

# Learning Brief: Feminist Leadership Capacity Strengthening Initiative for South Sudan WLOs (2024-2025)

## Introduction

This brief presents a synthesis of a feminist leadership capacity strengthening initiative provided to support Women-Led Organisation (WLO) partners in South Sudan from December 2024 to June 2025, as part of The Gender-Based Violence Prevention South Sudan (GBVPSS) Programme. It draws from two workshop reports, five online coaching session summaries, participant feedback and pre/post evaluation data. The activities aimed to strengthen transformative feminist leadership practices within WLOs working on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response in South Sudan.

## What is the GBVPSS?

**The Gender-Based Violence Prevention South Sudan (GBVPSS) Programme, launched in 2024. Funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), aims to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) and strengthen access to survivor-centred services for women and girls in South Sudan. Led by UNICEF in partnership with women-led organisations, capacity-strengthening and practice-based learning insight, support and generation, is provided by Social Development Direct (SDDirect).**

**The WLO partners who engaged in the 2024-5 activities described in this brief were: Africa Initiative for Rural Development (AIRD), Eve Organisation, Gender Empowerment for All South Sudan (GEFASS), Steward Women, Titi Foundation and Women for Justice and Equality (WOJE).**

## CONTEXT

South Sudan is experiencing a deteriorating humanitarian crisis, leaving more than 9.2 million people, including 4.9 million children, in need<sup>i</sup>. The country has an alarming food security and nutrition crisis, with 5.97 million people (42 per cent of the population) in IPC Phase 3 or worse (Crisis, Emergency, or Catastrophe), including 28,000 people in Phase 5 (Catastrophe) who risk death without immediate assistance. More than 2.11 million children under five and 1.15 million pregnant or breastfeeding women are acutely malnourished or at risk<sup>ii</sup>. Persistent conflict, recurrent climatic and

economic shocks, disease outbreaks, widespread poverty, ethnic and communal conflict, absence of effective justice mechanisms, and harmful social norms are having devastating gendered impacts on the protection and well-being of women and girls.

Women and girls in South Sudan face extraordinary challenges and bear the brunt of the legacy of the civil war, ongoing conflict, and inter-communal violence coupled with climatic shocks that contribute to growing levels of poverty. Limited access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation, coupled with harmful social norms and cultural practices, further exacerbate gender disparities. GBV, including sexual violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and harmful traditional practices like child marriage, remain pervasive across South Sudan.

While the full magnitude of GBV is unclear, a 2023 national prevalence survey by the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare (MGCSW) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) revealed that more than 75% of South Sudanese women of women aged 15-64 years experiencing at least one form (i.e., physical, emotional, sexual, economic) of violence over their lifetime – one of the highest rates globally<sup>iii</sup>. Another study demonstrated that over 50% reported that the first incident of sexual violence took place during adolescence, demonstrating that violence begins early in the lives of girls in South Sudan.<sup>iv</sup> Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, exploitation, and abuse.

Women-led organisations play a pivotal role in responding to and preventing gender-based violence in South Sudan, and yet, their contribution is often overlooked for resources, recognition, technical and operational support. The GBVPSS, through UNICEF’s impetus and leadership, seeks to act as a catalyst for change and enable WLOs to have greater technical and operational capacity and resource for GBV prevention and response and to do so through ongoing WLO partner consultation regarding the inputs they need to support this.

UNICEF, in collaboration with SDDirect, co-designed a programme of feminist leadership strengthening activities from December 2024-June 2025, in order to centre and ground feminist leadership principles and practices with WLOs and during the initial phase of the GBVPSS.

## BACKGROUND

UNICEF began formal partnerships with WLOs in South Sudan in 2023 as part of an **intentional strategy to localise GBV prevention, response and risk-mitigation efforts**. This shift aimed to **position WLOs as central actors capable of shaping community-driven and survivor-centred approaches**.

During an April 2024 UNICEF–WLO partnership workshop, **partners collectively identified several structural challenges limiting organisational effectiveness: entrenched hierarchical and patriarchal leadership norms, communication challenges, emotional burnout, unresolved workplace trauma, and a need for stronger internal accountability structures**.

When the GBVPSS came on-stream this presented an opportunity to further expand GBV prevention and response in South Sudan and for WLOs to engage as partners already onboarded with UNICEF. The issues which surfaced during the April 2024 workshop informed the initial design for the 2024-5 Feminist Leadership Capacity Strengthening initiative described in this brief.

## APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The initiative's learning architecture was grounded in feminist pedagogical principles that value experiential learning, reflexivity, co-creation and psychological safety. SDDirect used a multi-modal methodology which included:

- Story-circles and 'circle of trust' formats to explore leadership journeys and lived experiences.
- Practical power-analysis exercises, including tailored power-walks reflecting internal organisational hierarchies.
- Creative methods such as collage work to externalise internal leadership narratives and aspirations.
- Intensive communication practice using feminist communication models, behavioural frameworks and role-play.
- Case-study clinics examining real organisational dilemmas involving challenging interpersonal dynamics, misuse of power, conflict and delegation difficulties.
- Literature-driven conceptual modules drawn from a 69-source feminist leadership evidence review.
- Remote coaching sessions to bridge learning between workshops, reinforce application, and maintain community of practice.



*Figure 1: Group photo of some of the Feminist Leadership Workshop Participants with their Feminist Leadership Vision Boards created as part of a self- and collective- care workshop component in December 2024*

## TIMELINE OF ACTIVITIES

The feminist leadership capacity-strengthening initiative consistently engaged with 11 WLO partner staff (targeting Executive Directors (EDs) and Programme Managers (PMs)) from six UNICEF WLO partner organisations.

The initiative comprised five core phases:



### **1. Rapid literature review (November 2024)**

A rapid literature review using key terms to search for relevant sources and search engines alongside the consultation. This informed and shaped initial content creation for the workshops and online coaching sessions.

### **2. Consultation with WLO leaders from UNICEF partner organisations (November 2024 and ongoing throughout the initiative)**

SDDirect conducted KIIs with EDs and PMs in November 2024 using a semi-structured interview format to inform the design of the capacity-strengthening content. This aimed to increase likely relevance of content and generate interest of the partner organisations. Consultation and feedback were also ongoing throughout the duration of the initiative.

### **3. Foundational Workshop (4–5 December 2024, Juba)**

Two days of co-exploration of core feminist leadership concepts and practices, including power, communication, accountability, self- and collective-care, and organisational practices.

### **4. Online Coaching Series (March–June 2025)**

Five virtual sessions focused on feminist movement-building, advocacy (message and strategy design and monitoring effectiveness of these activities), delegation, solidarity practices and staff wellbeing were conducted between March and June 2025. Each session also included a collective care element.

A practical application one-day workshop focusing on i) conceptions of confident feminist leadership (including aspects of self-esteem) and how this can interplay with dominant patriarchal societal influences and expectations; ii) communication and consideration of how to navigate specific challenging dynamics within organisations and with stakeholders; and iii) commencing the development of

organisational wellbeing roadmaps. Approaches for integrating staff development into standalone organisational policies versus integrated and harmonised suites of organisational policies were also discussed, underscoring the importance of consistent organisational wellbeing practice mirroring its policies. The reality of how challenging this can be for fast-paced, high-demand workplaces focused on implementing GBV services within a deteriorating humanitarian context also surfaced for collective problem-solving.

Activities focused on co-analysis with WLOs of what transformational feminist leadership means for them in South Sudan. All activities integrated an element of self- and collective-care, promoted power-sharing and accountability. The interactions aimed to promote the enhancement of organisational wellbeing and improved communication which centres feminist values and principles.

## IMPACT

This section summarises the impact the feminist leadership focused activities had on participants' knowledge, confidence, leadership practice and organisational behaviour. Evaluation data from both workshops and coaching sessions indicate substantial positive shifts, whilst signalling areas which may require further strengthening support. Data was collected through pre/post workshop assessments, coaching session feedback and evaluation forms.

Figure 2 relates to the first feminist leadership capacity-strengthening workshop, indicating pre to post increases in confidence across all the dimensions. The overall mean average increase in confidence across all questions was 24.4%. No knowledge-based questions were asked during the pre/post assessment for workshop 1 given this was the first engagement with the WLOs and the priority was to build trust and foster mutual understanding.

Figure 3 relates to the second workshop, indicating that the pre/post increases in knowledge/confidence are more modest (overall average of 6.5%), as the participants scored highly at both pre-and post-assessment stage, with 5 elements scoring 100%. The positive increases related to self-rated self-esteem levels (+8%) and a knowledge-based question relating to specific elements necessary to sustaining feminist leadership over the long-term (+5%).

Figure 2: Bar chart depicting the pre/post levels of WLO participant confidence linked to the content provided during Workshop 1 (two-day workshop in December 2024).

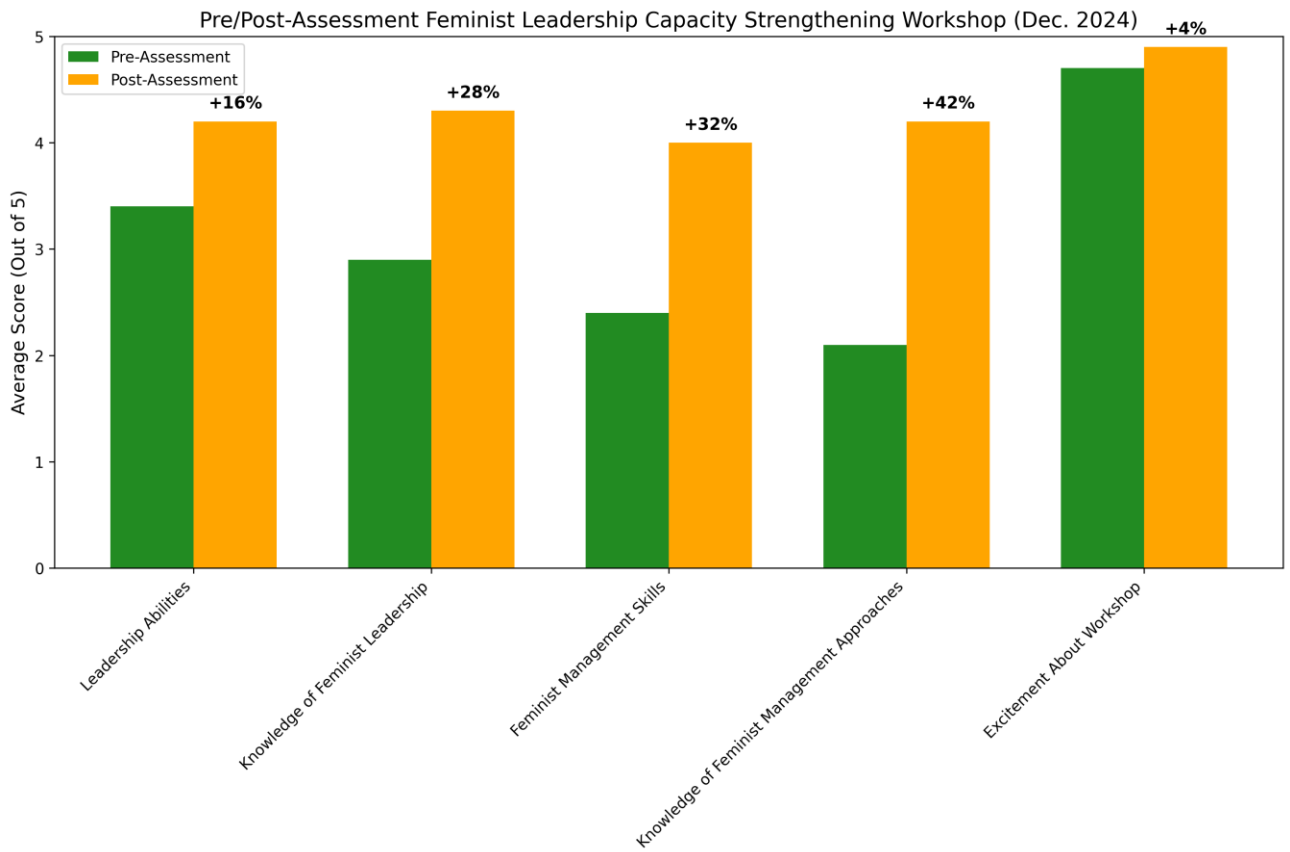
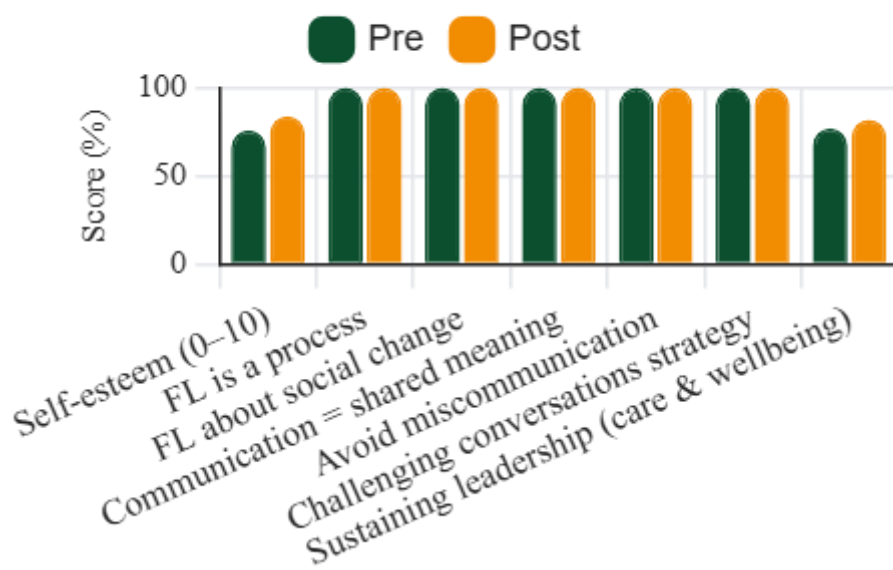


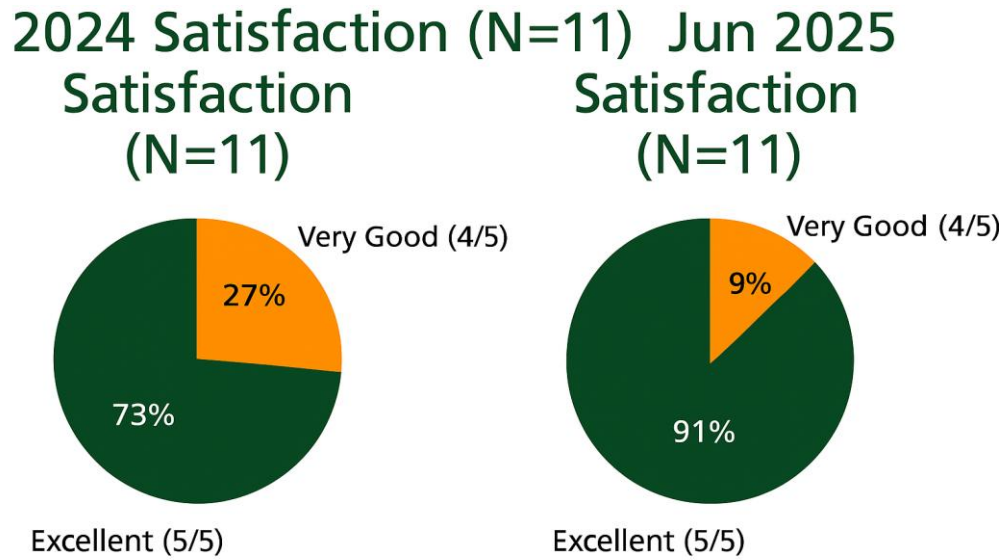
Figure 3: Bar chart depicting the pre/post levels of WLO participant confidence and knowledge linked to the content provided during Workshop 2 (the one-day workshop in June 2025).

**Pre/Post Confidence & Knowledge – Jun 2025 Workshop (N≈11)**



The satisfaction pie charts (Figure 4) indicate that high levels of satisfaction with the content of the feminist leadership workshops was sustained throughout the feminist leadership capacity-strengthening initiative and increasing over time. Participants provided anonymous responses to this Likert scale question in the workshop evaluation forms. The Likert scale ranged from 1-5, with 1 indicating the content was weak and 5 excellent. No respondents rated either workshop lower than 4 out of 5.

Figure 4: Pie charts depicting WLO participant satisfaction with the quality of the workshop content



## *Summary stories of most significant change*

Provided here are a snapshot of condensed and summarised stories of most significant change from WLO partners who engaged in the initiative. These were shared verbally during the June 2025 check-ins/ workshop check-out and written evaluation forms.

A Programme Manager expressed that she now felt equipped to communicate her feelings regarding her heavy workload, to her supervisor whereas before she would just bear the burden. She has also been practicing delegation, running weekly mentoring sessions for her team and instituted an anonymous team feedback process for staff to express how they are feeling at work, all of which she remarked was a 'Big step forward for her.'

A younger Programme Manager expressed that since the initiative started, she now had the self-confidence and courage in her abilities to be able to speak to older community members in relation to shifting social norms and encouraging them to become champions of change in preventing GBV. She said that before the course she was really struggling with this issue of confidence but now said that she was 'So grateful for all that I have learnt through this experience and getting these wider perspectives on what women's empowerment means.'

An Executive Director reflected on the communication and associated content / information from the course and acknowledged that there were times when she had 'Not been so nice in her communication style with [her] team, at times even harsh, and also isolating and locking [herself] away from her team if [she felt] they were disturbing her'. She described how she has been actively practicing some of the positive communication techniques discussed and has increased the frequency of her interactions with her team moving from monthly to weekly meetings to be closer to her team and is trying to be of greater support to them.

FEMINIST LEADERSHIP CAPACITY-STRENGTHENING IS RELEVANT TO GBV  
PARTNER WLOS IN SOUTH SUDAN. FEEDBACK FROM WLO PARTICIPANTS.

*“It has been an excellent experience because I was able to speak out on some of the issues happening at [the] workplace that I was holding at heart.”*

*“I have learned that the feminist leadership is not a journey that you should follow alone”*

*“I think the workshop was a reflection of what we have been struggling with in our organisations, and this has provided an opportunity and oversight [sic. insight] on how we treat people.”*

*“[I] gained experiences / knowledge about the feminist leadership and learn a lot from others who share their different experiences.”*

*“It is life-changing for the career journey.”*

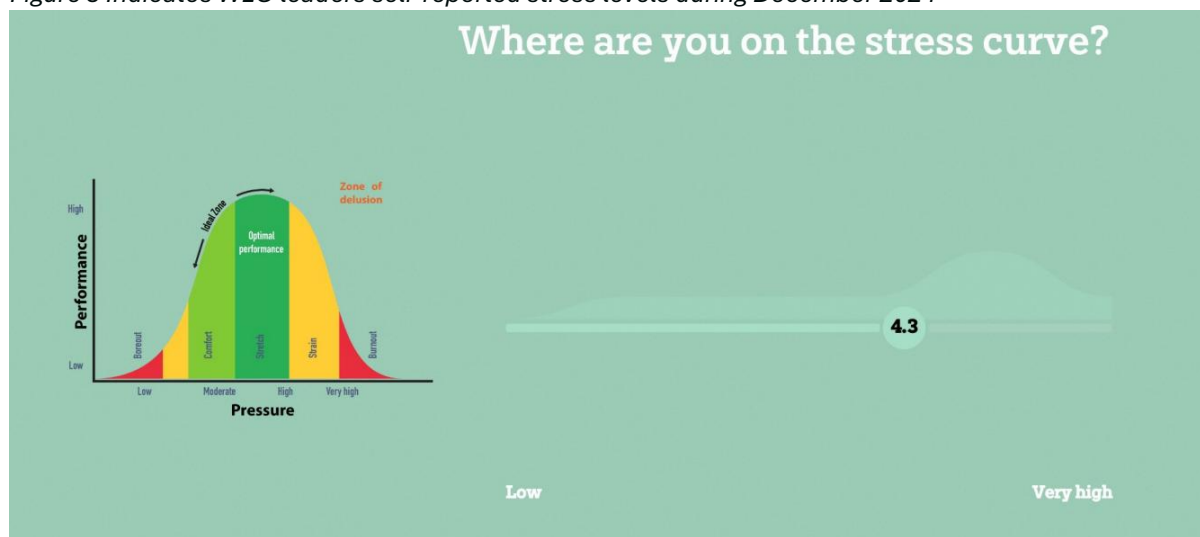
*“I have benefited so much on this feminist leadership workshop because the facilitator made everything easy to understand.”*

## KEY FINDINGS AND EMERGING INSIGHTS

The following key findings and insights emerged from the process, content and data collected throughout December 2024 – June 2025.

1. **Consultation with WLOs was essential**, integral and yielded necessary information to shape content development. This may have contributed to the high satisfaction levels with the initiative and the extent to which the content resonated with WLO partners.
2. **Increases in leadership knowledge and management competency and confidence** were reported through pre/post assessments, particularly during the first workshop. This linked particularly to increased understanding of leadership as a transformative process for positive social change rather than a position. Participants strongly resonated with concepts like power-within, power-with and power-to.
3. WLO participant self-reports of improved application of feminist **delegation, mentoring and communication strategies** during the intervening time between workshops was highlighted as well as three participants stating that the activities had motivated them to enrol in additional, external relevant professional development studies. However, **communication challenges remain their most persistent pain-point**, with participants citing a range of internal / external challenges, complex dynamics and issues with conflict escalation.
4. **Delegation also emerged as a critical leadership skill gap / area of struggle**, with several EDs admitting fear of losing authority, concerns about quality control and internalised hierarchical norms, although progress was reported on this throughout the initiative.
5. **Self/collective care and staff wellbeing require deeper and ongoing support and practice**. Workplace **stress levels were high**, with participants describing feeling overwhelmed, under-resourced and lacking supportive organisational cultures. **Collective care** including peer check-ins, mentoring circles and anonymous feedback mechanisms – **showed promise** and were voluntarily adopted by leaders.

Figure 5 Indicates WLO leaders self-reported stress levels during December 2024



6. **Movement-building and feminist solidarity amongst WLO partners requires further attention, commitment and investment.** Participants expressed a desire to form a South Sudan WLO peer-network or ‘crying-out space’ (for solidarity and collective care) but appeared to lack the time and impetus to initiate it.
7. **Using co-facilitators with experience of South Sudan,** humanitarian settings and relevant technical and leadership role experience supported not just the contextualisation of information but enhanced the opportunity for connections and bonds to be forged between the co-facilitators and the WLO partners.
8. Using **co-facilitators who can model feminist co-leadership and accountability,** stepping forward / stepping back techniques and **consistently demonstrating cross-cultural understanding, respect and sense of enquiry** was key for ‘walking the walk’ and maintaining credibility with WLOs engaging in the capacity-strengthening process.
9. **In-person delivery (i.e. workshops) was most effective** and the **preferred modality** for participants. Online sessions were limited by restricted connectivity and made it challenging for participants to sustain engagement. Given the high stress levels and demands on WLO EDs and PMs consistent attendance and focus was challenging with several receiving interruptions to attend to emergencies / priority issues during learning sessions.
10. There was **considerable demand from WLOs for a continuation of the feminist leadership capacity-strengthening initiative** with a request for longer workshops (2–5 days) and sustained mentorship, in addition to coaching sessions.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER FEMINIST LEADERSHIP CAPACITY-STRENGTHENING SUPPORT TO WLO PARTNERS? WHAT NEXT?

The feedback and data from WLO participants indicate the 2024-2025 feminist leadership capacity-strengthening initiative was relevant and had added value for them both as individuals and for their organisations. It enabled a dedicated opportunity to learn, share and reflect with peers. However, it is also evident that the pressures upon South Sudan WLO leaders remain high due to multiple factors. It is also clear from the feedback that there remains both interest and demand from them for further feminist leadership capacity-strengthening. Given the GBVPSS is envisaged as a 4- year programme it has been confirmed that the feminist leadership strengthening initiative should continue in 2026. Therefore, in 2026 it is intended that there will be:

- **Renewed consultation** with WLO EDs and PMs to identify and determine specific feminist leadership capacity-strengthening needs.
- For priority topics / aspects which are identified as common across multiple WLOs these will be considered for inclusion within the **quarterly online coaching sessions** or for **two further in-person workshops**. These workshops are planned to have an expanded duration of 3 days each.
- **New structured 1-to-1 feminist leadership mentoring for WLO partner leaders will be introduced**. The topics/areas of focus for mentoring sessions will be those which fit an individual partner organisation / need tailored technical support. The consultation input from WLO leaders will be crucial for ensuring relevance and their consistent commitment to engaging with the mentoring sessions essential
- The 2026 activities will aim to **deepen knowledge** on some topics already covered in 2024-5, as well as provide **new information on additional topics** which WLO leaders highlight through the consultation - and which align with the GBVPSS objectives.
- Encouragement and guidance for WLOs who wish to form **peer-support spaces and solidarity structures**.
- Encouragement and support for WLO leaders to identify **common GBV influencing and advocacy priorities** and messaging where there is consensus and alignment.

## Acknowledgements

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## Suggested Citation

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> OCHA (2023). [Humanitarian Needs and response Plan South Sudan 2024](#).

<sup>ii</sup> UNICEF (2025) South Sudan Situation Update November 2025.

<sup>iii</sup> UNFPA (2023). [South Sudan ranks second in GBV prevalence rate in East Africa – a new study indicates](#).

<sup>iv</sup> International Rescue Committee. (2017). [No Safe Place: A Lifetime of Violence for Conflict-Affected Women and Girls in South Sudan, “What Works” summary report](#). What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls Programme, UK. London.