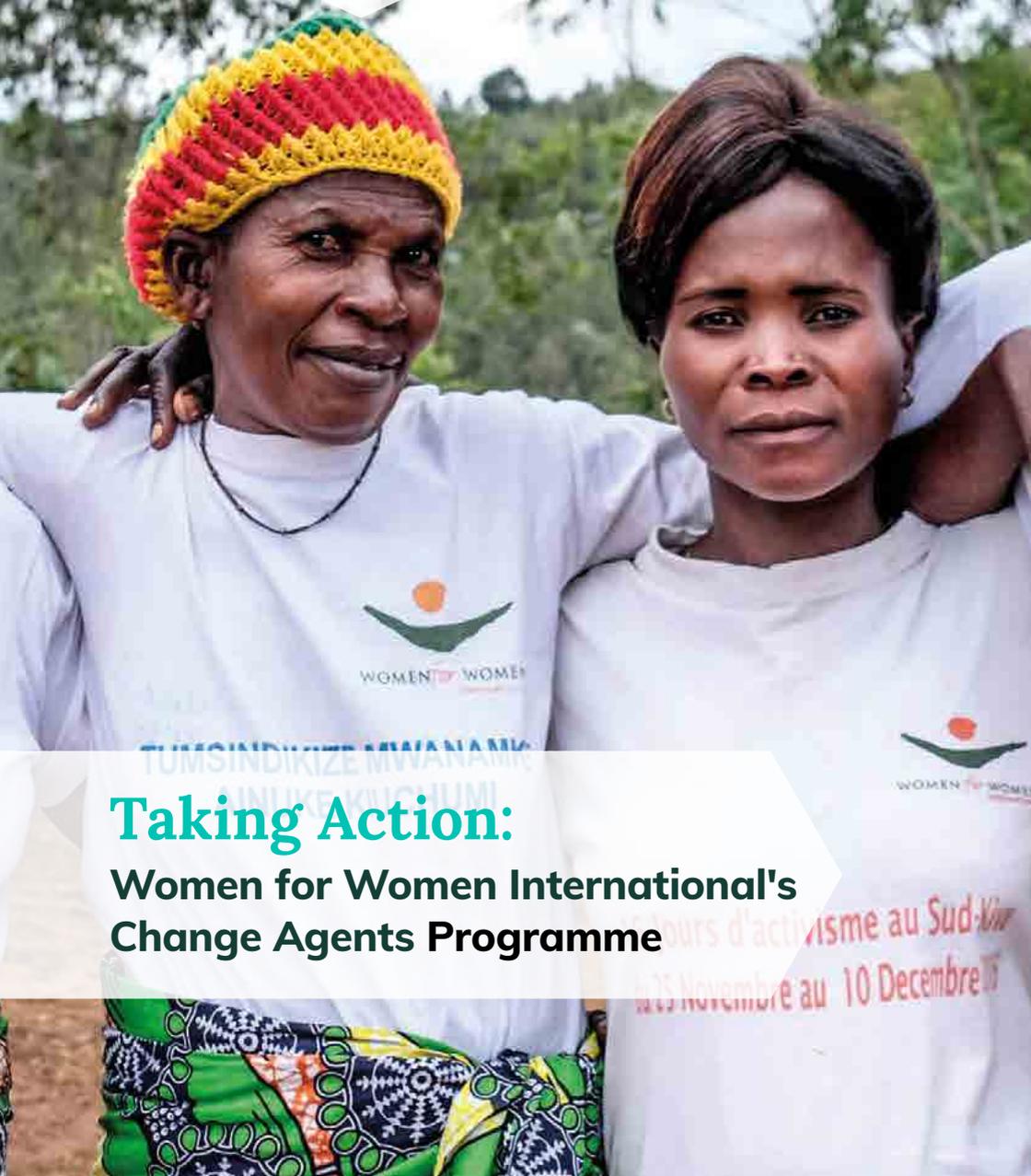




**WOMEN FOR WOMEN  
INTERNATIONAL**



## **Taking Action:**

**Women for Women International's  
Change Agents Programme**

5 jours d'activisme au Sud-Kivu  
du 25 Novembre au 10 Decembre 2015



Photo: Momilekan

# 1

## Introduction

Since 2017 – across Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Rwanda, Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – Women for Women International has developed, piloted, adapted and replicated a new grassroots advocacy approach, training women in advanced leadership and advocacy skills to become Change Agents, or advocates. To date, this Change Agents programme has been implemented as an extension to Women for Women International's year-long integrated social and economic empowerment approach

for marginalised women survivors of war. The Change Agents programme is a key part of our ongoing commitment to supporting women's participation in the **decision-making that affects their lives**.

The main aim of the Change Agents programme is to provide select women who show real, natural leadership and dynamism in advocacy with the tools, knowledge and skills to identify, advocate for and secure changes on issues that directly affect marginalised women.

### Our definition of marginalisation

**We define 'marginalisation' based on crucial areas of vulnerability:**

- **Conflict affected**, such as surviving violence, being displaced, acting as the de facto head of the household;
- **Social exclusion**, as evidenced by signs of malnutrition or poor hygiene, poorer than average living conditions, restrictive traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and/or cutting, forced or early marriage, or limited or no education;
- **Living in extreme poverty**, perhaps due to unemployment, or limited to high risk or unsafe occupations, or responsible for dependents (children, elderly, disabled).

In combination, these criteria help us to identify and reach the most marginalised women in the conflict affected communities where we work.

Our role is to support Change Agents to identify the changes they want to see, and to choose how they want to **use their voices and experiences to influence their environment**.

This briefing provides a summary of what the programme has achieved to date. It takes stock of the iterative learning process we have been

through so far and uses case studies to highlight successes and key learnings. The content of the briefing is informed by our monitoring, evaluation and learning processes, surveys we conducted to gather views and experiences from our in-country staff and partners, and feedback from sessions held with Change Agents themselves.

## Our Change Agents programme

Marginalised women in fragile and conflict affected states face a multitude of barriers and challenges that prevent them from fully and freely enjoying their rights, and participating in the decisions that affect their lives. Conflict, poverty and violence lead to further discrimination and inequalities for women, both within their households and their wider communities.

The Change Agents programme seeks to build women's capacity to identify the structural barriers and issues they face in their communities and identify ways to overcome them. Change Agents are nominated for the programme by their peers – other women from our year-long social and economic empowerment programme.

The Change Agents programme is tailored based on the local context, but it includes core components such as advanced content on women's rights; gender and power analysis; problem solving; communication skills; identifying stakeholders; managing risk and planning for action.

By using and building on their increased skills, and collective experiences and strengths, Change Agents are gradually seen as women leaders in their communities, acting as important role models for others.

The programme is built on the premise that once trained, Change Agents from different communities will connect with others and create Change Agent Networks to affect change on a wider scale; and they will engage with women's rights groups and civil

society organisations to support and advocate with them, to influence power-holders at various levels.

Change Agents are mentored and supported by Women for Women International staff from planning to implementation. We also bring different groups of Change Agents together so they can learn from each other and share experiences. We also connect them to local partner organisations and networks to facilitate their access to local leaders, create platforms to raise their voices and further extend their reach.

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



understand the thematic issues that impact women's lives such as violence against women and women's economic empowerment;



identify priority issues and target their root causes; and



develop clear action plans for advocating on the issues they have prioritised.



1

**Selection process:** Women are nominated to become Change Agents either by themselves or their peers. Our trainers work with women candidates to agree the selection criteria for entering the Change Agents programme.

2

**Training content:** The Change Agents programme focuses on knowledge building and skills in leadership and advocacy. Each programme is developed and tailored to the local context, but will always include core content on women's rights; gender and power analysis; problem solving; communication skills and planning for action.

3

**Implementation of Advocacy Action Plans:** 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 change.

4

**Follow up:** Change Agents meet regularly with our trainers who provide mentoring support as they put into effect their action plans. We also bring different groups of Change Agents together to network and share their learning with each other, and to provide them with any additional training they have identified a need for.





## Marriage Registration in Rwanda

In Rwanda, Women for Women International has trained over 200 women across five districts through the Change Agents programme. Following on from the training, each group of Change Agents developed their own action plans to advocate on the issues that were affecting women in their communities.

Change Agents in Kicukiro District of Rwanda identified informal marriages as a key barrier to women realising their rights. Without the legal protections of a formal marriage, women can face challenges with their access to inheritance, property and other economic rights.

The Change Agents also recognised that informal marriages can be a source of conflict within the family, with some men being reluctant to formalise their marriage because they were concerned that this would mean sharing their assets with their spouse. When speaking with women in their communities, Change Agents also heard stories of husbands threatening to send their wives away and replace them with wealthier women.

The Change Agents carried out awareness raising activities on the importance and benefits of legal marriage, working with both women and men in the community as well as local leaders to change negative attitudes towards formal marriage.

As a result of their advocacy, more couples are formalising their partnerships and women are gaining an understanding of and access to their legal rights. The marriage ceremonies are organised by the Change Agents in collaboration with local leaders. The ceremony is officiated by the district's Executive Secretary who reads aloud the legal rights regarding property ownership and inheritance.

The Change Agents continue to work with their communities and leaders to advocate for women's rights.

### 3 Success and impact

**By driving forward changes in their communities, the work of Change Agents is crucial to creating sustainable and long-term social norm transformation. The impact of the Change Agents programme is being felt both by the women participating and the wider community.**

#### Women experience transformational change at an individual level

Through providing advanced leadership and advocacy skills training and follow-up support, the Change Agents programme is designed to build on the transformational individual-level change achieved through participation in Women for Women International's year-long, holistic, social and economic empowerment programme, and support emerging advocates to take forward actions to affect change for other women in the community. As a result of their advocacy, Change Agents become very active members of their communities and are increasingly perceived as leaders, acting as important role models for other women. After the training, Change Agents state that they have increased confidence to speak out on a wide range of issues.



**“From the moment I decided to run as a candidate for the village leadership, I knew that I would have the support from women in the village, but I could have never imagined that I would also have the support and votes from the men of the village. Thanks to the training and the project, we have changed a lot as women in our village and I hope that all women who didn't have the courage to change their lives so far, will have the courage to do so in the future and use the opportunities that are out there. In this way, slowly, we will manage to have a positive change that will benefit women and the society.”**

**Change Agent – Kosovo**

#### Community members are more aware of and engaged in women's rights

Change Agents share their knowledge, skills and experiences with others in their communities through activities such as radio programmes, community dialogues, awareness raising campaigns, gatherings with religious leaders and workshops on the effects and consequences of practices such as violence against women and early forced marriage. Change Agents have brought their communities together – including men – to discuss the barriers affecting women, understand the negative implications of gender inequalities on society as a whole, and collectively come up with solutions.

In Rwanda and the DRC, for example, Change Agents have been working to raise awareness of the importance of marriage registration, and have encouraged couples to register their union legally, including through community meetings, conducting campaigns on local radio, and lobbying authorities to reduce the costs of obtaining a marriage certificate.



## Peace Dialogues in Nigeria

In September 2001, conflict broke out in Jos, Plateau State. At least 1,000 people were killed within a week of fighting between mainly Christian locals and Hausa-Fulani settlers from further north. Ever since, the violent clashes have had a large impact on the community as a whole. Many women had been widowed because of the violence and there were increasing cases of rape and murder as women travelled to their farms for work. Security and attempted peace processes organised by the local government had all failed

to gain cooperation between the two communities.

Women in Riyom district who had been through the Women for Women International Change Agents programme spoke with women in the community and created an action plan for peace. Since women had been excluded from previous resolution attempts, the Change Agents began to meet with women from each of the communities to discuss resolution options and build trust within the communities.

Once the Change Agents had built trust, they suggested organising a peace dialogue between the communities. The meeting was organised and facilitated by the Change Agents and both communities agreed that the violence should come to an end. By the end of the dialogue, a peace agreement was reached. One local leader concluded the meeting: “We are committed to peaceful coexistence and living together in our community. It is better to have dialogue than to take up arms.”

### Leaders at community level and beyond have made concrete commitments to implement change

Perhaps most importantly, Change Agents have achieved critical, tangible and concrete changes in their communities, for example by meeting with key stakeholders to raise important issues, anything from the need for more regular and efficient household waste collection to the prevalence of violence against women. For example, when a village health clinic in Afghanistan was not meeting the needs of women in the community and refusing to provide them with medicine, 25 Change Agents went to the clinic and asked to meet the director. At first, he did not respond, so the women waited. Eventually, he invited them to his office and the group explained the challenges and requests. After initially rebuffing the women, he agreed to hire a female doctor and distribute medicine fairly. Emboldened by their success, the women went door-to-door to share their news and tell other women that the Change Agents were there to stand up for their rights if they faced violence or discrimination. Change Agents have also been able to have their voices heard beyond their direct communities with national and international decision-makers.

**“In the advocacy training I have learnt how to raise the voice of the Syrian women in order to be heard, and to advocate more for our women.”**

**Change Agent – Iraq**

### Change is more achievable using the power of networks and collective action

By working with other community members, Change Agents can also build networks to challenge community practices that discriminate against women. For example, many Change Agent groups have strategically included male ‘allies’ – men who have been engaged by Women for Women International to support and promote women’s rights and positive masculinities – in the implementation of their action plans, which has resulted in stronger links to community leaders and influential civil society organisations. This demonstrates the power of networks and collective action, and has led to a strengthened enabling environment for women’s rights and gender equality.





## Meeting the First Lady of Afghanistan

Women trained on the Women for Women International Change Agents programme in Afghanistan are using their advocacy and leadership skills to advocate for change within both their communities and national decision-making spaces.

Working in partnership with our office in Kabul and the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), Change Agents secured a meeting with the First Lady of Afghanistan, Ms Ghani, to share the issues within their communities and to discuss how to achieve change.

The Change Agents had identified gender-based violence and barriers to women's economic empowerment as two key issues within their communities. At the meeting, Change Agents shared their concerns around safety and security and the impact on women as well as the importance of engaging men to support women's rights, noting that "if you train men, bring changes in their attitude, and provide them with work opportunities, it will affect women's lives."

The Change Agents also told the First Lady about the vital need for

investing in and creating markets to support women's economic empowerment. The Change Agents shared that many women have a good supply of products to sell to generate income for themselves but are not able to sell at the local market because of a lack of safe spaces for women.

As a result of the meeting, Change Agents were invited to further advisory meetings with the First Lady to provide their guidance and expertise on issues relating to peacebuilding, security and women's access to economic opportunities in Afghanistan.

## Our key learnings

**This document highlights our key learnings and observations from implementing the Change Agents programme over the past 3 years that we will take forward in the next phase of programming.**

**Communicating the roles and responsibilities of a Change Agent is important for setting expectations around what they do, and who for**

In some cases, Change Agents have experienced some confusion around the roles and responsibilities of the Change Agents and who they take action on behalf of. For example, community members have approached Change Agents with their personal cases (for example, instances of violence), expecting hands-on support. While Change Agents are trained to provide advice and make referrals to relevant organisations and providers, they are not equipped to provide in-depth and continuous specialist support to other individuals in the community. They are, however, in a situation to advocate more generally for an end to violence against women.

We have identified key communication areas that can be improved going forward to address this, including ensuring a better understanding among the Change Agents themselves about their roles from the outset of the selection process and training. We are also working more closely with community leaders and members to raise awareness of who a Change Agent is and what she does, increase understanding of what is and is not advocacy, and provide clarity that Change Agents are not employed by Women for Women International to manage specific cases.

**“We face security challenges during and after the training - and sometimes we are threatened by people who say that if the Taliban hear about our activities, they will kill us. But, through our advocacy, we showed people that our work is not against Islam or our culture and now the community has observed our work, they are grateful for us.”**

**Change Agent – Afghanistan**



Photo: Serrah Galos

**Change Agents need to be supported to better prepare for and respond to any risks they face in advocating for change**

Change Agents advocate in environments where it is incredibly difficult to be a woman, and some have spoken of open challenges being made to their work – particularly from community members who have particularly entrenched beliefs and are unwilling to change their views. This is partly connected to the nature of their work, disrupting the norms for those who traditionally hold the power, but is further compounded by the lack of understanding of their roles highlighted opposite.

We recognise the importance of ensuring that Change Agents are well-prepared to manage and respond to these scenarios. In addition to clearly communicating about their roles, we have also committed to addressing issues of risk by:

- proactively supporting existing, active Change Agents to mitigate risk by working more closely with community leaders, local organisations and participants of Women for Women International’s Men’s Engagement Programme to further strengthen the enabling environment;
- reviewing our training programme to provide a greater emphasis on risk management to support future Change Agents; and
- revisiting this issue on a rolling basis with Change Agents, and enabling better connection among Change Agent networks to share learnings on tackling this challenge.



Photo: Esther Nsapu.

**The impact of the Change Agents needs to be better measured to help us improve and strengthen the programme, and monitor their success**

As the reach of the Change Agents grows, monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of their activities – and ultimately, their impact becomes increasingly challenging. We should also attempt to balance our need and desire to know what works about the programme with our commitment to ensuring the independence of the Change Agents.

While there are clear and tangible examples of Change Agent success, some of which are highlighted in section 3, these only scratch the surface of the long-term potential impact of Change Agent advocacy. It is widely accepted that the effects of advocacy for women’s rights, much of which requires social norm and behavioural change, will often not be fully realised until much later down the line. It is also hard to attribute these positive consequences directly to the stories of advocacy.

Going forward, we have committed in our strategic plan to develop more suitable tools and systems for monitoring and evaluating Change Agent progress, including by gathering the rich details through storytelling. We will also be looking at ways to incorporate training on impact measurement into the Change Agent curriculum to enable the Change Agents themselves to better monitor the outcomes of their work.

**“I want women to change. Let it be known that women are also capable of doing things. Women should know their rights and understand that they are an integral part of the society. Women should be known for something all over Nigeria. A woman has the right to become a governor, she has the right to become a president, she has the right to speak up on anything that's not going right – a woman has that right.”**

**Change Agent – Nigeria**

**A focus on the sustainability of the programme must be included from the outset**

We know that affecting change, particularly in the difficult contexts we work in, requires consistent and sustained efforts over time. This can be challenging without sufficient resources, time, mentorship and partnerships.

For example, the need to ensure that Change Agents are able to sustainably manage time away from work, family life and other important roles to advocate, without the promise of long-term structured support from Women for Women International, has been a key learning from implementing the programme to date. Resource burdens (i.e. time and money) have been an ongoing challenge – women find themselves needing to balance their volunteer roles as advocates with their personal economic and social demands (for example, missing out on potential earnings because of taking time away from work to carry out their Change Agent activities). They also face a financial burden in that simply travelling to attend meetings with other Change Agents or leaders in the community costs money. During feedback discussions, 100% of Change Agents requested increased financial support to enable them to travel further afield and scale up their advocacy activities.

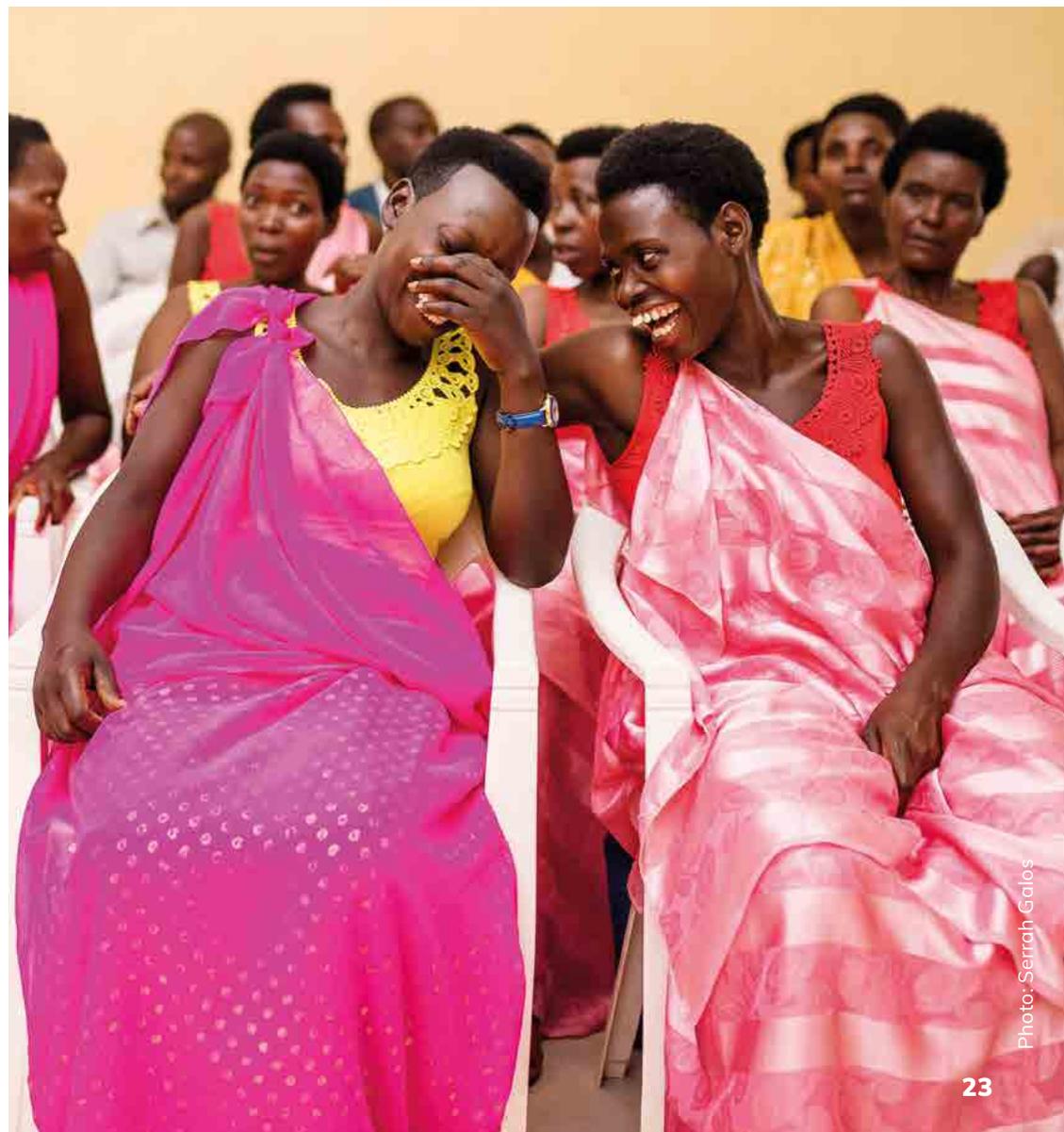
While it would be unsustainable for Women for Women International to provide continuous long-term support to Change Agents for their advocacy activities, there are alternative ways for Change Agents to source the resources they need to continue their activities. Change Agents who were facing these financial challenges in Nigeria, for example, have secured transport support from the local leaders in their community. Based on this, we are now revisiting our training programme design to look at innovative ways for Change Agents to source the support they need to continue their activities, particularly through partnerships.

**“Sometimes when I have been out doing advocacy activities, on returning home I find that the children did not go to school and others are sick. As I sell donuts, sometimes they go mouldy and I have to throw them away which creates a loss for me and my family. These are the difficulties of balancing my advocacy work with other obligations.”**

**Change Agent – DRC**

**“The Executive Secretary of Fumbwe Sector has said that we are doing things that they cannot do, and encouraged us to keep it up.”**

**Change Agent – Rwanda**



## Community Forums in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

In eastern DRC, 120 women have been through Women for Women International's Change Agents programme. In their different communities, Change Agents have been working to address harmful social norms and engage the wider community in the challenges that women are facing.

The Change Agents now organise regular Community Forums, which bring together members of local women's networks, local leaders, local authorities (such as police and military officials), school teachers, health workers and the media. Each Community Forum focuses on a key topic relating to women's rights and encourages open and participatory discussions with all members.

At the Community Forums, Change Agents are able to provide testimonies and share issues affecting women with the decision-makers in their communities and work together to develop solutions.

Recently, Change Agents in Nyangezi organised a Community Forum to address the barriers women face as a result of informal marriages (including lack of access to legal rights, forced marriage, inability to legally register children). Some of the barriers to legal marriage include the price of the registration and negative attitudes within the community. By discussing the issue at the Community Forum, local officials agreed with Change Agents to reduce the price of registration so that poorer couples were able to legalise their partnership. The Community Forum also helped the increase awareness in the community of the benefits of marriage registration.





## 5 Conclusion

Women living in fragile and conflict affected states are critical agents of change. The compelling, inspiring and impactful stories highlighted here show that, with the right skills, knowledge and support, women can use their unique leadership, resilience and experience to take action, influence and secure change.

Not enough has been done to invest in and catalyse this to support a broader agenda that is driven by women to represent their own needs, ideas and expertise. Despite this, every day, positive change and progress is driven by those very women who are being failed by the system, but who refuse to have their lives and futures left in the hands of someone else – whether it be an individual, a community, or an institution.

This is only the beginning. Women for Women International will continue to invest in the Change Agents Programme. We will build on the successes outlined in this document, adapt our programme and further utilise existing networks and spheres of influence to maximise and scale up Change Agent impact.

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## Get in touch

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