



UN TO END
TRUST VIOLENCE
FUND AGAINST WOMEN
AND GIRLS



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What do you know about your husband's death?

That was often the first question put to a widow in the communities where we worked. Before anyone asked what she needed, she was already under suspicion.

We had not started Alafia to work on widowhood practices. We began as a small group of women in Vo talking about community health and wellbeing – sport, nutrition, child massage. Then we heard about a woman living with HIV whose husband beat her and withheld money for food if she refused him.

We forgot about sport. We forgot about massage. We pooled what little cash we had to help her start selling water, and began listening more closely to what women were telling us.

Again and again, widowhood came up: women described confinement, degrading rituals, sexual violence, loss of land and businesses, and relatives taking control of their futures. The practices differed by community, but many were so deeply rooted that they were rarely questioned. We wanted to do something about it.

When the UN Trust Fund opened a Call for Proposals in 2014, we thought it was not for us, we were not big enough. Then we saw there was a Small Grants window and applied. We were selected.





With the grant, we brought women together with traditional chiefs and priests. Women spoke about what these practices cost them physically, psychologically and economically. The leaders told us that customs rooted in generations of belief could not simply disappear overnight.

So we stayed in the conversation.

For almost a year, the women and community leaders talked, negotiated and searched for a way forward. Eventually, traditional authorities held public ceremonies to announce that the harmful widowhood practices had been abolished.

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Nearly ten years later, they have not returned.

That experience changed how I think about social change. You cannot walk into a community and expect practices rooted in generations of belief to disappear overnight. The solutions had to come from the grassroots, and we needed time to build trust and support communities as they found their own way forward. The UN Trust Fund gave us the time and resources to support that process until change took root, something short-term projects rarely allow.

We never felt left alone. The UN Trust Fund accompanied us throughout the process, helping us strengthen how we managed the work, our finances, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Those skills and systems became part of how Alafia worked and later helped other donors trust us with larger opportunities.



“As our relationships with communities deepened, women and girls began bringing other issues to us, including child marriage. We learned that preventing it meant more than stopping a marriage: girls needed support to return to school, and women needed economic opportunities that gave families more choices.



The issue changed, but our approach did not: begin by hearing women's experiences firsthand, work with the people who shape decisions in the community, and stay long enough for change to take root.



What we learned in Togo is now informing our projects in Benin and Madagascar, and organizations in Ghana are reaching out to learn from our experience. We know this approach works. What we need now are the means to reach more women, more girls and more communities. Every time we listen, women show us where we need to go next.

Berthe Tatey founded Alafia in 1997, a Togolese women's rights organization working with women, girls and community leaders to challenge harmful social norms and prevent violence. Its work has addressed harmful widowhood practices and child marriage in Togo, with projects in Benin and Madagascar and organizations in Ghana seeking to learn from its experience.

