



## CIRW 2024 – Key Takeaway #4

# GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

**Gender inequality adversely affects HIV outcomes all over the world. Women, girls and gender diverse people are face compounded marginalization that makes them highly susceptible to HIV, related stigma and violence and limits their access to life saving services.**

The Robert Carr Fund has launched an initiative called Sustaining Action for Gender Equality (SAGE). Over the next four years, RCF will work to integrate a gender transformative lens across our processes and learn from (and support) grantees to work gender transformatively. With this process in the background, this year's CIRW explicitly included a thematic focus on gender to understand if and how grantees are already working on gender issues in their contexts.

### Key Challenges

**Patriarchal contexts:** The patriarchal contexts in the countries where grantees live create barriers for women, girls and gender diverse people living with HIV to freely exercise their rights. These contexts further compound violence and stigma and create an uphill battle for those fighting to dismantle structural and systemic discrimination. In certain contexts, in addition to structural

**Reduced funding and rise of anti-gender pushback:** In the current global context of heavy anti-gender pushback and the rise of the fascist right all over the world, there is reduced funding for human rights work. These funding cuts particularly affect communities working sex workers rights, trans rights, harm reduction and decriminalization – making the lives and work of RCF grantees very difficult.

**Criminalization:** Criminalization was identified as an important challenge. The interconnectedness of issues shows up very strongly under this challenge. Women, girls and gender diverse people living with HIV are not only people living with HIV, but can also be women who use drugs or sex workers, migrant sex workers or parents who breastfeed or transwomen or all of the above. In most contexts people living with HIV are criminalized – if not for their HIV status, then for being sex workers or drug users or for breastfeeding while being HIV positive. Criminalisation further compounds stigma. It also makes women, girls and gender diverse people living with HIV highly vulnerable to violence and abuse at the hands of law enforcement, clients, partners and society at large.

**Jargon and working in silos:** Donor trends require movements to adapt to jargon that may not resonate with or reflect lived experience of activists. Additionally, donor trends further exacerbate siloisation of issues and competition instead of solidarity amongst key populations.

Across contexts the following issues were identified as key interconnected gender issues that RCF grantees are grappling with: 1) Gender Based Violence; 2) Stigma; 3) Lack of access to services.

Globally 1 in 3 women have experienced gender based violence in their lifetimes. Women, girls and gender diverse people are more likely to contract HIV because their vulnerability to GBV decreases agency and ability to exercise their choice around sexual interactions. At the same time women, girls and gender diverse people living with HIV are at an increased risk of experience violence and abuse due to stigma against and marginalization of people living with HIV. Stigma and violence also limits their access to life saving services and the ability to exercise their human right to health, freedom and pleasure.

## Successful Strategies

### Research and mapping

Partners have invested in multiple (community led) research and mapping projects throughout the cycle in order to understand the unique and intersecting challenges they face in their contexts and successfully influence advocacy outcomes. For example, The GATE project collected important data on the health of trans and gender diverse community members, which is being used to advocate for greater inclusion of the trans and gender diverse community in health and emergency support programs.

### Safety planning and mental health services

In an increasingly volatile world, partners are aware of the threats that they face. They are working on strengthening their communities' resilience by safety planning and breaking through stigma and lack of access to mental health services.

### Sensitization and consciousness raising

Integrating a gender transformative approach into work and life requires a questioning of the current status quo and ways of being. RCF partners have consistently engaged in consciousness raising through the Feminist School and other efforts and through sensitisation trainings for their communities.

### Cross movement solidarity

In the current anti-gender climate, partners working on this issue from different perspectives are feeling the need to engage across movements. RCF partners have successfully harnessed south-south connections through Regional and intersectional 'Gaffayes' (gatherings) among other strategies.

### Involving men and boys

In some contexts partners are engaging men and boys in their communities integrate gender norms transformative approaches and social inclusion principles to counter gender inequalities that fuel the HIV epidemic.

RCF partners identify intersectional sources of oppression in multiple contexts and their strategies have also adapted to reflect this intersectionality. Communities are investing in global research and mappings to understand their unique realities and common struggles. The results of these mappings are then being successfully used to influence advocacy outcomes. Regional gaffayes and global south-south connections are highly useful to feel the interconnectedness of issues and build cross-movement solidarity. Simultaneously partners are also adapting their strategies to work on the unique and urgent challenges in their context and respond with emergency measures such as safety planning and ensuring mental health support for survivors of gender and other related violence.

## Common Pitfalls

### Gender is not only about 'women'

Gender is often seen as a 'women's rights' issue. Multiple partners who do not work with women and girls as primary key population do see their work as having a gender component. This is a common pitfall because the word 'gender' encompasses all gender identities and gender inequality adversely affects us all. RCF and partners push to expand our understandings of gender beyond gender identity to include an intersectional understanding of how identities intersect with power to create unique lived experiences.

### HIV is not seen as a mainstream feminist issue

A common pitfall amongst the HIV movement and the feminist movement is that they forget to see HIV as a feminist issue. HIV is a feminist issue because gender inequality is a feminist issue. Gender based violence makes women, girls in their diversity and LGBTQIA+ folks highly susceptible to HIV and to compounded stigma and to a lack of access to essential services.



## Quick Assessment Questions

These questions can be used to identify gaps in mainstreaming gender and intersectionality across your organization/network

Do we have policies designed to address specific needs of women, girls and gender diverse people in our organization?

Does our organization actively embrace intersectional feminist values?

What steps does our organisation actively take to ensure diversity and inclusion in our network?

Do people of all gender feel a sense of safety and belonging in our organization?

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ON...

Is there a common understanding of concepts such as gender and intersectionality in our network?

Does our organization have a gender equality policy?

Are there systems and processes in place to protect members from gender based discrimination in our network?

How much gender diversity exists in leadership positions in our network?

## Significant Stories: CIRW 2024

In 2024, WHRIN undertook a global ‘mapping’ of gender responsive harm reduction services to inform advocacy and to document experience. The mapping focused on identifying services that specifically worked to address gender-specific barriers and address gender-specific needs — for example, women only service space or times, meaningful involvement of trans women who use drugs in service delivery, gender diverse services, sex worker services, gender-based violence services, specific sexual and reproductive health services, among others. The mapping identified important gaps in gender-responsive services for women who use drugs and WHRIN plan to utilize that gap analysis for advocacy at the CND and at the International Harm Reduction Conference.

Since 2019, the Feminist School, a key initiative of the Eurasian Women’s Network on AIDS (EWNA), has become a vital platform for women living with or vulnerable to HIV across the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) region. The school aims to address gaps in addressing patriarchal social norms, gender-based violence, and violations of women’s sexual and reproductive rights in the context of the HIV response. Guided by feminist values and ethics, the school aims to strengthen the response to HIV by developing leadership and activism while addressing the intersectional challenges women face. The school combines a broad range of feminist principles with practical skills, fostering an environment where women can challenge stigma, improve their self-care, and build a supportive network. The women who have participated in the programme report feeling more empowered, better equipped to handle challenges, and more connected to a supportive network of community.

*“We have to see the interconnectedness of issues. We sex workers cannot advocate for access to HIV services without talking about the violence we face everyday.”*

*“The everyday resilience of my trans sex worker sisters gives me the hope to keep fighting.”*



## Resources & Further Readings

This toolkit on intersectionality aims to help both organizations and individual practitioners and experts to address intersectionality in policies and programmes.

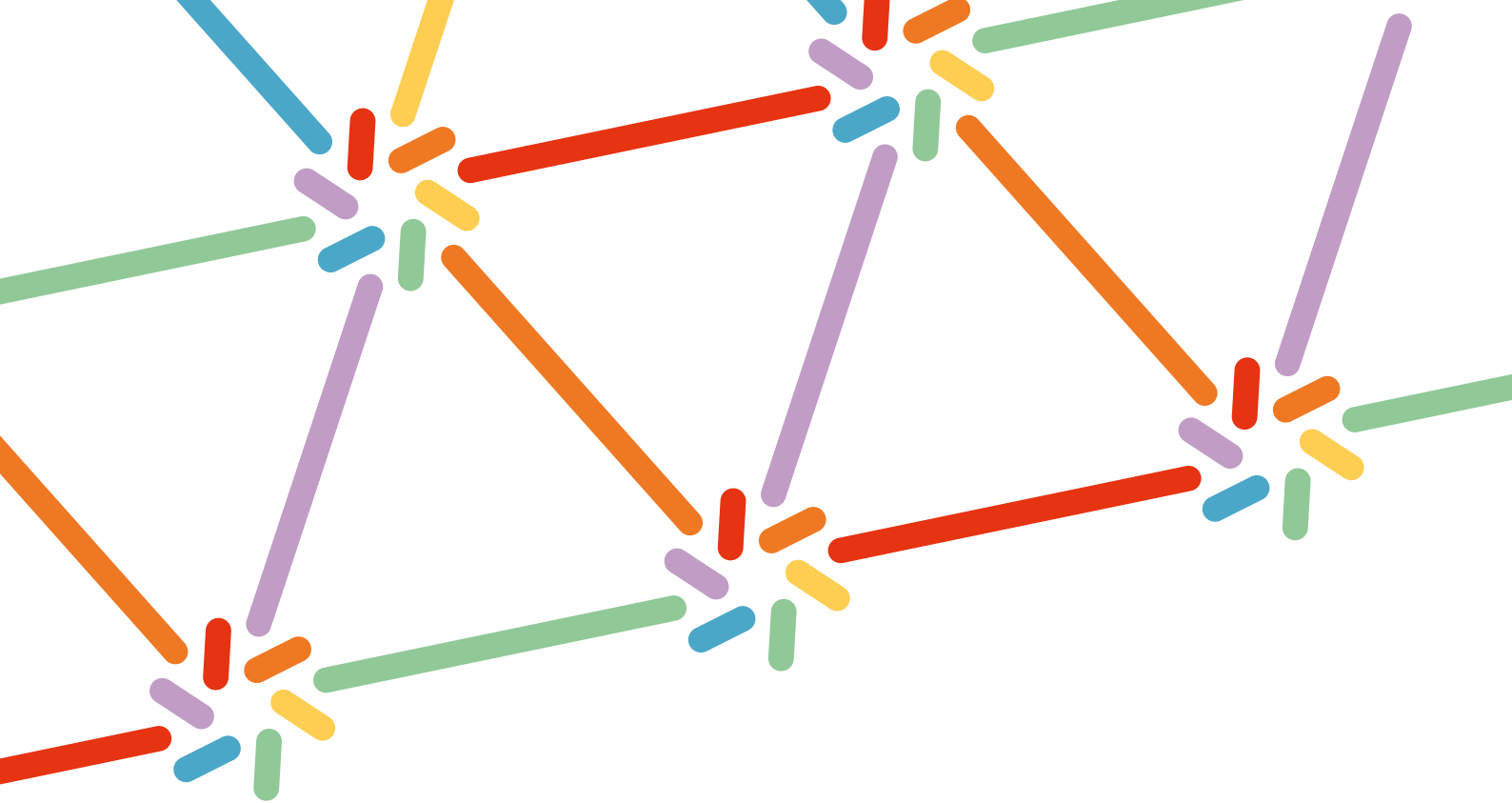
UN Women. 2021. [\*Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit.\*](#)

This brief sets out key concepts, resources and opportunities within the Global Fund grant cycle to integrate approaches that respond to gender inequality in society.

Global Fund. 2023. [\*Technical Brief on Gender Equality.\*](#)

## Looking Forward

RCF is committed to integrating a gender transformative approach across our systems and processes to be able to better support our grantees and reflect the intersectional nature of their lived experiences. During the 2025–2027 grant period, RCF will actively engage with grantees to co-create, collaborate and amplify gender transformative, intersectional and decolonial approaches from communities. This collaborative process will inform mainstreaming of gender into our future grant cycles and ways of working that reflecting RCF's commitment to being an organization that is deeply committed to values that reflect the multifaceted lived experiences of our partners.



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