IRC Women’s Protection and Empowerment (WPE) Learning Brief

Irish Aid GBV Strategic Partnership 2021
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INTRODUCTION

This learning brief was created through the Women’s Protection and Empowerment (WPE) Irish Aid-IRC Gender-based Violence (GBV) Strategic Partnership. The purpose of the brief is to share learning from a global WPE forum which explored three themes of inclusion, accountability and adaptability in relation to GBV prevention and response programming in acute and protracted emergencies, and to also share relevant findings from our evaluation of our 2019–2021 Irish Aid IRC Strategic Partnership.
From 2014 to 2021, the Irish Aid IRC Strategic Partnership has funded WPE programming in 23 emergency responses across six regions and 18 countries; sustained IRC and partners GBV response in underfunded and forgotten crisis in East and Central Africa; leveraged Ireland’s and IRC’s leadership in global and regional advocacy and policy spaces to champion attention to women and girls protection and empowerment; and created opportunities for WPE practitioners across 35 countries to share learning.

Each year, the Strategic Partnership has promoted technical excellence through south-to-south learning fora. Initially the annual learning forum engaged WPE teams in East Africa. Since then, teams from more countries have attended each year and in 2021, due to the continuing Covid-19 pandemic, WPE staff met together online for a second year running. In 2021, 93 staff met multiple times in two global and four regional online learning fora from across 30 country program, global and regional hubs.

We were grateful for the time and space to connect during such a challenging year. This learning brief captures some of the ideas and discussions between WPE teams.

2021 has once again been a challenging year for women and girls globally and for GBV responders working tirelessly to respond to growing protection concerns. Violence against women and girls is a major threat to women and girls and their ability to lead safe, healthy and active lives reaching their full potential. Women and girls in displaced, refugee, and recovery settings continue to disproportionately bear the brunt of the pandemic as well as the epidemic of violence against them. Despite this the WPE community has continued to provide much needed GBV response and prevention services with renewed creativity and adaptation to meet women and girls where they are and remain hopeful that not only can we continue to shine a light on the threats to women and girls and gains in their protection and empowerment threatening to roll-back progress but we will continue to stand in solidarity with women and girls around the globe until the violence stops and they are free to live safe, healthy and productive lives.

This brief shares some learning which we’ve brought together as a WPE community across many teams, regions and countries. We’re very grateful for the time colleagues took to share this learning. Many thanks to the following learning brief writers: Joanne Creighton, Alice Hawkes, Liliane Munezero, Rocky Kabeya, Marian L. Rogers, Patricia Gray, Mehreen Jaswal, Elizabeth Bartolomucci-Hughes, Elisa Mengatti, Sarah Mosely, Khudeja Asghar, Pauline Thivillier, and Rosemary Tola Ogunjobi.
LEARNING THEMES

The Irish Aid WPE Strategic Partnership learning themes include: adaptable WPE programming, accountability to women and girls, and inclusion of diverse women and girls within GBV prevention, response and empowerment programming. These themes were addressed within the six online learning forum sessions conducted in 2021.

Here we gather some reflections from each theme.
ADAPTABLE WPE PROGRAMMING

What did we continue to learn about adapting WPE programming during the pandemic?

Many of the innovative and creative adaptations that the WPE community designed and started implementing in 2020 continued to be valid, needed and implemented throughout 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to sweep and spread globally, with surges and troughs in transmission and new variants of the virus continuing to affect women and girls, their communities and WPE responders.

These included but were not limited to:

- Blended approach (remote and in-person) for case management and different sessions
- Staff working in shifts and in line with Covid-19 regulations and prevention measures eg. social distancing
- Integration of risk communication for prevention and control of C19
- Continued advocacy to support women and girls access to Women and Girls Safe Spaces to benefit from GBV response and prevention services.

WPE teams in partnership with local women-led community-based organisations (CBOs), women’s rights organisations (WROs), and other key stakeholders built on what worked during the first year and carrying this through to the second, making tweaks and further innovations as the needs in their contexts and the situation in relation to rules and COVID-19 restrictions evolved. The IRC’s collaboration with women’s groups and organisations continues to evidence that with the right resources, skills and trust, women’s movements remain best placed to continue service delivery during crises and pandemics. During the Covid-19 response, women continued to play a crucial role in information dissemination about the virus, its spread and prevention, encouraging good handwashing practices and supporting women and girl survivors to seek services, and offering immediate psychosocial support.

Focus on WPE teams learning on adaptability - 2021

Middle East Region

The Girl Shine curriculum adapted for remote delivery continued to be used in Lebanon and Iraq. With a worsening of the economic crisis coupled with the pandemic in Lebanon the Lebanon WPE team found that power outages and the escalation in fuel prices were also impacting girls’ ability to participate in the Girl Shine sessions. To the extent feasible, given COVID-19 restrictions and need to limit the risk of transmission, the team adapted the delivery modalities to offer a range of options to support girls’ participation in the sessions according to their and the facilitators’ situation. 1) socially distanced sessions in the women and girls safe space with some girls participating remotely with the facilitator present in the WGSS, 2) all girls and facilitator participating remotely and 3) volunteers supporting and supervising girls access to the safe space but with facilitators delivering the session remotely.

“Learning is the only escape from all challenges, with it I can progress, fly without wings, and I can separate from the entire world”

Quote from a Lebanon WPE client

Building on the project experience in Lebanon, the IRC pursued an opportunity for dialogue and reflection around the implementation of the remote Girl Shine intervention, conducting a learning exercise and has produced a learning paper documenting the key results, areas for further considerations and useful practices. This will be published in early 2022 and available on the GBV responders website.

Given the significant economic pressures on women and girls the Lebanon and Jordan, WPE teams have been pivoting their response based on feedback from women to provide cash for protection and in Lebanon to increase the level of material assistance (eg. dignity kits, learning kits) to be more responsive to the current situation. In Spring 2021, the Iraq WPE team commenced a pilot of the Women Rise PSS Supervision Tools with the objective of supporting the PSS group facilitators in their delivery of quality group psychosocial support for women and enhancing their knowledge and skills through continuous supportive supervision. The facilitators and the facilitator supervisors participated in a two-day workshop to familiarize themselves with the tools, practice using them, and, to make recommendations for further contextualization to support finalization and roll-out. The North East Syria WPE program has also increased its recreational and income generating activities for women and girls given that many face increased financial pressure and hardship. This has included mask-making to support infection prevention and control. They also established a new WGSS this year.
East Africa and Great Lakes IRC region
The WPE team in Yemen had two major breakthrough successes in 2021 relating to program adaptation. The first was that in Al Dhale they were able to obtain the Education Office of the Ministry of Education’s cooperation to stamp the participation certificates of women and girls attending the WPE informal literacy sessions. This is considered as one of WPE’s major achievements not only due to the value and meaning of such a stamp to the clients but also because the ministry now recognizes the certificates as valid qualifications for clients who decide to further continue their education beyond the literacy sessions. Secondly, the team is now piloting the delivery of Girl Shine to adolescent girls in schools, with co-facilitation provided by Girl Shine Girl graduate mentors.

The Tanzania WPE team faced a particular challenge in supporting women with access to savings and loans to help them through tough economic times when the Government put in place a restriction on VSLA activities in the refugee camps. The IRC continues advocacy on this issue and in the interim the WPE implementers continue to engage refugee women and girls into alternative empowerment activities, as well as focusing efforts on supporting host community women in areas surrounding the camps with VSLA activities, including adding a new pilot VSLA group with older adolescent girls.

In Kenya and Uganda, radio talk shows were used to support mass messaging about the availability of GBV services and to provide basic COVID-19 prevention messages. In Uganda, the WPE team also attended district level COVID-19 task force meetings to support effective coordination efforts. The Kenya team was also able to continue to provide their 24-hour hotline for GBV survivors to call to access support and information with the added benefit this year that they were able to upgrade their phone technology to smart phones meaning that there were additional features that case worker call handlers could utilize including, for example, a feature which allows for reverse calls.

In Gedaref state, Sudan, the IRC recognized that women and girls who were new arrivals into the camps were reticent to come forward and access services. Many are focused on survival and are traumatised from their GBV experience and conflict. The IRC WPE team therefore adopted a tent-to-tent outreach mobilization effort to try to take a first step to build trust and to invite women and girls to attend one-off PSS session as an entry point/taster to other activities available within the WGSSs. This is helping to build rapport and women and girls are providing feedback on types of information they would also like to discuss in PSS sessions.

A consistent issue which was raised by learning forum participants across all regions is the cumulative impact on GBV frontline responders of supporting survivors through a pandemic and usually during additional emergencies or as they recover from other crises (eg, conflict, flooding, displacement etc.) The risk of frontline GBV responders’ burnout and other stress related conditions remains a real and present danger and with the ongoing pandemic these risks are becoming heightened and prolonged. Whilst, IRC has a dedicated staff care resource and has invested in specific mental health and psychosocial support sessions for frontline staff and has WPE focal points to support staff experiencing IPV during the pandemic, these remain basic measures with more comprehensive investment and support needed from donors to help implement consistent measures such as routine clinical supervision to help mitigate against secondary trauma impacts on responders and consequent impacts on service delivery for GBV survivors, women and girls.

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Spotlight on Early Marriage, COVID-19 and IRC WPE’s efforts to support effective GBV response and prevention programming for adolescent girls in humanitarian settings – 2021

Through the Early Marriage in Crisis project funded by BPRM, the IRC has led the development of resources to prevent and respond to early marriage—which includes working with married and divorced girls and young mothers, as well as their female and male caregivers.

The goals of the early marriage intervention are twofold:

1. Delaying marriage: here the IRC aims to unpack the drivers of early marriage, raise awareness of the risks of early marriage, support girls and caregivers to find alternatives to marriage, support girls and caregivers to strengthen relationships with each other and build social support and solidarity amongst girls.

2. Responding to the needs of married girls: here the IRC aims to provide married and divorced girls with information about their bodies, how to influence decisions, encourage girls and their caregivers to strengthen their relationships with each other and build social support and solidarity amongst girls.

Mehreen Jaswal, Senior Adolescent Girls Specialist for WPE in the VPRU provided an update on early marriage in crisis and the impacts of COVID-19 and what progress is being made by GBV responders during 2021. As Mehreen explained:

‘In humanitarian crisis, early marriage rates increase with a disproportionate impact on girls and early marriage is internationally recognized as a human rights violation, but is so common and normalized globally. There are many drivers and contributing factors of early marriage but the root cause is gender inequality.’

So what is being done?

Under the Early Marriage in Crisis Project the IRC has conducted a formative study on early marriage in Uganda and Lebanon and conducted program testing in Uganda. Due to COVID-19, the Lebanon team adapted their Girl Shine intervention for remote use and a learning paper is being developed on the process followed and the learning from this approach. Additionally, the Early Marriage in Crisis Project team has:

- Developed Outreach strategy
- Life skills sessions for married and unmarried girls
- Sessions for female and male caregivers of married and unmarried girls
- Key messages

In development are the following…

- Training content on Girl Shine and early marriage
- Training content for service providers on early marriage and other forms of GBV
- Implementation guidance
- Easy read guide

Due to Covid-19 the planned in-person Training of Trainers (ToTs) on the new updated tools and package were not feasible so IRC has shifted to developing a remote training package instead. This is a major adaptation which aims to support GBV responders’ capacity building remotely and will hopefully also be of value even if the pandemic abates i.e. the online course can serve as a pre-requisite to participating in a ToT and thereby reduce the length of in-person ToTs.
ACCOUNTABILITY TO WOMEN AND GIRLS

Being accountable to women and girls is an essential aspect of women’s protection and empowerment.

As WPE program adaptations to Covid-19 took place, women and girls were engaged in program design and continued to be consulted on the best alternatives to provide GBV response services as the pandemic intensified.

Prominent among WPE country teams was a continuing commitment to the empowerment and leadership of female community workers to keep women and girl spaces open and continue providing GBV case management and psychosocial support services, share information on updated referral pathways, and ensure all Covid-19 prevention protocols are observed. In many countries, trained female GBV case workers from refugee and displaced communities were provided with mobile phones to continue to deliver case management services to women and girls, with remote supervision support from staff. Based on feedback from women and girls, dignity kits packages in some contexts included personal preventative equipment as a measure to mitigate the spread of the virus. WPE teams demonstrated continuing flexibility throughout 2020 and 2021 and speedily took action to adjust meeting schedules, reduce numbers of participants per group activity, establish handwashing facilities at the women and girl spaces, pin up Covid-19 prevention guidelines, and adapt GBV referral pathways to ensure GBV prevention, response and empowerment activities remained open and were responsive to the needs of women and girls throughout the pandemic.

The remote safety audit option developed in 2020 continued to be used in some settings where COVID-19 interrupted direct access to communities or due to other access constraints, for example, flooding or insecurity in 2021.

By engaging women leaders who had existing expertise in GBV prevention and response in telephone interviews, WPE teams heard about increased perpetration of GBV, barriers to accessing services due to government restrictions on movements, and high transport and medical costs. Understanding women and girls’ concerns by conducting regular safety audits, listening sessions, as well as gathering feedback from women and girls through IRC’s established feedback mechanisms, have contributed to improved service delivery for women and girls throughout the pandemic. Accountability provides women and girls space to raise their concerns and provide recommendations for changes that promote their safety and empowerment.

With the current Covid-19 pandemic, the need to ensure accountable practices for women and girls across humanitarian response was addressed through strengthened coordination and collaboration with other partners, including grassroots women networks, government partners and sector leads.

As part of GBV working groups, IRC contributed to strong advocacy efforts to make sure GBV prevention, response and livelihood services for women and girls were prioritized during the humanitarian response to Covid-19. WPE teams across the world raised their voices to highlight the need for GBV services as essential life-saving services and to ensure they remained available and met the needs of women and girls even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

During 2021 the IRC as in 2020, increased technical support to local women and girls’ movements and networks through online trainings and mentorship. This supported grassroots actors to lead on service provision, including GBV case management and psychosocial support for other women and girls in their respective communities. During this time, many country teams worked with women and girls to plan adaptive ways they can continue engagement with them, taking into consideration safety measures and to continue lifesaving GBV response support for women and girls experiencing different forms of gender-based violence.

In the midst of the numerous challenges women and girls face due to the Covid-19 pandemic, IRC WPE country teams continue to put women and girls at the centre of their programming, ensuring that everyone is demonstrating accountability to women and girls in their everyday interactions and promoting women’s and girls’ safety and empowerment.
**Spotlight on IRC’s EMAP projects**

In many countries, men engaged in the GBV prevention Engaging Men Through Accountable Practice (EMAP) groups demonstrated accountable practices by joining women as allies to speak about the increase in GBV during the pandemic, and to advocate for services.

In Spring 2021 the WPE Yemen team commenced their implementation of EMAP for the first time! This is a major milestone! Whilst the team have reported several challenges such as having men's commitment to full participation and acceptance of some of the men's curriculum messages they have also had some notable successes already. These include: some male participants demonstrating positive reflection on gender norms, for example, men recognizing and valuing women for the contributions and work they are doing in comparison to their own roles. Based on the feedback and demands from EMAP women's advisory committee the men in the EMAP sessions have been developing anti-violence messages, and brochures discouraging street harassment of women and girls and-youth drug-taking.

**“EMAP has greatly changed the attitude and behaviour of men in this community that has made life easier for women. A lot of men are joining after we have created awareness through a radio question and answer session that we do to educate fellow men who have not participated in the program. Now we don’t follow culture blindly like we did before. Let our girls go to school. My wife says that I am a better man.”**

Bashir, a client of the IRC’s EMAP program during an interview in Hagadera, Kenya.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic some countries noted challenges with dropouts of men or inconsistent attendance of EMAP session during 2021, this is leading teams to redouble their efforts in relation to careful selection and enrolment of committed men to the program and also for further strengthening of community actions and advocacy at the end of the intervention.
INCLUSION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN ALL THEIR DIVERSITY

Inclusion of diverse women and girls remains a critical issue on the agenda for WPE programming. So many women and girls struggle to access our protection and empowerment programming across the world, and we continued to recognize there is more we can do to facilitate their participation and leadership within our WPE movement.

WPE’s has been intentionally exploring how to ensure our interventions are inclusive for more than 10 years. Building on these efforts by the WPE community this year IRC intentionally decided to focus a full session of the WPE learning forum specifically on inclusion of diverse women and girls and pooling together key developments and learnings to take stock of the journey travelled and the distance still left to travel.

Firstly, recognizing that there can be varying levels of understanding in relation to inclusion definitions and core it was necessary to (re)visit these to support a common grounding and understanding amongst WPE practitioners.

Defining Intersectionality:
A feminist framework which explains how interlocking systems of oppression mean that women and girls experience violence and discrimination differently based on their race, class, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity and religion. An intersectional approach requires that action to achieve social justice be informed by an understanding of the multiple experiences of inequality faced by women and girls, rather than by prioritizing the experience of needs of one group of women over another.

BLTG Inclusion Guidance Note, 2019

Defining inclusion:
The process of improving the way people participate in the community and how they access services and resources. Inclusion involves proactively removing barriers and risks to ensure everyone can meaningfully participate and benefit from services. Inclusion involves enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights.

BLTG Inclusion Guidance Note, 2019

Next, we explored together the types of barriers to inclusion diverse women and girls face to accessing, participating and benefiting from IRC WPE services. Identifying barriers whether physical, communication, attitudinal or institutional is a critical first step to be taken before identifying the approach to addressing and removing those barriers.

Ensuring meaningful participation of women and girls by recognizing their capacity and the critical role they play in responses, together with partnering with representative organisations (eg. WROs and women and girls focused disability organisations) are key ways in which participation can be fostered. Collecting data to monitor inclusion is also crucial to understanding the needs of diverse women and girls and their journey through GBV response and prevention service provision.

As a global community of practitioners, we also explored the enablers of inclusion. Enablers are factors that can be put in place to enable the participation of diverse women and girls (for example, women and girls with disabilities). To create equal access to WPE programming practitioners were motivated to adopt the following inclusive and adaptable approach:

Major WPE inclusion milestones
2015: the IRC collaborated with the Women’s Refugee Commission to develop a GBV disability toolkit which supports GBV practitioners to identify barriers and pilot approaches to disability inclusion in GBV programming in humanitarian settings.

2019: Building Local, Thinking Global (BLTG) launched its guidance on the Inclusion of Diverse Women and Girls in GBV Prevention and Response Programming. This guidance challenged us recognize and understand how “intersecting inequalities” affect diverse women and girls and shape their identity and power.

Also in 2019, the GBV Blended Curriculum was launched to support GBV Case Management including survivors with disabilities and with a focus on digital inclusion throughout.

2021: the BLTG coalition launched a ground-breaking paper ‘Opportunities for Transformative Language within Feminist Approaches to Partnership’ exploring language and power hierarchies within humanitarian aid, and the impact of language on relationships between different groups.
Spotlight on WPE global inclusion resources and approaches under development by the IRC’s Violence Prevention and Response Technical Unit

During the Global Learning Forum deep dive on inclusion the IRC’s Alice Hawkes, Senior Technical Advisor for Technical Innovations and Pauline Thivillier, Inclusion Specialist from VPRU provided an overview of the body of work and achievements of WPE to date with a view to i) providing a comprehensive refresher to existing program staff on available tools and resources ii) guiding and informing newer members of the WPE community who want to support inclusion of diverse women and girls.

New technical developments, resources and learning on inclusion throughout 2021 include:

The VPRU’s Disability Inclusive Client Responsiveness Initiative has expanded its understanding of promoting disability and older age inclusion at a cross-outcome level. This initiative is cross-cutting not only supporting inclusion but also adaptability and accountability themes. Here are just some of the incredible very recent outputs from this initiative:

**Phase 1:**
- Conducting a scoping study: Strengthening Accountability and Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities
- Case Study – Strengthening Access of Persons with Disabilities to IRC Feedback Mechanisms and Services

**Phase 2:**
- IRC developed a Disability Inclusion Core Concepts Training Package This covers:
  1) defining disability and the CRPD
  2) removing barriers to access
  3) inclusive data collection

**Phase 3:**
- IRC developed a client responsiveness guidance and a toolbox for practitioners. The toolbox includes a practical tip sheet to support communication with persons with disabilities and older persons, as well as data collection information, easy to read guidance and barriers and enablers in IRC’s client feedback channels.

Safety and accessibility audits as a method to evaluate the level of accessibility of WPE services, as well as a means of identifying existing barriers of different reactive feedback channels were also discussed. Safety and accessibility audits are a checklist format which includes:

- Self-audit
- An action plan to track how barriers identified will be addressed and to draw recommendations and prioritize them

In order to support practitioners with practical steps to making progress on inclusion of diverse women and girls.
Spotlight on WPE teams learning on inclusion – 2021

WPE colleagues shared experiences and learnings in relation to inclusion in the global forum inclusion session and in the regional forum sessions. Some key exchanges included:

IRC East Africa and Great Lakes regions

In Ethiopia the WPE team delivering EMAP to men and Girl Shine caregivers’ curriculum encouraged caregivers to support their daughters with disabilities' to go to school and pursue their education through positive messaging and dialogue. Girls with diverse backgrounds (for example, girls who are out-of-school, girl headed households, and adolescent girls from girls from ethnic minorities were all engaged in participating in Girl Shine life skills sessions.

The South Sudan WPE team has been successful in hiring women as security guards to protect the safety and security of women and girls safe spaces. This is a breakthrough in challenging prevailing stereotypes that these roles are traditionally held by men.

During group psychosocial support sessions with women, the Uganda WPE team learned from them that lactating women were facing particular challenges in being able to afford to continue accessing GBV services at the WGSS given the costs of also providing for their new-borns. To respond to this access barrier the Uganda team were able to provide these new mothers with cash assistance to support their access to GBV services.

An inclusion training was conducted in Somalia and program data collection tools were updated and revised to support age and disability as well as gender disaggregation.

IRC has been busy setting up and establishing WPE programming in Gedaref State, Sudan during 2021. During community-based discussions and assessment it was clear that both refugee and host community women and girls had unmet needs, yet many actors were initially only targeting the recently displaced. IRC recognising this and wanting to avoid tensions took a proactive approach and delivered outreach messaging and held dialogues with all key stakeholders to ensure that they are clear that IRC WPE services are offered to all women and girls, regardless of their status, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, and age. Therefore, IRC WPE ensured that the women committees have both refugee and host communities’ represented and that both communities facilitate the life skills sessions, to ensure all women and girls are part of the decision-making circle. The WPE Sudan team is also planning to distribute solar lights to women and girls with a disability based on the findings of an interagency assessment.

In Yemen, to expand reach, the IRC established four mobile GBV teams which integrate with IRC’s mobile health medical teams. The mobile WPE staff conducted sessions to increase awareness of the existence of GBV, available GBV services, and how to access the services making it clear these services are open to all women and girls. They also carry out community mapping and safety planning with women and girls to mitigate identified safety and protection concerns.

The Burundi team as part of their safety audits and monitoring of GBV case management data patterns and trends identified women and girls with disabilities as a particularly at risk and marginalised group. Some disabled women and girls reported feeling stigmatised and excluded from society and expressed a wish to be more integrated and have the opportunity to meet more women and girls. The IRC WPE team therefore took steps to ensure women and girls with intellectual as well as physical disabilities were invited to participate in all relevant WGSS activities, and if they faced barriers to participation that support was provided. For example, cash to support their transportation to and from the WGSS.
West Africa

In Cameroon WPE programming, the inclusion of women of different status (host population, IDPs, refugees) is essential and a central value of all IRC interventions. The WPE team holds specific sessions on living together and social cohesion, an open dialogue before any intervention with community and religious leaders. The equitable inclusion of each group in resources or income—generating activities (e.g., distribution of kits, VSLA, IGA, socio-recreational activities) as well staff sensitisation on inclusion and for staff to have knowledge of all local languages have been ways in which the programming has evolved to be more inclusive.

Diverse feminist partnerships with Women Right’s Organisations was a key priority for the Liberia WPE team as the IRC phases out from direct implementation of GBV response and prevention services. The Liberia team engaged with partners in a feminist partnership evaluation process, funded by Irish Aid, to capture the learning from the partnership collaborations to date and to identify the successes and challenges in sustaining quality GBV response and prevention services in Liberia. This culminated in a learning event where key recommendations to support sustainable GBV response and prevention service delivery were presented. The Coalition of Women Against GBV in Liberia (COWAGIL), Rural Women and Girls Promoter and Women Solidarity Incorporated (WOSI) were leading light WROs sharing the platform with IRC WPE. ‘You need us just as we need you’ in order to end violence against women and girls was a key message emerging from the session with building stronger, respectful, equal partnerships by investing in and empowering women’s rights organisations to be well equipped to sustain quality programs being the essential takeaway clarion call to action.

Middle East and North Africa region

The Lebanon WPE team marked International Literacy Day on 8 September with specific activities to support the inclusion of women and girls with limited or no literacy. Through specific basic literacy numeracy and skills support activities women and girls as well as through the Girl Shine sessions (whether remote or in-person) women and girls are being given the opportunity to develop their literacy and numeracy skills in a supportive environment and provided with educational/PSS kit materials to support their learning and development.

“International Literacy Day, by reading and writing, we can travel the world with no expenses… all what we need in imagination”

IRC client

Meanwhile in Nigeria, WPE teams were active in continuing to ensure women and girls with disabilities were prioritised and included in criteria for material support distributions, that diverse women participated in the monthly safety audits to directly inform understanding of risks in project locations and to support identification of contextually relevant risk mitigation measures.

Niger WPE team made physical adaptations to WGSSs to enable participation of women and girls with physical disabilities. Systematic inclusion of women and girls in the IRC’s protection committees, in technical trainings, and in sensitization to include women and girls of all ethnicities, ages, marital status, legal status (refugees, host community, and IDP), abilities and disabilities, in basic and final assessments and reports of IRC projects. Women and girls were also involved in the GBV safety audits.

The DRC program set up a community complaint management mechanism which includes equal representation from women and men community members. The CBOs IRC WPE is engaging with also received briefings and guidance on the inclusion of women and girls with disabilities within their GBV response and prevention activities.
Spotlight on Safe at Home 2.0 to support inclusion

Through the Safe at Home project funded by BPRM, IRC is testing a community approach to prevent co-occurring intimate partner violence and child maltreatment, while building a deeper understanding of violence risk through a gender, age, and disability lens.

Khudejha Asghar IRC Prevention Specialist shared some key information on Safe at Home 2.0 developments at the Global Learning Forum. These included that, IRC is now piloting the new program modules to address violence against women and girls with disabilities, build female and male parent's inclusive parenting skills, address IPV through the life course, and prevent abuse and neglect of older persons, looking to bring more emphasis to violence faced by older women both in their intimate partnerships and in caregiving relationships.

Safe at Home 2.0 progress to date also includes development of the following:

**Formative research**
- Formative Research Brief – Understanding Disability and Older Age
- LGBTOI Scoping Study – Cycles of Displacement
- LGBTOI Ethical Research Recommendations

**Inclusive curricula:**
- Introduction to Human Diversity and Disability Module
- Inclusive Parenting Module
- Preventing Violence, Abuse and Neglect of Older Persons Module

And, in development, is a case management guidance for older persons.

Safe at Home 2.0 has also developed remote disability inclusion training. This training is 2 hours per day for 3 days on zoom and covers the following topics:

- Defining disability
- Removing barriers
- Unpacking beliefs
- Supporting parents of children with disability
- Inclusive data collection
- Meaningful participation

Safe at Home 2.0 has also developed remote disability inclusion training. This training is 2 hours per day for 3 days on zoom and covers the following topics:

**Emotional abuse against women with disabilities**

“...because whenever they would be seated at home she [the wife] would start telling her [the woman with disabilities]: you just came here to make me uncomfortable with your disability; so and so...and that disabled sister could feel sad...and she could be lamenting: 'God, let me just die and leave this world, I can't take it anymore that people are always talking about me when I didn't choose to be disabled'; she could feel really bad.”

Woman with disabilities, 41 years, DRC

**Family level drivers; income and perceived autonomy levels of women and girls with disabilities**

“What we mostly observe in such families, it's about neglect, he would neglect his sister and wouldn't give her the consideration she deserves because he knows that she wouldn't do anything for him and even for herself, he gets no benefits from her so he would neglect her.”

Man, 35 years, DRC
Spotlight on WPE Policy and Advocacy

In 2021 the Policy and Advocacy team has worked to highlight and support the work of WPE teams across the globe through our external relations work. Here we share a few highlights of how WPE teams have informed global discourse on protection from GBV in emergencies.

In Why Not Local? the IRC highlights various challenges that women's rights organizations (WROs) face in accessing funding and participating in humanitarian decision-making, reflecting missed opportunities for accelerating localization during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report also asks WHERE IS THE MONEY?, tracking funding to GBV interventions across three contexts, evidencing the ways in which GBV interventions remain underfunded, and shining a light on the need to prioritize GBV interventions and meaningfully engage WROs in these efforts.

Importantly, the findings compel humanitarian actors to ask the question, “Why not Local?” Through this report we’re calling for system reform to achieve a more equitable distribution of power, including with feminist organizations and WROs, who are frontline responders providing lifesaving services to crisis-affected women and girls in their contexts. Finally, the report makes specific recommendations calling on humanitarian actors to fulfill their commitments to increasing the prioritization of GBV interventions in humanitarian crises and the meaningful engagement of women’s rights organizations.

Our 2021 policy report Why Not Local? Gender-based Violence, Women’s Rights Organisations and the Missed Opportunity of COVID-19 shows how the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to take a devastating toll on women and girls’ safety in already complex humanitarian emergencies. Following on from the 2020 WHAT HAPPENED?, this report surfaces evidence of increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV), as well as how GBV interventions have been impacted, drawing on interviews with those working on the front lines of prevention and response across three contexts: Cameroon, South Sudan, and Yemen.

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The Policy and Advocacy Team were also actively engaged in the Generation Equality Forum (GEF). This civil society centred global gathering for gender equality was convened by UN Women and co-hosted by the Governments of Mexico and France in partnership with youth and civil society. The Forum kicked off in Mexico City in March and culminated in Paris in July when a series of concrete, ambitious and transformative actions to achieve immediate and irreversible progress towards gender equality were launched as the Global Acceleration Plan. The actions in Paris are complemented by commitments made by Governments, IOs, INGOs and NGOs towards their achievement.

As one of over a 1,000 commitment makers to the GEF and one of over a 100 signatories to the Women, Peace and Security Humanitarian Action Compact, the IRC applauds the explicitly feminist nature of the GEF and its outcome documents. Through our policy and advocacy work we will continue to call on commitment makers to hold fast to this core principle of intersectional feminism when implementing commitments.

The IRC’s Commitments to the Generation Equality Forum include: a commitment that ‘The IRC continues to prioritize our work to prevent and respond to GBV in humanitarian contexts throughout our programming. We re-commit to the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (CIA), reaffirm our commitments made to the 2021–2026 CIA Road Map, and pledge to continue advocating with our fellow CtA partners for the full inclusion of women and girls in humanitarian contexts wherever gender equality commitments are being made.’

The renewal of commitments to gender equality at the GEF is welcome together with the financial pledges which totalled over 40 billion USD; the IRC does however cautiously welcome the outcomes as the GAP failed to represent women and girls in humanitarian settings across all areas of their lives. Yet, undoubtedly, the leaders of the GBV Action Coalition should be recognized and applauded for going the furthest in integrating women and girls in humanitarian settings into the GAP by setting clear targets for the humanitarian system to achieve. We look forward to implementation and monitoring of the actions and commitments moving forward.
The WPE podcast also continued to feature WPE teams and VPRU colleagues:

- Tizita Tekletsadik’s career and work focused on women and girls as a Child Protection and GBV Survivor Specialist in the VPRU’s Technical Unit.

- Kristy Crabtree (Senior Advisor for Information Management and Technology, VPRU, IRC) together with Virginia Zuco (UNICEF) discussed the new GBVIMS+ GBV Case Management Companion Guide in a podcast moderated by Megan O’Brien (VPRU, IRC).

- Sadia Dahir (WPE Response Officer, Somalia), Maimuna Mohammed (Psychosocial Support Officer, WPE, Nigeria) and Rose Poni (WPE Manager, South Sudan) discuss the new Women Rise Psychosocial Support Framework and Toolkit. Funded by USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs, the Women Rise Toolkit seeks to address a critical gap in technical guidance for GBV service providers implementing the MHPSS programming.

- Esther Karnley (WPE Coordinator, Tanzania) and Marian L. Rogers (WPE Technical Advisor, VPRU) discuss their twenty years of service to IRC and what they as lifelong GBV activists think is the future of this work.

We also highlighted WPE teams and partners efforts through the GBV responders medium blog and amplified them via Twitter @GBVresponders:

- Jihan Hisso, WPE Coordinator for Iraq features in Kristy and Megan’s blog post about how digital information systems aid quality GBV programming

- The Irish Aid IRC GBV Strategic Partnership was also spotlighted with data produced from remote safety audits from Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Cameroon WPE programming.

Photo: Martha Tadesse/IRC, Ethiopia

**Spotlight on evaluation**

For over 15 years, Irish Aid and the IRC have partnered together to address GBV in acute emergency and protracted humanitarian crises. The Strategic Partnership brings together action across five pillars: 1) GBV Response, Preparedness and Recovery; 2) GBV Emergency Response; 3) GBV Policy and Advocacy; 4) GBV Learning; and 5) Coordination, Management and Quality Assurance.

In Year 3 of the current partnership (2019-2021), the IRC conducted an internal evaluation to understand, document and learn from the experiences of partnership stakeholders—including what they perceived as the most significant changes, successes, challenges and lessons learned over the past three years—which will inform future work to support women and girls affected by crisis.

**Findings**

The evaluation report was structured to answer three key evaluation questions, namely:

1. **Most Significant Change and Successes:** What have been the most significant changes (and successes) that the key stakeholders report related to the Irish Aid-IRC Strategic Partnership?

2. **Emergency Response Fund Scheme (ERFS):** To what extent has the ERFS supported the IRC’s ability to respond efficiently after a sudden onset emergency or spike in existing protracted crises?

3. **Lessons Learned:** What are the lessons learned from the Irish Aid-IRC Strategic Partnership that can inform future activities?

The evaluation made a total of 20 recommendations which are now being used to inform future GBV programming.
WPE LEARNING BRIEF
RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on feedback, conversations and learning from the online 2021 WPE Learning Fora. We hope they will also be considered by other organisations and networks who are on a similar journey to create inclusive, accountable and adaptable GBV prevention and response programming led by diverse women and girls.

We recommend:

1. GBV actors continue to conduct regular assessments to review and track the impacts of violence against women and girls and the Covid-19 pandemic over time. It will be important to monitor for shifts in the short, medium and longer term to inform programming, advocacy and coordination efforts.

2. GBV actors should continue to implement core and holistic programming informed by the needs and wishes of women and girls. For example, during 2020-21 IRC WPE teams have demonstrated incredible creativity and further diversification of skills-building and income generating activities. These activities are providing a vital lifeline for many women and girls, supporting their safety and economic empowerment and should be sustained moving forward.

3. GBV, cash and livelihoods actors should continue to scale up their coordination efforts and the level of support provided to women and girls to help them access vital GBV response services, meet their unmet needs and be able to be economically independent during the COVID-19 pandemic given the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women and girls.

4. Digital literacy training and learning efforts need to be increased and rolled out more broadly across humanitarian settings in order to support women and girls safe access to online GBV response and prevention services and online activity to reduce risk of online harassment, exploitation and abuse.

5. Linked to digital literacy it is also the case that women and girls remain disproportionately excluded from the digital revolution IRC’s ICT assessments in programming locations with women, girls and their caregivers and IRC staff demonstrate that this ongoing inequality and lack of digital inclusion is hampering some women and girls’ from being able to benefit from a full range of available protection services and support. The IRC therefore calls for governments and donors to re-double their efforts to support women and girls safe access to technology and online connectivity to support their access to GBV prevention and response services.

6. GBV actors should continue to adopt blended approaches to service delivery (in-person, mobile and remote) where safe, feasible and appropriate to maximize opportunities for women and girls to receive support when they experience GBV and remain agile and responsive to contextual shifts.

7. Given the ongoing impacts of the pandemic combined with the impacts of responding to and preventing GBV it is imperative that GBV responders are supported with regular supportive supervision, that supervisors prioritise the safety and wellbeing of frontline GBV responders by adhering to the GBV minimum standards, encouraging staff and volunteers to take rest breaks, to adopt flexible working patterns e.g. shifts and task shifting to the extent feasible. Surge staffing resources should also be assigned to ensure frontline responders can rest, recover and be able to return/sustain their work.
We recommend:

1. WPE should continue to ensure programming is women-led, centred, owned and informed across all activities and interventions
2. That state and non-state actors accept GBV responders, women’s rights activists, WROs and WLOs right to conduct their activities freely, without access constraints or threats of punishment or reprisal. 2021 continued a concerning trend as it was characterized by a series of complex acute, layered and protracted crises where GBV responders, women’s rights activists, WROs and WLOs have been targeted for backlash and oppression and where women and girls access to GBV response and prevention services has been threatened. Repression of women and girls is not acceptable and humanitarian access and services for women and girls in humanitarian settings must remain open and able to operate freely.
3. WPE teams and INGO GBV responders should continue to more fully partner with local partners, increasing these partnerships in number (e.g. partnering with networks of WROs), proportion of funding, duration, and capacity strengthening.
4. Linked to this, WPE teams and INGO GBV responders should examine internal structures, processes and systems that should be adapted or changed to facilitate stronger, more equitable partnerships
5. At the global as well as regional and local levels, WPE teams should directly support south-led feminist movements and reflect on ways in which partnerships can deliver GBV technical assistance in ways in which we are modelling power-with approaches.
6. WPE and GBV actors should renew and redouble focus and investment in women leaders in communities and informal/ formal women and girls’ groups, as well as formal established WROs.
7. Continue to advance and re-double efforts in relation to joint GBV policy and advocacy work through coalitions with WROs as together we are stronger and will have more impact in raising up the voices of women and girls affected by GBV in humanitarian settings.
8. Peer to peer learning and experiences both formal and informal should continue as these are helping to drive improved practice and accountability by exchanging knowledge on tools, systems and new women and girls and survivor responsive initiatives.
9. WPE Teams must continue to ensure WGSS committees are established, are diverse and representative of the women and girls they service and use power-with approaches to operating safe spaces.
10. GBV responders in acute emergencies want to see investment in trend analysis across deployments and responses—and specific reflection activities built in acute emergency responders, clients, and partners. This would support learning on promising and best practices for working with local partners in acute emergencies or other complex topics and support more accountability to affected populations, which are relative gaps in the acute emergency GBV evidence landscape.

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ACCOUNTABLE

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INCLUSIVE

We recommend:

1. GBV responders continue to advocate and coordinate for the needs of all women and girls to be met in humanitarian settings taking into account their individual and specific characteristics and intersectional identities.
2. That WPE teams continue to challenge discriminatory laws, regulations and practices through advocacy actions and solidarity with other GBV responders, WROs, WLOs and women’s rights activists. For example, advocating for prohibitions and restrictions on IDPs and refugee access to income generating activities, training and employment opportunities to be lifted.
3. WPE staff should continue to learn/unlearn and reflect on their privilege and role as GBV responders supporting diverse women and girls and to reflect on their unconscious biases which may prevent inclusive and equitable service delivery for all women and girls.
4. WPE teams are supported by WPE Technical Advisors and their country leaderships to be engage in learning and growth on inclusion and to promote staff access to and uptake of new technical resources which support the inclusion of women and girls.
5. For all WPE staff to take steps to ensure learning platforms and activities are inclusive and accessible for WPE staff and factor for language inclusivity and technology access.
6. For WPE partner organizations to be given increased access and opportunity to engage in WPE global, regional and country level learning activities to promote capacity sharing and collaboration and further promote power shifting from global north to global south.
The International Rescue Committee (IRC) responds to the world’s worst humanitarian crises and helps people to survive and rebuild their lives. Founded in 1933 at the request of Albert Einstein, the IRC offers life-saving care and life-changing assistance to refugees forced to flee from war, persecution or natural disaster. At work today in over 40 countries and 29 cities in the United States, we restore safety, dignity and hope to millions who are uprooted and struggling to endure. The IRC leads the way from harm to home.

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