

Strengthening mechanisms that support gender responsive legislation

The Gender Technical Unit (GTU) facilitated the passage of the Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act and the progression of the Gender and Equal Opportunity (GEO) Bill and has gained recognition as a facilitator of gender responsive legislative process at the National Assembly in Nigeria.

What was the situation before V4C intervention?

A critical aspect of creating an enabling environment for young girls and women in Nigeria are the presence of laws and policies that support girls and women's empowerment (GEWE). For V4C, this has meant identifying potential legislature and finding ways to engage with the National Assembly – the main legislative body that governs the country – as effectively as possible in order for them to be enacted into law.

Rather than starting from scratch V4C revived the Gender Technical Unit (GTU) – an 'in-house' function set up within the National Assembly (NASS) with the remit to influence national legislative processes and engage with those already engaged in pursuing and contributing to gender-sensitive policies and laws. Prior to V4C's engagement the GTU, which had originally been set up to work alongside civil society to boost their efforts to advocate for gender equality-related legislation, had a very low profile and was only known by a small number of stakeholders, thus minimising its impact.

What did the GTU do?

Since re-launching in January 2014, the GTU has helped partners undertake a number of initiatives designed to enable the passage of the VAPP and move the Gender and Equal Opportunities (GEO) Bill to its current second reading stage. It has provided real-time monitoring of the processes; held meetings with NASS members to sensitise them on the issues and supported high-level delegations visiting NASS lawmakers and senior staff to solicit endorsement for the passage of the Bill. By acting as a facilitator, the GTU has built the capacity of CSOs, NASS and development partners to understand each other better and work in partnership.

What happened as a result of V4C's involvement?

Since attending the training, participants have reported a wide range of positive changes, to Following V4C's investment, the GTU has been reinvigorated and now acts as vital bridge

between all the key stakeholders involved in the passage of laws, including NASS staff, legislators, civil society organisations (CSOs), and donors. As such, it has played a pivotal role in the passing of the VAPP Act in 2015 – seen as a watershed moment in Nigeria and commonly regarded as the most significant change affecting the legal framework for girls and women in the country. The GTU, along with others, is now turning its efforts towards the GEO Bill.

A number of strategies and causal factors that have led to the success of the GTU since V4C's intervention:

The GTU was instrumental in the passage of the VAPP Bill and the current progress made with the GEO Bill in the National Assembly.

“...A lot had happened prior to their advent. However, within the short time of their existence, they did such a tremendous job that they deserve to be in the annals of history as those who promoted the passage of the VAPP Act.”

The GTU has gained recognition and respect among the various actors working towards gender sensitive laws and is widely recognised as being instrumental in the achievements made to date. Employing an ‘insider’ from NASS to fulfill the role of GTU facilitator, the external support given to the Unit and the GTU's successful facilitation of partnerships, are all believed to be the most significant factors in the passage of the VAPP Act and the progress made with the GEO Bill.

A modified approach to legislative advocacy by the GTU has led to improved relationships among, and between, CSOs, legislators, NASS staff and donors.

“The moment they began to understand each other's opinions, things began to change.”
(GTU Facilitator)

There is now a collective and coordinated approach to legal advocacy between CSOs, donors and development partners and as a result, their access to the National Assembly has improved. The GTU and its partners are now providing technical support to legislators in research, preparation of presentations and position papers. The GTU serves as a rallying point for all groups and constituencies working on legislative issues and provides a coordinated approach to legal advocacy. Legislative staff are valued for their expertise and are used as experts during capacity building activities.

An ‘insider’ is considered to be more effective than an ‘outsider’ in working with the legislature to get a bill passed.

“... The insider knowledge is a great help and it should not be changed, no matter what happens to the GTU, staff of the national assembly should be engaged to run the place”.
(IDI 7, donor)

The current GTU facilitator's extensive network and good interpersonal skills have had a particularly big impact on the success of the GTU. As a former NASS employee, his 'insider' knowledge of how the legislature system works and where to focus the effort is regarded as a huge advantage.

The GTU is valued and appreciated by all stakeholders, although each has a different perspective of what it is.

Staff of the National Assembly (NASS), notably legislative aides and clerks from both the House of Representatives and the Senate, say they value the GTU for a number of reasons: it keeps them informed of all relevant proceedings in the NASS; it links legislative aides with a large external network; and it engages them in advocacy efforts around the passage of gender equality-related bills. The GTU has enhanced their understanding of gender issues and the nitty-gritty of legislative processes. The GTU mini library has also become a resource centre that the staff use to research gender issues.

For CSOs and other development partners, the GTU has become a mechanism to bring them closer with NASS. By bringing different agencies together, the GTU has ensured that they are bigger than the sum of their parts – thus minimising duplication of effort and helping partners to realise their common objectives.

Stakeholders see the GTU as a reliable partner and want it to become a permanent institutional mechanism within the National Assembly (NASS).

"GTU is very relevant. If it was set up just to pursue the passage of two bills, then I can say they have finished their job. But if it is to assist NASS in making laws relating to women and children, then they should continue to work, as there is a lot to do".
(Legislator)

As a result of the role the GTU played in the passage of the VAPP Bill and the progress made with the GEO Bill, it has come to be valued, recognised and appreciated by all the stakeholders in legislative process to the extent that they would like it to become a permanent institutional mechanism at the National Assembly.

Long-term and sustainable funding is essential for the Unit so that it does not lurch from one grant to another. Suggestions for funding include: building partnership MOUs with financial and technical attachments; CSO partners involved in legislative advocacy making provision in their annual budgets to support its core costs and activity funding, and the GTU raising its own funds through the sale of publications and providing consultancy services.

What are the reasons for these changes?

Following V4C's investment, the GTU has become well known and highly regarded by all the key stakeholders involved in the passage of laws concerning gender equality and GEWE. A sense of ownership among the primary actors in the legislative system has been created as a result of locating the Unit at the NASS and seconding a well-respected member of staff to lead it. It has proven its value and is now regarded as a mechanism that should be institutionalised.

The GTU has contributed directly towards the passing of the VAPP act and the development of the GEO Bill and developed a reputation as a valuable resource for demand and supply-side actors alike. By playing the role of facilitator, the GTU has fostered collaborative partnerships between the different stakeholders to create an enabling environment for the passage of gender sensitive laws and the processes designed to support them.

What helped to facilitate the changes?

1. Legislative advocacy is a long-term process. It requires building on what has been started by other organisations or projects.
2. A mechanism like the GTU is necessary to bring legislators, the staff, citizens, CSOs and donors closer together. This enables better communication and understanding, and eventually to partnerships.
3. The location of the GTU within the legislature, headed by a seconded staff member, albeit independent, who understands the workings of the legislature and who CSOs are familiar with, are important factors in winning the trust and confidence of the key stakeholders.
4. In acknowledging and using the expertise of the NASS staff, legislators and CSOs to build the capacity building of one another, the GTU has been able to foster appreciation among the stakeholders of each other's contribution and value.
5. It is important to identify allies and opponents to a bill and then adopt appropriate strategies to work with them – supporters to strengthen their arguments and for the objectors to defuse their concerns.