



# Building Bridges for Collective Change

VOICE 2021  
Annual Report



# Contents

Forward

Branching Out: Supporting Feminist  
Movements Through Partnership And  
Accompaniment

Partner Spotlight 1:  
Afghan Women Advocacy Group,  
Afghanistan

Re-Mapping Our  
Landscapes: Centering  
Women- and Girl-  
Led Organizations In  
Humanitarian Spaces

Partner Spotlight 2:  
Feminist Fridays,  
Pakistan

Weaving Strong Foundations:  
VOICE's Internal Strengthening

Partner Spotlight 3:  
Casa Amazonia, Colombia

Financial Statement

Gratitude Section



# Forward

We are delighted to present the 2021 VOICE Annual Report “Building Bridges for Collective Change.”

For so many of us, 2021 felt like a year of liminality: a transitory state of disorder where what comes next is yet to be known (or is still being built). In 2021, we crossed a solemn threshold. More than 1% of the world’s population - 1 in 88 people - were forcibly displaced, continuing the upward trend we’ve seen over the past decade. As a feminist organization working with women and girls in crisis, this number sits heavily on us. While the causes behind why people leave home are diverse and varied, we know that humanitarian actors can - and must - do better to center the voices, experiences, and leadership of women and girls displaced by conflict and crisis in their emergency responses. At VOICE we are committed to building the linkages - the bridges, as per the title of this report - that connect women and girls in crisis settings with the humanitarian actors who too often decide their futures without considering their voices.

In 2021, we did this in a range of ways: from groundbreaking feminist assessments on the impact of COVID-19 on women- and girl-led organizations, to supporting organizational policies and practices to better prevent sexual abuse by humanitarian actors, to exploring how to embed artistic and creative strategy more intentionally in our work and culture building.

Our theme of bridges was inspired by three primary sources. First, our organizational positionality as bridge builders between feminist civil society and humanitarian actors. Secondly, the writing and work of seminal Chicana feminist scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and specifically the opening sentences of her 2002 book *This Bridge We Call Home*: “Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives.” Finally, our illustrator Pearl D’Souza introduced us to an additional bridge visual metaphor - the root bridges woven by communities across the Northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya, living monuments to how collective action makes functional pathways to new places and new futures.

In the following pages, join us as we dive deeper into our advocacy work within the humanitarian system. Learn about the life-giving work of our partners in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Pakistan through illustrated spotlights of their work and take a peek into the internal happenings and culture building at VOICE. As you’ll see, change takes all of our careful weaving to build bridges to new places. Thank you for joining us in 2021, and for all the weaving that you do.

**Mendy Marsh**  
VOICE Executive Director and Co-founder



## Branching out: Supporting Feminist Movements through Partnership and Accompaniment

VOICE’s approach to supporting women- and girl-led organizations in crisis is rooted in our belief that the humanitarian system should be built with the local organizations and the communities who were doing the work before the crisis - and will continue to do the work after - at the center. We are committed to walking alongside women and girls in all their diversity who are working to transform their societies to end gender-based violence. Feminist accompaniment and partnership are rooted in centering the rich diversity of lived experiences of these women and girls, and the different seasons and stages of their lives as they navigate crisis and conflict: in survival, recovery, resistance, community, and transformation.

Our team is spread around the world and we use our roots in many places to continuously expand our network of women- and girl-led organizations, bringing new voices into the international feminist community and working together to dismantle the hierarchical, colonial, racist, and unequal practices and

structures that have long dominated the humanitarian aid industry.

VOICE’s approach to partnership and accompaniment is supporting organizations and unregistered feminist networks and groups based on what they tell us they need: capacity sharing support (specifically around navigating opaque funding and NGO processes), connections to technical specialists, access to transnational feminist spaces for conversations, rest, and knowledge exchange, and increasingly, additional financial resources for their work. As part of our annual report, we are sharing the work of three VOICE partner organizations: Afghan Women Advocacy Group (AWAG), Feminist Fridays (Pakistan), and Casa Amazonia (Colombia). This is just a sample of the organizations we collaborate with, but it illustrates the diversity and breadth of the ways in which women- and girl-led organizations are working towards a safer world, and to end gender-based violence in all of its forms.



# PARTNER SPOTLIGHT 1

## AWAG (Afghan Woman Advocacy Group)

The Afghan Women Advocacy Group (AWAG) advocates internationally to create support networks for Afghan women and bring their needs to global policy spaces. Founded by a group of Afghan women human rights defenders forcibly displaced from Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover - AWAG shines light on the impact of shifting political and social realities in Afghanistan on women and girls while keeping attention on the needs of Afghans around the world who now find themselves in forced transit. VOICE provided accompaniment to AWAG in a number of ways: strategic development - including support on defining the group's core focus, strategic messaging development and writing and joint advocacy.

### About AWAG: Before & after the 15th August takeover

Before August 15th, 2021, there was an active women-led civil society advocating for women's rights in Afghanistan.

After the Taliban takeover on August 15th, the founders of AWAG - like many women-led organizations based in Afghanistan - found themselves under a direct threat of violence and retribution for their work. The founders of AWAG were forced to leave Afghanistan. AWAG became their platform to connect Afghan women who have been forced to evacuate to different countries, to keep amplifying the voices of Afghan women, and to bring their issues into the political arena. AWAG also continues to support the voices of the women who had no option but to remain in Afghanistan.

Currently, AWAG is positioning itself as an organization that monitors and provides security and safety information for women in Afghanistan. They envision becoming a digital platform where members within and outside Afghanistan can come together and strategize on their activities while creating a space for learning and advocacy. The pressure and responsibility in such a high risk context is sometimes difficult to bear. At the same time, the strength that comes from collective voice and action fuels AWAG's determination to advocate for change for Afghan women and girls.



### Imagining AWAG's development in 10 years: An ongoing path

AWAG's organizational structure and activities are created in collaboration with its members, through a shared visioning and decision-making process. This process helps make AWAG a dynamic and engaging platform for discussions on what should be incorporated into the Afghan women's agenda, and provide informed recommendations and guidance to the international community on how to support Afghan women.

Preserving independence and autonomy is a critical priority for AWAG, who want Afghan people to take the lead in their own advocacy and consensus building process. In this sense, AWAG wants the international community to facilitate the coming together of Afghan actors committed to women's human rights and provide the space and resources to build shared but independent agendas.

### Building a support network: The key points an international organization should follow

#### 1 Institutional Strength

When international organizations come to help, they need to use the same standards of **transparency, capacity and management** they use in their own organizations. It is vital to encourage building the **institutional strength** that organizations need to execute their work.

#### 2 Shared Vision

**The partnership needs to be of mutual help based on a shared vision** to strengthen each other. Since most of the time international organizations do not have the tools to contribute to a specific context, it is crucial to create a system of **mutual accountability** and support where the local organizations provide information about the local environment while the international ones navigate the global system.

#### 3 Accountability

Sometimes international organizations take a lot of credit for the work that their partners are doing, but are distant from the day-to-day reality. It is essential to **ask what partnership means and be held accountable** for its significance.

#### 4 Creating the Right Platform

It is essential to include **women with strong voices** within the international arena. Giving a platform for these loud voices - even if the words they speak are uncomfortable to the status quo - is essential to creating change.



# Re-Mapping Our Landscapes: Centering Women- And Girl-Led Organizations In Humanitarian Spaces

At the core of VOICE's approach to change is advocating for humanitarian actors and systems to center the needs of women and girls in their response and take decisive steps to end violence against women and girls in all of its forms. We use our diverse backgrounds as a team - experience working within humanitarian systems and outside of them - to document, analyze, amplify, and shine a light on the ways in which the humanitarian system can, and must, do better. Read on to learn more about the core advocacy work, research, and learning tools that we developed in 2021:

## We Must Do Better & 16 days

*We Must Do Better* is a feminist assessment of the humanitarian aid system's support of women- and girl-led organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. We documented how interconnected systems of oppression resulted in a profound lack of access to essential resources by women and girls around the world during COVID-19 a situation that continues to influence their futures today. We then used the global #16DaysofActivism digital campaign to uplift key findings from *We Must Do Better* Report and demand systematic shifts in the humanitarian aid system that center on women's and girls' realities and needs. As part of this campaign, we hosted a donor listening circle with UNICEF to connect funders and women and girl-led organizations together.

## One Million Strong

VOICE's regional work in Afghanistan (more below) led to the ongoing One Million Strong digital campaign. The One Million Strong campaign is gathering 1 million signatures in solidarity with women and girls in Afghanistan living under the Taliban regime. Join VOICE, Mina's List, and Women's Refugee Commission in calling for enhanced international solidarity and action for Afghan women and girls living under Taliban rule by signing your name [here](#).

## Gender & COVID-19 Vaccines: Listening to women-focused organizations in Asia and the Pacific

In collaboration with Gender in Humanitarian Action and UN Women, VOICE hosted a virtual listening session together with different women- and girl-centered organizations across Asia and the Pacific to discuss the gaps women and girls face accessing COVID-19 vaccines that hamper its equitable distribution.

## 24-Hour Truce

"What would it be like if we had one day, just 24 hours, without sexual assault?" A series of VOICE webinars connected women from different backgrounds and countries to imagine a world without violence against women and girls and discuss how their lives, perceptions and choices would be different if we had a sustained 24 Hour Truce.

## UNHCR

In collaboration with the UNHCR, VOICE developed a led a project to amplify the voices, leadership, participation and agency of refugee and internally displaced women and girls and the groups, organizations and networks they lead in humanitarian settings. The partnership focused on three women- and girl-led organizations in Bangladesh, Colombia, and Pakistan.

## Hidden Heroes podcast

Within UNICEF's podcast series "Hidden Heroes," Mendy Marsh, Co-Founder and Executive Director of VOICE, discusses VOICE's priorities and explains why we need to focus on women and girls to create a valuable humanitarian response to crisis settings.

## Allegedly

As part of our inaugural work on arts and creative strategies in humanitarian settings and feminist movement building, we hosted a performance of Allegedly - an online play that seeks to spark conversations at the intersection of sexual violence, justice, and women's lives. Using personal stories, experiences and musings, the piece asks questions about the systems that govern us and how little trust women's stories and experiences are given. Over 400 people from around the world joined us in our digital theater space.



## In-Focus: Feminist Humanitarian Response In Action

In August 2021, as the Taliban took over Afghanistan, thousands of Afghan women human rights defenders, government officials, and other at-risk women and their families were evacuated by an array of civil society actors. The breathtaking lack of leadership, preparation, and coordination by the US Government and its allies resulted in a rapid series of events that left Afghan women human rights defenders under direct and immediate life-threatening risk - and feminist organizations, such as VOICE, scrambling to support our colleagues, friends, and collaborators.

Since 2020, the VOICE team in Afghanistan had been working with women human rights defenders across the country to access security trainings and capacity development support, while also partnering with feminist activists to center their voices in humanitarian spaces. Our team in Afghanistan and around the world spent much of 2021 analyzing the impact of the US withdrawal on women's human rights and watching warily as the US troops drawdown began. As it became increasingly clear that decisions were being taken to speed up the US withdrawal, VOICE, like many other women's rights organizations, immediately recognized that it was our humanitarian and feminist imperative to play as significant a role as our resources and expertise allowed. A significant factor in our ability to be of assistance came from our existing relationships with Afghan women human rights defenders across the country. The Taliban takeover was and remains a direct threat to our team in Afghanistan, their families, and the women and girls we have worked and partnered with.

What followed was a dizzying series of events that involved a web of contacts around the world. Our global team spent countless sleepless nights supporting

women's human rights defenders in seeking their rightful exit from a country that no longer felt like theirs--a country that now posed a direct threat to their lives and livelihoods. Our team in Pakistan collected critical information on border crossings into Pakistan, the safest passages out of Afghanistan, and supported humanitarian evacuations while mobilizing and facilitating access to rapid grants to support women human rights defenders on the move. In Pakistan, we mobilized and coordinated with local activists to establish informal support groups for girls and women traveling alone from Afghanistan into Pakistan and provided day-to-day accompaniment as people crossed into Pakistan to ensure women-led households had the information and social, legal, and political context they needed to stay safe given heavy government surveillance of Afghans in Pakistan. Our global team, working in Canada, Colombia, India, Pakistan, and the US, leveraged our relationships to act as a conduit for Afghan women human rights defenders and their families: ranging from high-level policy work with governments, to reviewing document lists that established relationships with US-registered organizations to help people get on priority evacuation lists, to spending hours upon hours filling out forms for the US Department of State and sometimes Canada. Processes for seeking asylum were confusing and unclear in addition to demanding harrowing evidence to prove life-threatening risk. VOICE's role was not merely to provide women and girls in Afghanistan with access to resources and recourse, but also to effectively make their cases to various authorities in a manner that did not compromise their dignity or question their lived realities. As Kabul fell, we worked with activists to create backups of critical documents and store them digitally on servers outside of Afghanistan, while they burned anything that could put them at additional risk.

As people left Afghanistan, VOICE worked in partnership with Mina's List and the White Scarves to support the resettlement process by conducting rapid needs and risk assessments in the transitory spaces where thousands of women human rights defenders and their families waited in Albania and Greece. We ended 2021 by partnering with Vital Voices to provide long-term protection, support, and training for the Albanian caseworkers who were themselves supporting over 3000 women human rights defenders and their families waiting for asylum in Northwestern Albania.

As Afghanistan fell out of the global news circuit, we organized feminist learning and listening circles on Afghanistan that gathered key global feminist actors around the stories of Afghan women, directly narrated by these women from their journals. The circles provided critical perspectives for global advocacy grounded in women's lived experiences through the crisis. We continue to remain active in feminist advocacy spaces organizing in solidarity with women, girls, transgender, and gender non-binary people in Afghanistan who, despite daily risks, continue to organize for their rights.

Looking back, the evacuation efforts and resettlement process that has followed often feel deeply insufficient. We will never know why some people were given access to exit Afghanistan while others were left behind, and the opaque asylum process that Afghans around the world continue to be subjected to is leaving thousands of people in a state of liminality as they wait on the whims of governments around the world.

As we write this, we are deeply conscious that the US Government has a list - submitted by feminist groups and INGOs - that contains thousands of names of women and their immediate family members who have requested evacuation from Afghanistan, many of whom are eligible for P1/2 visas, and who remain in grave danger.

**"As the world turns its attention away, VOICE will continue to advocate for the protection and rights of the Afghan women and girls awaiting resettlement in third countries around the world, as well as those left behind in Afghanistan, ensuring their voices continue to be heard and amplified."**



## PARTNER SPOTLIGHT 2

# Feminist Fridays, Pakistan

Born as a knowledge-sharing group meeting on Fridays to discuss feminism in Pakistan, Feminist Fridays has grown into a loosely structured organization that brings women's rights into the political and social arena. Thanks to its internal diversity and multiplicity of voices, Feminist Fridays provides a comprehensive understanding of the pervasiveness of patriarchal structures in Pakistani reality. The wide network that has been built over the years has made it a space of many encounters: where women come together to meet, discuss, share experiences and organise collective feminist actions. Feminist Fridays is now in the process of growing its network and trust within the community with a focus on building relationships in historically underresourced tribal parts of Pakistan and working with internally displaced women left out of government aid systems.



## Feminist Fridays' Feminist Journey



### How It All Started

Feminist Fridays is a collective with an internal democratic structure. Here is one member's journey to Feminist Fridays:

Being a feminist for Samina started as an academic journey. She became aware early of the **gap between academia and activism** and the lack of literature on feminism in Pakistan. Within this context, she started interacting with feminist organizations working for women's rights; together, they realised the **need for a platform**. United by the strong motivation for the same cause, they began building **networks of solidarity** to come together, support each other, share experiences, knowledge, and information and connect with other feminist organizations like VOICE. These broad linkages brought Feminist Fridays to life in 2015/2016.



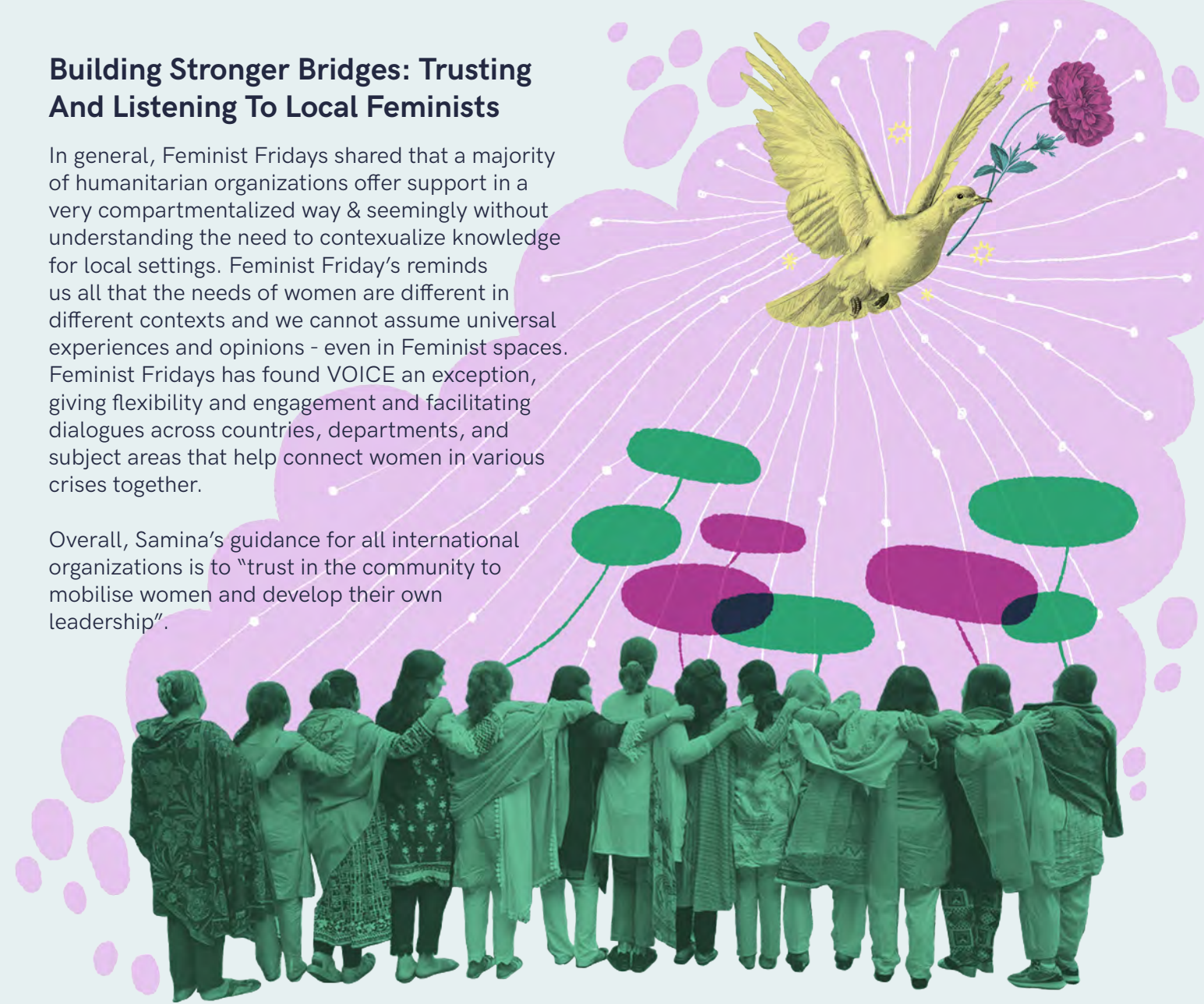
### Living Bridges: Feminist Fridays' Organizational Structure + Feminist Practice

Feminist Fridays gradually increased as an organization thanks to its members and architecture: from being just 7 founding members they've now more than doubled. Because of its **democratic structure** and its **voluntary participation**- members decide how active to be at any given time, while remaining part of the organization. Feminist Fridays is also concerned about maintaining a high degree of **diversity** within the organization. Continuously learning from each other, most of its members have **different backgrounds**: some work in education, health, and academia, and some others have their own organization. Having an internal community that reflects the diversity of the communities they work with is a source of pride and an example of their feminist values in practice.

## Building Stronger Bridges: Trusting And Listening To Local Feminists

In general, Feminist Fridays shared that a majority of humanitarian organizations offer support in a very compartmentalized way & seemingly without understanding the need to contextualize knowledge for local settings. Feminist Friday's reminds us all that the needs of women are different in different contexts and we cannot assume universal experiences and opinions - even in Feminist spaces. Feminist Fridays has found VOICE an exception, giving flexibility and engagement and facilitating dialogues across countries, departments, and subject areas that help connect women in various crises together.

Overall, Samina's guidance for all international organizations is to "trust in the community to mobilise women and develop their own leadership".



## Feminist Fridays' Horizons: Hopes For The Future

Feminist Fridays wishes to grow as a space for women's expression and voice for women facing violence. It hopes that more humanitarian organizations would contextualise their approach and celebrate diversity, recognising context and culturally specific realities and building systems and structures that meet organizations where they are.

When it comes to research - finding more ways to share research in accessible ways so organizations like Feminist Fridays can learn from it and incorporate research in their approach and work.

Feminist Friday's is currently working to provide more support for internally displaced women. Internally displaced women are often largely excluded from the relief and rehabilitation awarded to men because they are either not included in the processes or do not have the information that such support is available for them. Feminist Fridays is excited to continue expanding its relationship and building networks of trust between tribal regions and their work of mobilizing women to support community-level leadership.



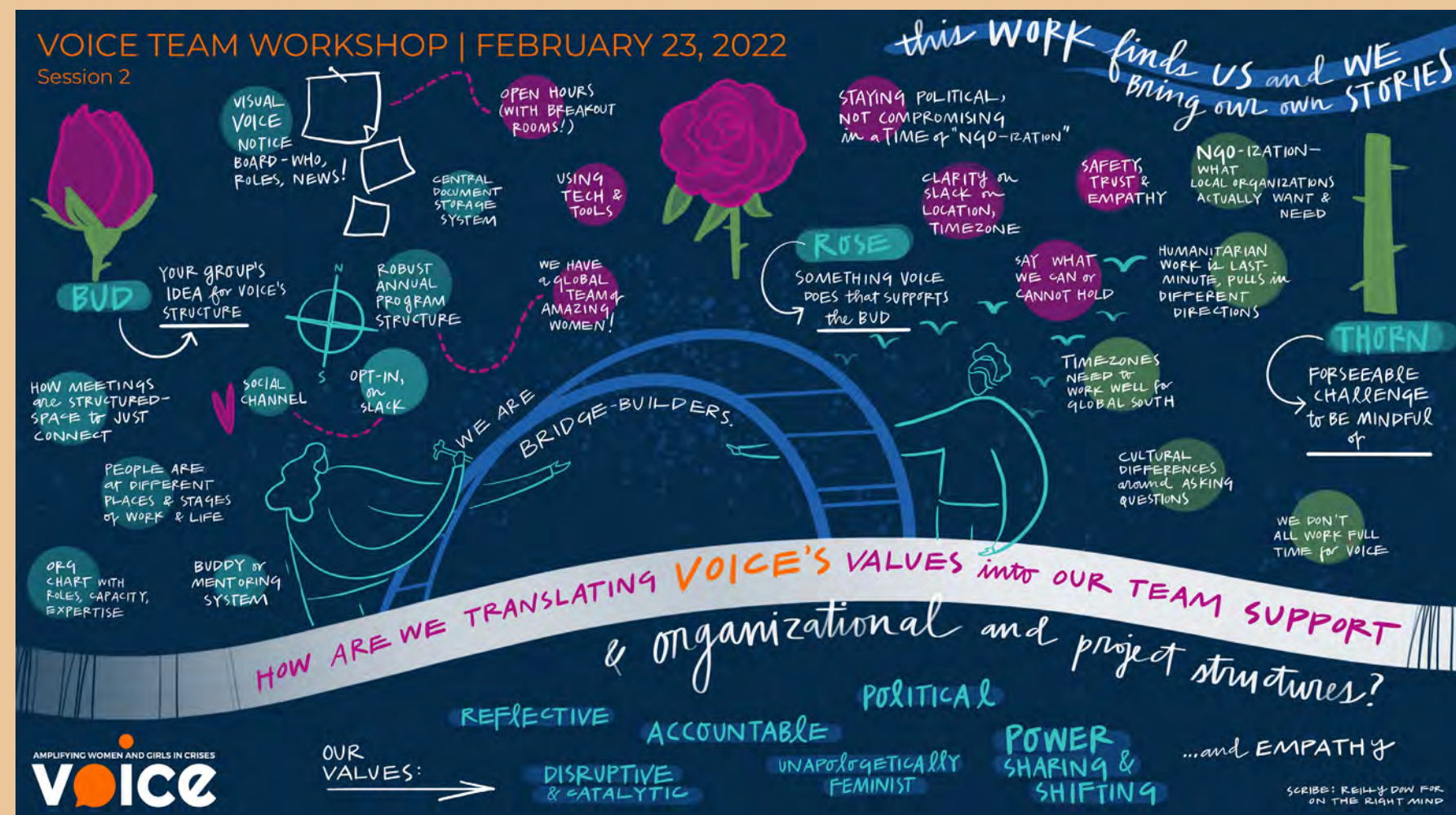
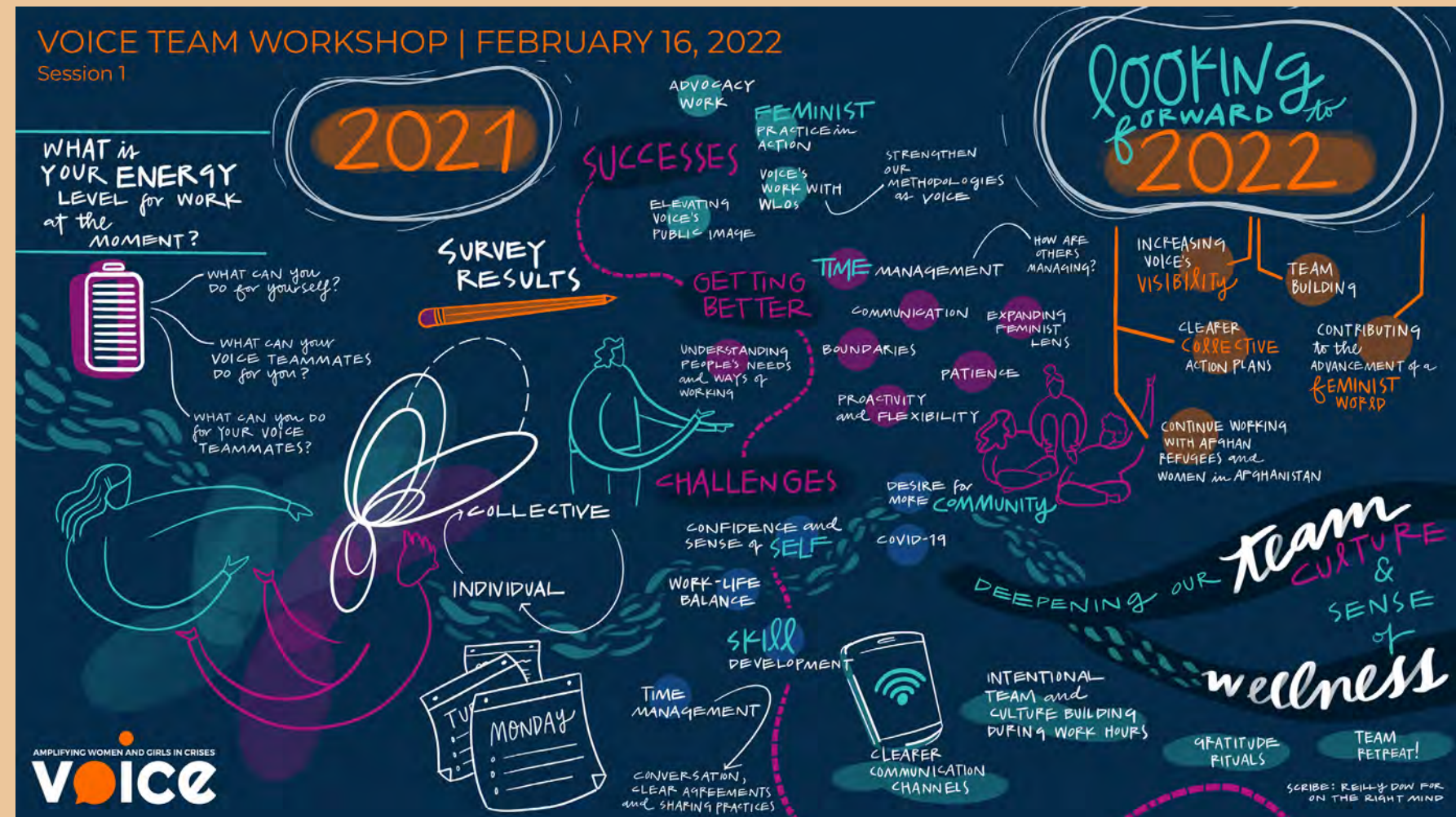


# Weaving Strong Foundations: VOICE Internal Strengthening

2021 was a year of scaling and growth for VOICE as we moved from a team of seven to 28 people across 15 countries. With such growth comes a need to look at our values with fresh eyes and assess openly how we are embedding our organizational values into our systems, structures, and ways of working.

Building organizational structures that share and shift power, disrupt systems of oppression and silence, nurture and encourage internal and external accountability, while being unapologetically feminist - is hard, and continues to be an area of discussion, growth, and deepening for the VOICE team. We ask, "How can we build organizational cultures, structures, and systems that allow us to support each other as co-builders and leaders while honoring the reality (and precarity) of labor in a capitalist system? How can we build reflective practices that challenge false urgency and support personal and collective (un)learning? How can we recognize transparent organizational structures without replicating unhelpful and overly rigid hierarchies?" The answers are hard to come by in a world with few examples of organizations successfully operating differently. Trying on new internal organizing structures requires constant reflection. Through this process we are working to design internal systems at VOICE that continue to operationalize our values.

You can see more of our team's internal reflections and conversations on operationalizing values and what we learned in 2021 through the lovely graphic illustrations of Reilly Dow of Pink Fish.



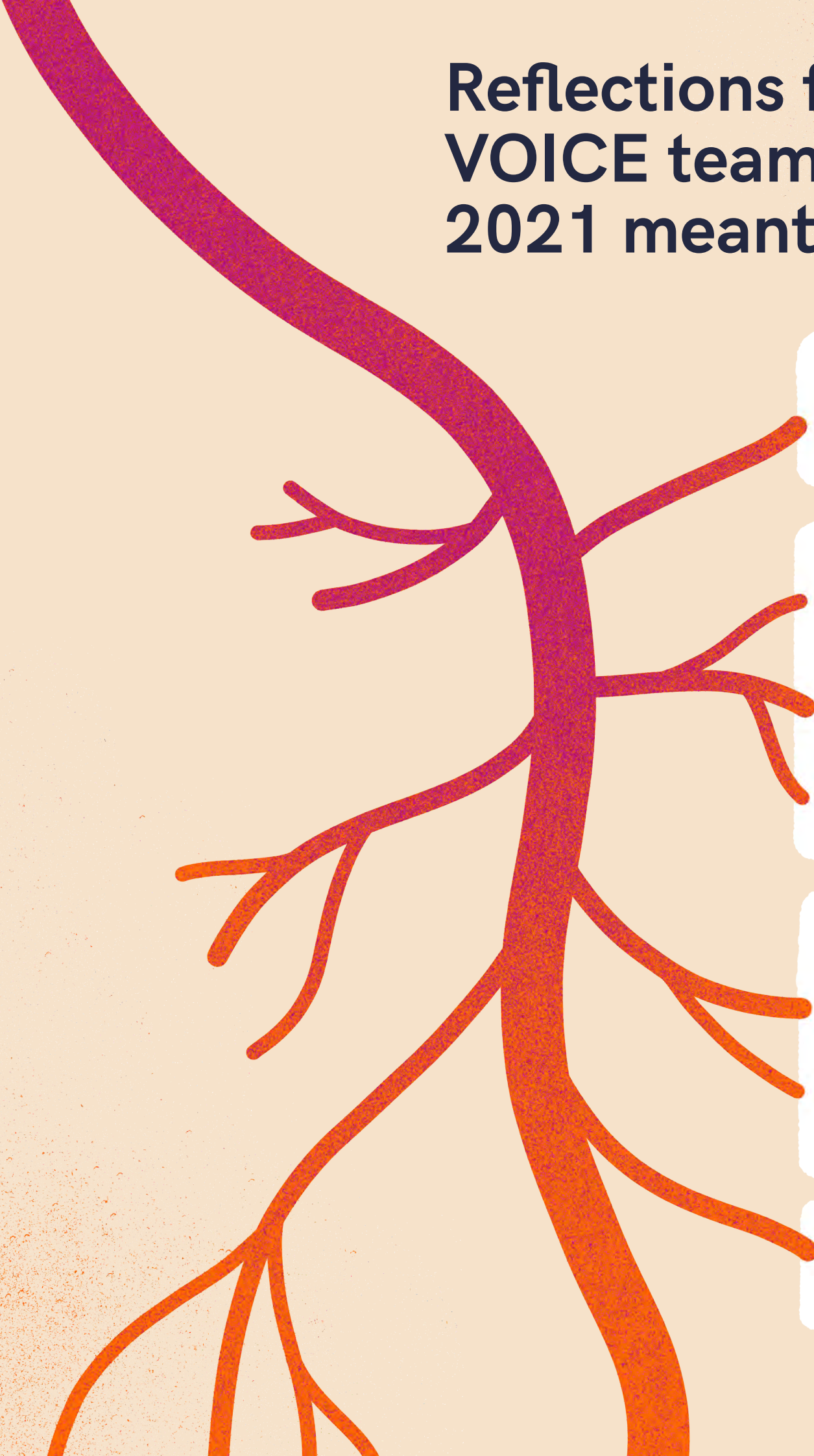


# Innovation Spotlight

In 2021, we launched our Arts Movement Team. The Arts Movement Team is focused on integrating creative strategies, practices, and approaches into VOICE's internal and external culture and programming as well as advocating for the role of creative practice in humanitarian systems and responses.

The Arts Movement Team believes that art in all its forms can be a tool to re-imagine oppressive systems and create power-shifting mechanisms that center the needs and wants of women- and girl-led organizations in humanitarian responses. Moreover, art has the power to center collective and personal well-being and create platforms and avenues for self-reflection and narrative building, which leads to more nuanced and representative storytelling. As part of the burgeoning work of the Arts Movement Team, we have started monthly internal team workshops called "Arts Hour". Co-hosted by VOICE team members and the Arts Movement Team, arts hour gives our global team dedicated time to explore a wide range of artistic expression (embroidery, archiving, poetry, music) as tools for feminist advocacy, organizing, and personal and collective transformation.

## Reflections from the VOICE team on what 2021 meant for them



"Engaging with women- and girl-led organizations and networks who were supporting women and girls in crisis was the highlight of the year 2021."

"Being part of any feminist community, regardless of what role I am playing, will always feel like a win for me. It's not common that I get to hear from international organizations that are approaching ending violence against women and girls in humanitarian contexts from a feminist perspective and lens. Coming across VOICE felt like a blessing. Finally, an approach I can relate to and want to be part of."

"I'm excited about being part of VOICE because it's not common to work within a multicultural organization with a strong willingness to create change worldwide. I love the energies of all the members of VOICE and their efforts in creating awareness around feminist issues and amplifying the voices of the least heard."

"The space for communication and mutual learning across the globe is the best part of working with VOICE."



## PARTNER SPOTLIGHT 3

### Casa Amazonia

Casa Amazonia is a women's organization that focuses on the rights of women and children of indigenous communities in the Putumayo region of Colombia. They work in partnership with indigenous women leaders from upper and lower Putumayo, strengthening women's leadership within their communities and establishing a strategy for the prevention of sexual violence. In a region that has witnessed decades of conflict and violence, Casa Amazonia weaves feminist and ancestral practices specific to their community with clinical, medical knowledge and ancestral pedagogical practices: the body is always put at the center and linked with the surrounding environment through self-help and local healing practices. To grow as an organization and as a community, Casa Amazonia wants to formalize decision-making practices, train its members to better frame the variety of projects they continuously shape and improve their communication strategy. VOICE is collaborating with them on this internal strengthening work. This process goes hand-in-hand with the construction of bridges: Casa Amazonia sees itself as working with other feminist organizations working locally to share practices and collectivize their action for political power, and simultaneously working within academia and other research centers to participate in the knowledge-making process.





# Financial Statement

**63%**

**direct support to  
VOICE's frontline  
programmatic work**

**8%**

**fundraising expense  
to support VOICE's  
sustainability**

**29%**

**admin and operations  
(including fiscal sponsorship)  
to support VOICE's mission  
and structure**

# Gratitude Section

## 2021 VOICE team-members

Amy Greenbank  
Anusanthee Pillay  
Asiya Jawed  
Callia Barnard  
Cassie Denbow  
Chiara Pirovano  
Christina Ketzner  
Elizabeth Cafferty  
Heather Cole  
Katherine Ronderos  
Kelly Joseph  
Mendy Marsh  
Midya Gaddo  
Muktasree Chakma  
Natasha Simone Alexenko  
Nida Mushtaq  
Sarah Nyaguok Richard  
Selina Yamout  
Sharanya Sekaram  
Shorouk Elzayat  
Shruti Manian  
Staci Coomer  
Tahira Kaleem  
Tarangee Mutucumarana  
Virginia Bolivar  
Wini Omer  
Yasmina Benslimane  
Yalda Royan

## Institutional donors

Ford Foundation  
NoVo Foundation  
UNICEF  
UNHCR  
Walmart Foundation  
Wellspring Philanthropic Fund

## Some of our programmatic partners

Afghan Women's Advocacy Group (AWAG)  
ARSIS  
CARE  
International Rescue Committee (IRC)  
Mina's list  
Monument Valley High School  
Native Pride  
Plan & Go  
Refugees International  
Strengthening Nations  
United Nations International Children's  
Emergency Fund (UNICEF)  
United Nations High Commissioner for  
Refugees (UNHCR)  
US Advocates for Afghan Women and Girls  
Working Group  
Vital Voices  
World Health Organization (WHO)  
Women's Refugee Commission



An Annual Report is a reflection of the collective labor of the entire team. We are tremendously grateful for the vision, day-to-day work, and energy of every member of the VOICE team and our partners in 2021.

Our endless gratitude goes to [Pearl D'Souza](#) for her illustrations, thematic support, and graphic design work that brought all this content to life. Special thanks to [Surmerce](#) for translating the work of Casa Amazonia with such accuracy and detail.

This report was written by Cassie Denbow and Chiara Pirovano.