CREA Strategic Plan
2021-2025

Introduction

Founded in 2000, CREA is a feminist human rights organization based in New Delhi, India. CREA works at community, national, regional, and global levels and is one of the few international feminist organizations based in the global South. CREA focuses on building feminist leadership, strengthening movements, expanding sexual and reproductive freedoms, promoting rights-based approaches to reducing gender-based violence, and advancing the human rights of structurally excluded[1] people.

The current five-year plan (2021-2025) comes at a time of extraordinary challenge and exceptional opportunity. In the process of developing this plan, CREA reflected on its 20 years of accomplishments, its core strengths, the current context, and the specific qualities that CREA can bring to meet today's challenges. Building on a period of impressive growth, together with a commensurate rise in demand for the organization's particular capabilities, CREA has developed a renewed vision for the future, a fortified sense of its unique mission, and a theory of change that describes clear pathways to achieve its objectives.

Theory of Change

CREA believes that amplifying the voices of structurally excluded people, building strong leaders, and strengthening resilient, intersectional movements are essential and inter-connected pathways to achieving a more just and peaceful world. It strives to effect change through its understanding and belief that:

- Bolstering the self-confidence, leadership, and knowledge of structurally excluded women, girls, transgender and gender non-conforming people, helps to strengthen their capacity to make their own decisions, exert control over their bodies, and demand their rights.
- Strengthening feminist and allied movements to become more inclusive of structurally excluded people, to develop new strategies to challenge anti-feminist and anti-rights mobilizations, and to address neglected or contentious issues, contributes to enabling them to defend and expand civic space and to challenge oppressive norms, power structures and discourses.
- Focusing on advancing sexual and reproductive rights and promoting a rights-based and rights-affirming approach to gender-based violence is central to attaining a world where everyone realizes their autonomy, dignity and equality.

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[1]CREA uses the term 'structurally excluded' to draw attention to the ways in which societal architecture prevents certain people from enjoying the full spectrum of rights and from meaningfully and effectively participating in their communities and decision-making spaces.

Our work focuses on preventing individual harms, dismantling the structures that construct and sustain those harms, and creating pathways to justice for persons excluded because of their real or perceived genders, sexualities, identities, or chosen forms of labor.

At present, CREA works with structurally excluded women and girls, persons of diverse sexualities, genders and sex characteristics, persons with disabilities, and sex workers. CREA will continue to practice and advocate for broader inclusion and solidarity.

(See the graphic version of the theory of change in Annex 1).

Context: rising threats, exceptional opportunities

CREA's new five-year plan is designed to advance the human rights of structurally excluded women, girls and gender non-conforming people at a time that these rights are under fierce attack. Authoritarian leaders are cracking down on dissent and closing space for political participation, using arbitrary arrests, detention, criminalization, and harassment to silence activists. Women, girls and gender non-conforming people who are fighting for human rights face increased repression and violence across the globe.[2] States have used the COVID-19 pandemic to justify further restrictions on movement and to attack human rights defenders, wielding online and physical assaults and expanding criminalisation.[3] Meanwhile, authoritarian governments have imposed administrative burdens for nongovernmental organizations to register, operate and receive funding, including in India.[4] Technology creates expanded opportunities and freedoms, but also brings censorship, surveillance and new forms of violence.

Non-state actors, such as religious and extremist groups, appeal to reactionary notions of race and gender and co-opt rights language to construct arguments, such as protecting religious 'freedom' and 'traditional' values. In recent years, they have concocted new anti-gender terms and renewed strategies to attack LGBTQ rights, women's rights, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive rights. These groups have gained power within the government or legislature in several countries, and wield their influence from the inside, as well as through the use of allied media outlets, online attacks and pressure at the ballot box. Once they capture government, or dominate the media and online spaces, they exert their influence on the world stage, undermining international agreements and distorting public discourse.

Gains in recent years include the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights and a growing awareness of the epidemic of gender-based violence (GBV). Yet many countries still criminalise same-sex sexual conduct and stigmatize behaviours not conforming to traditional gender norms. Sex workers face criminal or financial penalties for their work. Young and/or less formally educated women are often ignored by leaders in government and in their communities, as well as within movements. Pervasive power imbalances are maintained by individuals, in families and communities, who have an inherent interest in preserving the status quo and limiting the participation of structurally excluded people in social and political life. Prevailing norms regarding gender and sexuality also generate and perpetuate violence against women, girls and gender non-conforming people.

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[2] https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24232&LangID=E
[3] https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/defending-rights-during-pandemic-impact-covid-19-safety-and-work-human-rights
[4] https://www.policyforum.net/indias-war-on-ngos/

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated structural injustices. The economic effects disproportionately hurt women, who already were more likely to work in insecure, low-wage jobs. Women and girls face the burden of unpaid care work for children out-of-school, the elderly and the sick. Spending on health has been diverted to COVID-19, reducing resources for sexual and reproductive health. The pandemic has also reduced mobility and increased social isolation, and stay-at-home orders have contributed to rising levels of gender-based violence[5].

Movements are mobilizing in different ways to meet these unprecedented challenges. Women's rights movements are addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion. Powerful, self-led movements – those fighting for disability rights, LGBT rights, sex worker rights, amongst others – continue to challenge stigma, violence and discrimination. The use of digital technologies is generating new possibilities for feminists to organize. The inadequacy of governmental and private sector responses to COVID-19 has exposed structural weaknesses, creating opportunities to address deep roots of persistent injustices.

CREA's readiness, values and role

Founded in 2000, CREA is a global South-based feminist human rights organization working at the intersection of gender, sexuality and human rights at community, national, regional and global levels. Since its inception, CREA's mission has been focused on building feminist leadership, advancing the human rights of women and girls, and expanding sexual and reproductive freedoms of all people. CREA focuses on supporting those who have been structurally excluded, believing that when structurally excluded people identify and understand their rights and take action to exercise and assert those rights, the human rights of all people are advanced.

CREA has been guided by core values over its twenty years. As part of the strategic planning process, CREA reviewed, affirmed and refreshed its values, in ways that respond to the current moment and reinforce the core commitments that ground its work:

Critical feminist practice: CREA aims to practice an inclusive and intersectional feminism – centring gender, sexuality, accessibility and rights and amplifying the voices and visibility of those structurally excluded.

Diversity & cross-movement collaboration: CREA promotes cross-movement knowledge, solidarity and collaboration.

Multigenerational approaches: CREA practices multigenerational mentorship and learning within the framework of movement-building.

Innovation and creativity: CREA strives to ignite ideas, knowledge, and alliances – translating creative and critical thinking into action.

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[5] Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. UN Secretary General. 9 April 2020.
https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_apr_2020_updated.pdf

Sharing and shifting power: CREA works through partnerships – redistributing resources, knowledge and power, and opening spaces and expanding possibilities for activists to build collective power.

In its 20 years, CREA has developed effective and innovative strategies to advance its mission. As part of the strategic planning process, those strategies have been reviewed to identify which have been most effective and which most meet the needs of the present moment. The resulting set of strategies highlights CREA's particular abilities to capacitate, communicate, connect, convene, create and constructively complicate in order to ignite new ideas and inspire action. (See the Six C Strategies below.)

Over the next five years, CREA will focus its efforts on supporting partners in East Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia to participate in feminist organizations, to build cross-movement alliances, and to advocate locally, nationally and globally. It will continue to strengthen feminist leadership and movements, advance sexual and reproductive rights, promote rights-based approaches to gender-based violence, and support partner organizations and movements to defend and expand civic space and foster collective resilience. This last objective is a direct and deepened response to the current context, in which the need to resist and challenge anti-feminist and anti-rights mobilizations is urgent.

CREA believes this is a moment to step forward – to create strategic dialogues and convene spaces where diverse activists and constituencies can come together to build common ground on contentious or neglected issues and to protect gains that have been made. Over the next five years, CREA will be guided by its vision, mission and long-term objectives, as follows.

Vision
CREA envisions a more just and peaceful world, where everyone realizes their autonomy, dignity and equality.

Mission
CREA builds feminist leadership, strengthens movements, challenges unjust power structures, expands sexual and reproductive freedoms and advances the human rights of structurally excluded people.

CREA uses the term 'structurally excluded' to draw attention to the ways in which societal architecture prevents certain people from enjoying the full spectrum of rights and from meaningfully and effectively participating in their communities and decision-making spaces.

Our work focuses on preventing individual harms, dismantling the structures that construct and sustain those harms, and creating pathways to justice for persons excluded because of their real or perceived genders, sexualities, identities, or chosen forms of labour.

At present, CREA works with structurally excluded women and girls, persons of diverse sexualities, genders and sex characteristics, persons with disabilities, and sex workers. CREA will continue to practice and advocate for broader inclusion and solidarity.

Objectives and outcomes

CREA's strategic plan is organized around four long-term objectives that channel its theory of change and advance its mission. These four programmatic objectives are sustained by a fifth long-term objective, which addresses CREA's organizational capacities and qualities. Under each of these objectives, five-year outcomes have been identified. To make progress toward those five-year outcomes, CREA develops annual work plans, with one-year outcomes. Guided by CREA's core strategies (see the Six C strategies), the one-year plans chart the activities to be undertaken that year. To measure progress on the five-year plan, indicators have been developed for each outcome, with a plan for regularly gathering information on those indicators and periodically using that information to take stock of progress. (See Learning, Monitoring and Evaluation, below.)

Objective 1: Feminist leadership and movements are strong, intersectional, inclusive, and amplify the voices of structurally excluded people.

Outcome 1.1: Partner organizations are capacitated to become more intersectional, accessible, effective and inclusive of structurally excluded people.
Outcome 1.2: A cadre of leaders - particularly among structurally excluded people - is capacitated to advance feminist models of leadership, participation and critical thinking.
Outcome 1.3: South-South and global movements increasingly express solidarity with and reflect the perspectives of structurally excluded people.

Objective 2: Sexual and reproductive health and rights are advanced so that all people exercise bodily autonomy, consent and control over their choices and decisions.

Outcome 2.1: SRHR movement actors increasingly embrace a rights-based and affirmative approach.
Outcome 2.2: Individuals are capacitated to exercise and assert their sexual and reproductive rights and freedoms.
Outcome 2.3: Policy actors defend and advance sexual and reproductive rights and health.
Outcome 2.4: Families, community members and other stakeholders increasingly support the sexual and reproductive rights and freedoms of all people.

Objective 3: Responses to gender-based violence expand and promote well-being, security and rights.

Outcome 3.1: Structurally excluded people identify and understand gender-based violence (GBV) and take action to address it in their lives and communities.
Outcome 3.2: Advocacy, public education and capacity-building efforts effectively challenge punitive or protectionist laws, policies and practices that can exacerbate GBV or otherwise cause harm.
Outcome 3.3: GBV movement actors increasingly embrace a rights-based and affirmative approach.

Objective 4: Feminist, human rights and allied movements defend and expand civic space and foster collective resilience.

Outcome 4.1: Structurally excluded people and their movements contribute to the defence and expansion of civic space.

Outcome 4.2: Partner organizations and movements develop new discourses and strategies to resist and challenge anti-feminist and anti-rights mobilizations.

Outcome 4.3: Advocacy, public education and capacity-building efforts expand dialogues across contentious or neglected feminist issues, to build more effective movements.

Outcome 4.4: Feminist organizations increasingly adopt critical approaches to technology and defend digital rights, thereby enhancing the safety, security and well-being of movements and structurally excluded people in online spaces.

Objective 5: CREA manifests its values to be an intersectional, inclusive, accessible, diverse, innovative, collaborative and multigenerational feminist organization that strives to operate at high levels of excellence, effectiveness and accountability.

Outcome 5.1: CREA's organizational culture and structures reflect its values and enable it to advance its mission.

Outcome 5.2: CREA's organizational processes and systems enhance clarity, transparency, learning, accountability, efficiency and agility.

Outcome 5.3: CREA secures and manages the resources needed to implement its strategic plan and maximize strategic growth, innovation, responsiveness and sustainability.

The Six Cs (CREA's strategies)

CREA is known for its creativity, agility, thought leadership, and a willingness to convene difficult but important conversations that lead to stronger movements. Much of its work builds the capacities of others, generates new thinking, and contributes to increased inclusivity. The following describes CREA's core strategies:

Capacitate: CREA strives to equip our partners and constituencies of structurally excluded people with the knowledge, understanding, resources and skills to demand their rights, engage in advocacy, and strengthen individual and collective resilience. We convene cohorts of individuals and organizations who have the capacity to bring a sexuality, gender and rights perspective to their work. And we strengthen movements by fostering an intersectional approach focused on building collective efforts to defend civic space and influence decision-makers.

Communicate: CREA believes in and utilises processes that move from critical thinking to critical practice. We craft messages to shift discourses, build knowledge, introduce new concepts and language, challenge prevailing social norms, and strengthen movement-building approaches. We communicate directly and also amplify the advocacy messages of partners, especially structurally excluded groups, in order to expand our reach and influence key decision-makers.

Complicate: CREA practices a politics of deep inclusion. We identify matters that have been neglected or that provoke tension, and challenge ourselves and our partners to engage in difficult but meaningful discussions. We create opportunities for our partners to rethink, reimagine and reboot feminist politics and strategies in ways that fully embrace diversity and inspire action.

Connect: CREA connects communities and organizations with each other and links advocates and activists across local, regional and global levels. We aim to shift power by connecting those who are often structurally excluded to decision-making processes and opportunities to advocate for their rights. We support our partners and constituencies to develop new relationships, to collaborate, to build solidarity, and to work together to defend and expand civic space – online, in the public sphere, and in policy-making processes.

Create: CREA develops knowledge resources that link cutting-edge theory with the experiences and perspectives of our partners and constituents. These resources create new frameworks, tools and language that challenge restrictive social norms, provoke new thinking, build scholarship and mobilize cross-movement action. We use varied forms of expression – art, music, performance – and make resources on sexuality, gender, human rights and movement-building accessible to grassroots activists and communities through translation and adaptation to diverse contexts.

Convene: CREA collaborates with multiple social movements on cross-cutting issues of gender, sexuality and rights. We bring together diverse movements and organizations to build common understanding, allyship and a commitment to shared action. Working from an intersectional perspective allows CREA to bridge fault lines between social movements, to foster courageous conversations, and to build cross-movement linkages.

Managing risk

CREA recognises that the organization is exposed to risks due to the environment in which it operates and the nature of its activities, both of which are constantly evolving and changing.

Externally, the most significant risks at this time are related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of authoritarianism, and the dangerous ways that these two phenomena intersect. COVID-19 has made it harder for CREA's partners and constituents to meet, to travel, and to be out in the community. Dependence on communication technologies has increased the risk of online surveillance and harassment, and has exacerbated the digital divide, making it harder for some CREA partners to participate in activities. Diversion of funding for the pandemic and to address economic crises may threaten future funding for human rights and sexual and reproductive freedoms. Finally, climate change threatens the continuity of work, as people face extreme weather conditions that disrupt their work and generate hardship for already vulnerable communities.

CREA monitors and addresses potential risks on an ongoing basis. Its Risk Management and Mitigation Plan provides the principles and roadmap for managing risks, and forms part of the

governance framework of the organization. Risks are ranked in a consistent manner, taking into consideration the potential impact, and action plans are developed. Staff responsibilities for managing each risk are assigned. Risks and the risk management system are monitored regularly and updated annually.

CREA has multiple policies in place to provide for financial oversight, including audited accounting procedures, verifiable and recorded contracting and payments, informal and formal audits for financial reports and programmatic results of partners, and robust human resource policies. Financial sustainability is pursued through effective resource development, including identifying and seeking funding from a variety of funders and timely and accurate reporting.

In response the COVID-19, CREA moved deftly to working virtually, adjusting and maintaining both programmatic and organizational activities. The organization continues to draw on best practices for digital safety and security, for staff and partners.

Programmatic knowledge, networks, and capacities are spread widely through the organization to build and maintain capacity among staff, and to ensure that the organization has a broad leadership base. Consultants and staff are selected based on their technical expertise, as well as their commitment to the issues and to CREA's mission.

Strategic direction and programmatic focus are determined through strategic planning processes. Each unit within the organization is expected to develop and implement its own work plan, and is accountable to the leadership team, as well as the organization as a whole, for tracking progress, using indicators for each outcome and reporting templates. CREA continues to build its capacity for monitoring, evaluation and learning. (See below for more on monitoring, evaluation and learning.)

CREA's monitoring, evaluation and learning approach

Strengthening its internal learning culture is an essential aspect of CREA's new five-year plan. As the plan commences, CREA is developing a more systematic approach to its monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). CREA already dedicates significant time and effort to MEL, working closely with partners to gather and reflect on quantitative and qualitative data on its community-based work with girls and women; conducting pre- and post-surveys and after-action reviews to assess institutes and other events; commissioning external programmatic evaluations; organizing learning events; using story-telling/case studies to capture the effects of programmatic work; and utilizing the annual report to aggregate data from different programs and review achievements, challenges and learning for the year.

CREA's MEL approach is guided by principles and all staff engage in the MEL process as fundamental to CREA's values and effectiveness. A results-based matrix identifies a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators for each outcome, and determines a means of verification for each. Reporting templates focus on the outcome level, but also include questions about how the work (activity, event, project, program) is contributing to the achievement of the longer-term objective and to realizing CREA's mission. As much as possible, MEL data gathered by

individual programs are linked to the objective level and, when possible, to specific outcomes in the overall strategic plan. (See Annex 2 for the matrix, including outcome level indicators and means of verification).

Quarterly programmatic meetings structure discussions about outcomes, sometimes one at a time, sometimes broken into component parts (e.g., focus on one program or activity, linked to an outcome), sometimes rolled up to the objective level. A cumulative analysis is done annually. Meanwhile, existing all-staff retreats are used to discuss organizational strengthening outcomes under Objective 5, and to share learning across the entire organization.

Conclusion

This five-year plan will guide CREA's work from 2021 through 2025. It aims at maximising CREA's particular strengths to meet the challenges of the moment – when gains made on human rights, especially those rights related to gender, sexuality and accessibility, are under threat. It is grounded in a clear vision of the future, a distinct understanding of CREA's mission, a robust set of underlying values, and an ambitious, yet viable, theory of change. The theory of change is operationalized through four long-term objectives and, under each of these, outcomes for the five-year period. A fifth organizational objective, with corresponding outcomes, guides institutional strengthening essential to achieving the programmatic objectives. Rigorous systems to manage risk and to monitor progress have been put into place.

CREA is confident that implementation of this plan will create pathways to justice for persons excluded because of their real or perceived genders, sexualities, identities, or chosen forms of labour, and contribute to advancing the human rights of all people, so that everyone can realize their autonomy, dignity and equality.