

One of the greatest things we can do to change the status quo of women in the field of international aid is to support each other. While increased internet connectivity makes it easier for us to create and maintain virtual networks, there is no little substitute for in-person interaction and support.

The nature of our work poses challenges to such face-to-face contact, especially over time: international and national staff are often shuttled around to respond to crises; turnover in our industry is high; and there are linguistic barriers and power dynamics (i.e. race, nationality, and culture) that can disrupt in-person support networks.

In Conakry, a group of women tried to figure out how to provide support to each other while managing our busy professional lives. Here is some advice based on our experience:

HAVE FUN!

All work and no play will tire you and your members. Don't forget to have some fun! Organize a trip, host a movie night or dinner/drinks at your place. Get to know each other and enjoy each other's company. This will strengthen your bond and, ultimately, your work.

1. Identify the 'right' members:

A group is only as strong as its membership. A key reason for the Guinea group's longevity, despite recurring movements of its membership, was a commitment by its members to get things done. Our advice is take your time to identify professional members. Within about one month of arriving in mission it will become apparent which women aid workers are consummate professionals, take initiatives, and get things done— and these are the women you want to work with to advance our shared goals.

EXERCISE: ISSUE MAPPING

Hand out index cards to participants and ask them to write their 5 greatest challenges/ barriers in the field, and their 5 greatest strengths/strategies. Then group those according to categories and identify patterns and priorities.

2. Organize informal meet-ups:

Once you have a small network of women in country, arrange a meet-up. One of the best things to do is identify someone's apartment, or a private section of a local restaurant or bar, where people can get together comfortably. Identify a small group of women professionals who you think would be supportive – the more diverse the group is, the stronger it is (and don't forget to invite national female professionals).

The first meeting should be about exchanging experiences and stories (confidentially), and should be facilitated by someone who has some experience moderating discussions in diverse groups. It is about trust-building, and usually someone needs to be comfortable sharing first in order to get the ball rolling.

Other meet-ups can be organized more as professional networking, peer support, or advocacy, depending on the context and priorities of the group.

3. Identify common challenges:

Each country and humanitarian context is different. In some areas, physical safety of women is more of a concern, and in others, discrimination may be a greater issue. Identify actions that you as members, or your organizations, can do to begin to address the situation. Develop big goals, but also small and concrete steps so you know you are making progress.

4. Identify female mentors for the group:

Critical is having women who have 'made it' to senior positions in the humanitarian field around to mentor women in the network. This is important because:

Senior-level women have developed strategies and tactics for overcoming the gender barriers in the profession and can provide valuable advice about what fights to pick, which to leave alone, and how to protect ourselves.

Mentoring can remind senior-level women of the challenges that more junior professionals face and inspire them to advocate for change within their organizations.

5. Build on each other's technical strengths:

In your group, you may have gender advisors, psychologists, lawyers, human rights specialists,

and any other number of technical experts. We can apply these skills to our work in the field, but also to our cause. That does not mean a psychologist has to provide counseling for the group, or the lawyer legal advice, but they can provide orientation and guidance about where to look for help or how to address a certain situation.

6. Identify allies:

These can be both women and men in our professional networks – it is important to identify who they are and find a way that they can concretely support what you are working towards.

7. Celebrate days that celebrate women:

There are many occasions/ceremonial days dedicated to women's rights throughout the year. Many organizations use these days to pay lip service to gender equity, making general commitments or vague promises, while other organizations actually open up real forums for discussion and introspection. Regardless of which kind of organization you and your allies work in, you can use these days as an opportunity to spark conversations, build your network, or advocate for specific changes.

KEY DATES

International Women's Day: 8 March

International Day of the Girl Child: 11 October

8. Find an online forum to support connections when people move:

As mentioned earlier, between in-country missions and turnover, we move a lot. It is useful to find a platform (i.e. Skype, Whatsapp, Viber, Facebook,) that can help maintain communication when you are not all in the same place. There should be some guidelines about use and confidentiality for these forums.

STAY CONNECTED

The women's humanitarian network has created a number of ways to stay in touch. Reach out to us by e-mail (womeninaidwork@gmail.com) and we will link you up with support near you.