, women living in conflict-affected contexts receive advanced leadership and advocacy training to become Change Agents – local advocates driving change within their communities and beyond. As of early 2026, this network includes more than 1,400 Change Agents.

The Change Agents programme has been implemented both as an extension of Women for Women International's year-long integrated social and economic training programme for women survivors of war - Stronger Women, Stronger Nations - and as a standalone grassroots advocacy training open to women beyond programme graduates. This programme reflects our ongoing commitment to strengthening women's voice, meaningful participation and leadership in the decisions that impact their lives.

Women who demonstrate motivation and leadership in their communities participate in Change Agent training, where they strengthen their skills and knowledge, identify the changes they want to see, and create action plans that outline how they will use their voices and experiences to influence decision-makers, powerholders and other stakeholders.

Change Agents shape their advocacy priorities based on what they hear from women in their communities, working collectively to communicate shared priorities and advocate for change. By advancing self-articulated and rights-based priorities, Change Agents contribute to transforming power systems and structures to better uphold and protect the rights of women and girls affected by conflict, while promoting their meaningful participation in the decisions, policies and laws that affect them. Together, Change Agents form a growing grassroots movement of women leaders driving collective change.

This brief builds on our iterative learning process, translating programme insights into case studies that highlight successes and key lessons. The examples demonstrate how this network of community advocates contribute to conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and social cohesion – and ultimately advance the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

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The Change Agents Programme

Marginalised women in fragile and conflict-affected contexts face multiple and intersecting barriers that limit their ability to fully and freely enjoy their rights and participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Grounded in peer learning and solidarity, the Change Agents programme strengthens women's capacity to identify structural barriers and pathways to overcome them.

While standardised across regions, the programme is adapted to specific contexts. Core components include advanced content on women's rights and solidarity; gender and power analysis; leadership development; stakeholder mapping; risk management and action planning; as well as thematic content on climate change; women, peace and security (WPS); women's economic power and justice; and violence against women and girls.

Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Through developing women's knowledge, skills and confidence, Change Agents are better able to:

- **identify** priority issues and target their root causes;
- **understand** the thematic issues such as climate change, climate resilience and climate advocacy; women, peace and security (WPS) and peacebuilding; women's economic power and justice; and violence against women and girls;
- **develop** clear action plans for advocating on the issues they have prioritised.

1

SELECTION: Change Agents either nominate themselves or are nominated by their peers in the Stronger Women, Stronger Nations programme or wider community. They then take part in a selection and enrolment process to ensure they understand the commitment required and can meet the programme expectations around their other responsibilities.

2

TRAINING: Selected women participate in leadership and advocacy training that supports them to translate lived experiences and community insights into a clear understanding of priority issues restricting women's rights in their contexts.

3

ACTION PLAN IMPLEMENTATION: Using their advocacy skills and knowledge, Change Agents develop group action plans - based on the priority issues and key stakeholders they have identified - to advocate for meaningful change. Women for Women International teams provide ongoing mentoring and facilitate connections to community leaders, decision-makers and women's rights organisations, networks and movements.

4

INSPIRING BROADER CHANGE: Change Agents begin their advocacy at the community level, but their collective power influences social norms, policies and decision-making at the local, national and global levels. Through knowledge exchange, participation in global campaigns and convening spaces for dialogue, Change Agents create ripple effects that extend beyond their own communities. Women for Women International's broader global policy and advocacy agendas are directly informed by the issues they identify.

Photo Credit: Caroline Mohan

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Change Agents Driving the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Across the case studies outlined in this brief - from preventing gender-based violence in South Sudan and addressing child trafficking in Nigeria to promoting women's leadership in the DRC and improving access to health services in Iraq – Change Agents are advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in their local communities and beyond.

The WPS Agenda, established through United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and subsequent resolutions, highlights that women's meaningful participation in decision-making, protection from violence, and access to economic and social resources are essential for sustainable peace. These case studies show that women are not only recipients of support but leaders, advocates, and experts in addressing the challenges their communities face.

Through advocacy, community education, the creation of safe spaces, and stepping into leadership roles, Change Agents are addressing the root causes of conflict, including gender inequality, economic exclusion and social marginalisation. Their work demonstrates that women's participation in decision-making is critical to conflict prevention, resilience and the development of inclusive and peaceful communities.

Recognising and amplifying these local initiatives is vital. Whether through hosting a radio show in South Sudan, legal reform to prevent child trafficking in Nigeria, or women representing their communities in public assemblies in the DRC, these examples show that local leadership and partnerships are central to achieving sustainable change. Supporting these efforts ensures that women's voices shape community decisions, strengthen social cohesion, and contribute to long-term peace and security.

Change Agents illustrate how local women's leadership and advocacy bring the WPS Agenda to life. Their knowledge, skills and commitment demonstrate that peacebuilding and conflict prevention are most effective when women are supported to lead, in partnership with their communities.

Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

WPS in Practice

Throughout this brief, we've included short **"WPS in Practice"** snapshots for each case study. These highlight how Change Agents' everyday advocacy is directly advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda - whether by improving safety, shaping local decisions, expanding women's leadership or strengthening community resilience. Together, these real examples show how WPS comes to life in the communities where we work: not as separate pillars but as interconnected actions led by women themselves.

4

Change Agents and *From Asking to Action*

In 2024, we launched our most ambitious advocacy project to date – *From Asking to Action*. Designed to align with the four pillars of the WPS Agenda - participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery – this participatory consultation bridged community-level advocacy with international actors and policymakers, and was co-designed by Change Agents. Change Agent leadership during the design phase strengthened the relevance of questions, improved the accessibility of tools, and increased the legitimacy of findings among communities whose voices are too often unheard.

The consultation engaged more than 6,500 individual women across over 14 conflict-affected countries through surveys, focus group discussions and workshops. In addition, 54 partner organisations contributed through co-design, data collection or key informant interviews. Based on Change Agent recommendations, survey and discussion tools were drafted, reviewed with partners, and pilot-tested in South Sudan before being simplified to improve accessibility based on feedback.

The *From Asking to Action* consultation amplifies women's hopes, challenges, experiences and recommendations - revealing the realities of living through conflict and crisis, the futures women want to build, and the actions needed to make them possible.

Find out more about our *From Asking to Action* global consultation by using this QR code.

Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Change Agents leading *From Asking to Action* in Nigeria

At the outset of the *From Asking to Action* consultation, participatory design workshops with Change Agents across four countries shaped the scope, questions and methodology. In Plateau State, Nigeria, Change Agents identified intersecting barriers including domestic abuse, girl-child trafficking, denial of girls' education, ongoing conflict, forced marriage, limited women's participation in decision-making and restricted access to land and assets. This context informed their collective advocacy with local decision-makers.

To ensure the consultation was genuinely inclusive, Change Agents recommended intentional outreach - home visits and relationship-building with local associations and community groups, including cultural and religious bodies. They continue to apply this participatory approach so the priorities and lived experiences of the most marginalised are amplified in engagement with local decision-makers.

Change Agents shared that they often face familial pushback for engaging in public and economic life beyond prescribed gender roles. Despite this, they persist through community dialogues and advocacy campaigns that promote peace and security. Formal venues, such as court hearings, have become strategic opportunities for visibility and influence, providing official opportunities for their priorities to be heard. For example, following advocacy to include women in hearings over land disputes between Rim and Riyom communities, leaders paused farming on disputed land pending a court decision - reducing tensions and preventing violence.

Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

"There is a boundary community between Rim and Riyom where the community people farm, although it always causes disputes between the two communities claiming the land. The case was then taken to court, yet the dispute continued. I advocated that since the case began in court, only men always attend court hearings, so why not go along with at least one woman to the court hearing as she will have one input or the other? I advised that the land be left unfarmed until the court case is finalised. The Chief listened to my advice and the dispute arising from the land matter ceased until the court case is sorted."

Change Agent, Plateau State - Focus Group Discussion Participant

This example illustrates how women's participation in formal decision-making spaces can reduce community tensions and strengthen conflict prevention. Change Agents identified denial of asset control and ownership as a form of gender-based violence, as it reinforces economic dependency and can increase women's exposure women to gender-based violence (GBV). For Change Agents to be recognised by a local chief in a formal public setting on the issue of assets and land control is a significant achievement. It also demonstrates how Change Agents are mobilising on the issues that are most impacting their communities and making progress towards more inclusive decision-making and prevention of GBV.

WPS in Practice: Nigeria

In Plateau State, Change Agents are putting the WPS Agenda into action by opening spaces that women have historically been excluded from. By engaging in court hearings and community dialogue, they are helping to shape more inclusive decisions and reduce tensions before they escalate. Their work on issues such as land, rights, safety and trafficking shows how women's leadership strengthens everyday peacebuilding and makes local systems more responsive to those most affected by conflict.

The priorities identified through Change Agents' advocacy - and reflected in the *From Asking to Action* consultation - are echoed in the following case studies.

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Change Agents Taking Action

Building Bridges to Improve Health Service Provision in Iraq

Women for Women International has served women survivors of war in Iraq since 2003. In recent years, Change Agents - women leaders from diverse regions across Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq - have navigated shrinking civic space, increased insecurity, and legal proposals affecting women's rights, including changes to the Personal Status Law. Findings from *From Asking to Action* reflected these challenges: 73% of women consulted did not feel safe participating in community activities, yet 55% still wanted to participate in decisions as a fundamental right.

Through cross-regional coordination, Change Agents identified gaps in primary healthcare service delivery as a shared priority. They organised joint advocacy efforts to engage local health directorates. In the Shekhan area, this advocacy prompted unannounced inspections by the Governorate Health Directorate, which led to immediate improvements – including greater staff responsiveness and service adjustments to meet community needs.

One Change Agent took on the role of sustaining collaboration by connecting experienced Change Agents with new participants of the programme through peer-to-peer learning sessions. This approach has helped maintain coordinated advocacy and support continued progress in women's participation in related decision-making processes.

WPS in Practice: Iraq

Collaboration between Change Agents across different regions of Iraq shows how women's leadership contributes to rebuilding trust and stability. By coming together around a practical and essential issue such as healthcare, they have advocated for changes that make services safer, more responsive, and more reliable for communities. This collective organising strengthens social cohesion, improves wellbeing, and shows how women's leadership can help hold public institutions to account – all central to advancing the WPS Agenda.

Photo Credit: Sabua

Radio Shows as a Path to Peace in South Sudan

South Sudan is the youngest country in the world, and its short history has been marked by political instability and recurring conflict. For generations, South Sudanese women have lived with the impacts of war and violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, child marriage, and intimate partner violence.

Finding from the *From Asking to Action* consultation highlight the scale of these challenges. 72% of women identify war, conflict, and insecurity as the biggest barriers to quality of life, while 82% of women said that promoting gender equality and women's rights is the best way to prevent conflict and insecurity. When asked what they need most to advocate against violence, 96% said training and education, and 77% said community support.

Recognising these gaps and the urgent need for wider community engagement, Change Agents in South Sudan worked together to develop a radio talk show called The Voice of Change Agents. The show offers practical advice, recommendations, and examples of positive action for preventing and reducing gender-based violence. It also provides an open forum where women and men can discuss issues of safety, equality, and peace. Radio offers broad reach across dispersed communities and provides a low-risk entry point for dialogue.

The radio show also helps normalise discussions of GBV, increase awareness of rights and available services, and build public support for non-violence. These shifts can contribute to greater bystander intervention and improve women's perceptions of safety. In turn, such changes in social norms contribute to prevention and protection outcomes aligned with the WPS Agenda.

By creating safer spaces for dialogue through their radio programme, Change Agents are taking a holistic approach to addressing one of the primary challenges facing women living in conflict-affected areas. Their work engages men and links violence against women to wider community insecurity, helping address a root cause of conflict - gender inequality – while demonstrating how women's leadership contributes to long-term peace and stability in South Sudan.

WPS in Practice: South Sudan

In South Sudan, Change Agents are using radio to spark conversations that many people have previously been unable to have safely. Talking openly about violence, rights and equality helps shift harmful norms and encourages people to seek help earlier. By leading these discussions, women are shaping community narratives around peace, safety and change. This is a powerful example of how everyday leadership can influence attitudes, strengthen protection and support more peaceful relationships.

Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

Women Leading Change: Promoting Decision-Making and Rights in South Kivu, DRC

Since 2004, Women for Women International – DRC has reached more than 110,419 women. We have been implementing the Change Agents programme in the DRC since 2018. Findings from *From Asking to Action* show that 65% of women cited loss of economic opportunities and 55% cited war, conflict and insecurity as major obstacles, while 62% highlighted the importance of women's leadership within community decision-making structures. In August 2024, the worsening security situation intensified these challenges, exacerbating income losses for many households and further limiting women's political participation, increasing the urgency of women's leadership and representation.

Through the Change Agents programme, women gained knowledge about land rights, trade, and setting up a business. Many quickly realised that challenges around earning an income are not only economic, but political: women's exclusion from village public assemblies meant they had little influence over decisions about land, inheritance, and resources that directly affected their livelihoods.

In response, participants were encouraged to engage in public life and challenge the systemic exclusion of women from village decision-making spaces. They began advocating for women's representation in local assemblies and speaking out about women's inheritance rights in a context where men traditionally hold formal decision-making power.

As a result, one Change Agent stepped into a leadership role in her village's public assemblies, speaking on behalf of women and engaging directly with local authorities. She has addressed critical issues such as girls' education, women's economic power, and inheritance rights. Her advocacy has already led to tangible outcomes, including helping three women reclaim their rightful inheritance that had previously been denied.

Beyond these immediate changes, this Change Agent has become a role model, inspiring other women in her community to raise their voices and participate in decision-making. By securing a formal platform and demonstrating effective advocacy, she is helping to shift gender norms and support women who have been unlawfully denied their right to inherit.

WPS in Practice: DRC

In South Kivu, Change Agents are stepping into local assemblies and helping reshape how decisions get made. By speaking up on issues such as inheritance and education, they are working to ensure that women's rights are recognised and upheld. Each time a woman's voice is heard or she wins back her land, it strengthens community trust and confidence while challenging the norms that sustain inequality. This leadership demonstrates how women's participation in local governance contributes to more inclusive, stable, and peaceful communities.

Photo Credit: Caroline Mohan

Protecting Girls from Child Trafficking in Nigeria

Through the *From Asking to Action* consultation, women highlighted multiple barriers to their rights, including girl-child trafficking and restricted access to land and assets. 60% of the women identified loss of economic opportunities, and 40% cited war, conflict, and insecurity as obstacles to improving their quality of life. It is in this context that Change Agents have come together to advocate for change with local decision-makers.

Change Agents identified economic pressures as a key driver of girl-child trafficking. These economic challenges were echoed in the consultation findings, where women reported unemployment (70%) and poverty (69%) as the main drivers of violence against women. Many parents, unable to financially support their children, send them to work in other states, often exposing them to serious risk and, in some cases, fatal outcomes. Recognising the link between economic vulnerability and child trafficking, Change Agents prioritised advocacy for stronger legal protections for children, particularly girls.

To achieve this, Change Agents engaged with Nigeria's Federal Agency - the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons – as well as traditional rulers and local police, to push for enforcement of laws preventing child trafficking. They also led community initiatives to raise awareness of alternative ways to strengthen household income without sending children away to work. While they face resistance from some community members who supported existing practices, Change Agents successfully advocated for enforcement of the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, contributing to arrests and the safe return of trafficked girls to their communities.

This initiative also had a broader impact on women's leadership. One Change Agent shared that the experience inspired them to consider running for political office in order to further support women and girls. By addressing economic pressures and harmful practices, Change Agents are not only preventing child trafficking but also contributing to greater social stability and community trust - essential foundations for long-term peace.

WPS in Practice: Nigeria

Efforts to prevent child trafficking in Nigeria show what implementing the WPS Agenda really looks like when it's grounded in community realities. Change Agents are bringing together families, traditional leaders, and enforcement agencies to protect girls from harm, while also promoting practical alternatives that help ease the economic pressures driving trafficking. This work builds trust, improves safety and support community responses to insecurity that centre the rights of women and girls. It demonstrates how peacebuilding can be embedded in everyday community life.

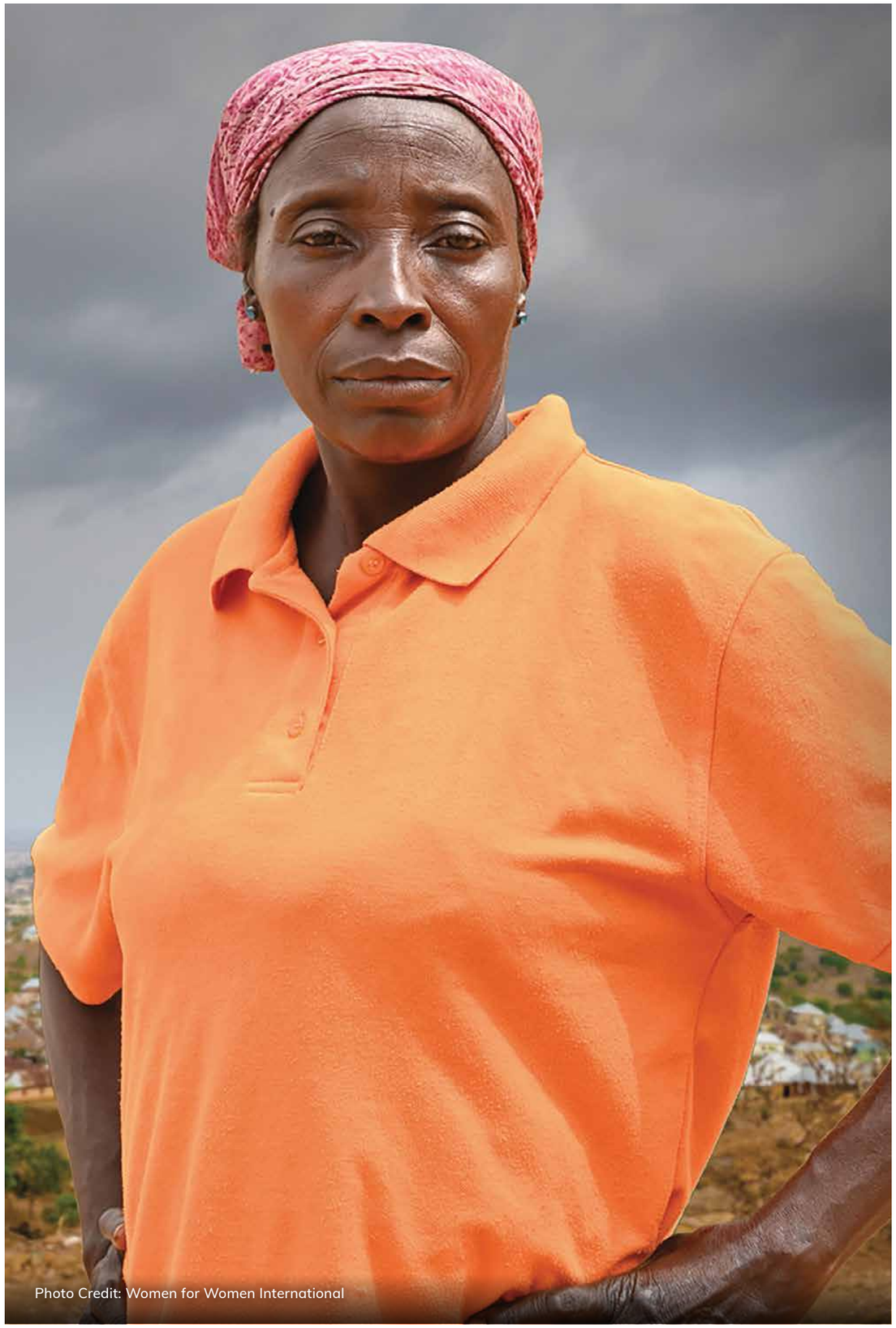

Photo Credit: Women for Women International

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Conclusion

Women living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts are not only survivors of conflict - they are critical agents of change. The case studies in this brief show that with the right skills, knowledge and support, women draw on leadership, resilience and lived experience to take action that influences decision-making and secures meaningful change for themselves and their communities. The Change Agents featured here demonstrate why women's leadership must be central to conflict prevention, peace and recovery efforts - challenging power imbalances and ensuring those most affected by conflict shape the decisions that impact their lives. While too often overlooked or excluded from formal decision-making, women continue to drive progress within their communities every day.

Women for Women International will continue to work with our global network of Change Agents -building on achievements, strengthening networks and spheres of influence, and scaling gender-transformative change as a contribution to more inclusive, effective and sustainable peace and security.

Photo Credit: Caroline Mohan

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