The Effects of a Gender-Sensitive, Safety-Prioritizing Digital Literacy Training for Women in Yemen

In Yemen's Abyan governorate, the IRC's Women's Protection and Empowerment program implemented the *Safe Space to Learn* digital literacy curriculum for 50 adult women. Following 20 weeks of focused sessions on digital literacy competencies, participants experienced a nearly four-fold increase in their digital literacy knowledge, with many reporting increased feelings of empowerment. Notably, many participants also spontaneously initiated livelihood activities after completing the training.

Digital technology holds immense potential to enhance access to information and services in humanitarian settings by offering virtual pathways. While technology can aid in the reduction of access barriers, caution is warranted. Implementing digital solutions without addressing the digital gender gap risks leaving women and girls behind and inadvertently reinforcing harmful patriarchal norms. To fully leverage the power of digital technology equitably, we must recognize and tackle the specific barriers that women and girls encounter in accessing and utilizing technology. One route to address this is through digital literacy training in Women and Girl's Safe Spaces, havens for women and girls that offer freedom from violence and harassment, while also providing opportunities for learning, accessing support services, and building community.

In 2023-2024, IRC's Women's Protection and Empowerment program in Yemen piloted the *Safe Space to Learn* digital literacy curriculum with 50 adult women in the Abyan governorate. Women were empowered to register for the digital literacy course through outreach efforts by social work staff. Over 100 women and girls of varying ages expressed interest. Fifty participants were identified between the ages of 19 - 35, and two groups of 25 participants were formed.

This brief discusses the findings from the pilot of the *Safe Space to Learn* curriculum in Yemen.

Participant from the Digital Literacy Training in Yemen.

Context

Yemen, facing one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, has 21.6 million people in need of assistance. The dire situation, affecting 65% of the population, arises from an ongoing, nine-year-long conflict, which has led to widespread unemployment, poverty, and limited access to essentials such as food, water, and healthcare. As a result, the majority of the population is on the brink of famine.

There are online service available to displaced communities, like Daliak.ngo, a recently-launched instance of Signpost. However, in Yemen, access to virtual services and other online offerings comes with challenges. The country grapples with a digital gender gap, which is exacerbated by threats such as online extortion and blackmail. As a result, many women and girls experience apprehension and anxiety, limiting their ability to fully participate in digital spaces. This gap contributes to weakened digital literacy, hindering women's access to critical and actionable information about essential services as well as access to virtual services.

Findings

Program Effectiveness

Prior to joining the digital literacy program, participants were asked to complete a knowledge assessment on practical digital literacy skills. The average score was 2.6 out of 10 on the initial assessment. Following ~20 weeks of sessions on digital literacy competencies, including phone operation, online navigation, secure account management, digital skills for education and employment, and proactive online safety strategies, participants scored an average of 9.9 on the final knowledge assessment. The *Safe Space to Learn* digital literacy curriculum, implemented within Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS), resulted in an almost fourfold increase in digital literacy knowledge among participants. This evidence underscores the effectiveness of the curriculum *and* the positive impact of hosting a digital literacy curriculum in WGSS as a successful model for improving women's digital literacy skills.

Beyond demonstrating the effectiveness of the *Safe Space to Learn* digital literacy curriculum in challenging humanitarian contexts for enhancing digital literacy, its implementation in Yemen also highlighted the curriculum's potential to:
- **Expand Opportunities & Knowledge:** Participants gained access to new information and resources, like resume writing tools, job platforms, and online learning programs.
- **Enhance Confidence & Skills:** They reported feeling more confident and self-reliant online, able to navigate the internet effectively and tackle past online challenges. This boost in digital self-efficacy empowered them to control their online experiences.
- **Reduce Gender Barriers:** The program helped break down societal gender norms and biases that limited access to technology for women.
- **Increase Economic Potential:** Participants organically explored entrepreneurial possibilities for economic empowerment, spontaneously starting businesses as a result of knowledge gains and increased comfort levels.
- **Build Supportive Connections:** The program fostered dialogue and communication between participants across generations and social circles.

Challenges

While the program resulted in the strengthening of participant's practical and technical capabilities and broader empowerment, there were also challenges.

- Unreliable connectivity posed a barrier for some participants (in affected areas) in applying the learnings acquired through online program modules. This restricted their ability to practice new skills and consolidate knowledge.
- Frequent or prolonged power outages disrupted program participation for some participants. This limited their access to online sessions, hindered the completion of digital tasks, and potentially caused learning gaps for affected individuals.
- The absence of personal mobile devices for a subset of participants presents a potential obstacle to sustained engagement and independent application of acquired skills beyond the program's duration. This could limit their ability to access online resources, maintain connections with the program network, and fully leverage their learnings in real-world scenarios. However, loaned devices remain available at the WGSS, ensuring continuity of access and many participants used the sessions as a prompt to increase their access to household devices or to acquire devices.

Digitally Empowered

To gain a better understanding of the impact of digital literacy training, the following participant narratives offer deeper insight. Adila and Faiza's[1] narratives below show the transformative impact of digital upskilling on both the individual participants and their communities.

Adila's Story

Adila's experience with digital tools was limited at the start of the program. Her initial assessment revealed a need to start with basic digital literacy skills. In the early sessions, Adila could be found in the back of the room, reluctant to participate. She was conscious of a congenital disability in her hand where tangled ligaments caused her fingers to contract, restricting her mobility. This impeded her daily activities like tying laces and using a mobile phone. Initially, she opted to remain in the background and abstain from active participation in the program. However, with psychosocial support from the facilitators of the program and the other participants in the WGSS Adila began to actively participate, finding support and connection among her peers. The once-intimidating digital world gradually became a manageable, familiar territory as the supportive environment enabled her to overcome barriers of fear and hesitation. In parallel, her fear of revealing her disability lessened. Graduation from the digital literacy program was a turning point for her. Adila shared her journey in a powerful speech during the project's graduation.

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> **When I'm with others, some laugh at me and others feel sorry for me. So, I stay away from big crowds and hide my hand. But when I found out about this program, I signed up even though I didn't think I'd get in. When I got accepted, I felt nervous at first, but with help from the trainers and using phones, I started to overcome my fear, though not entirely. After lots of lessons, I made friends, became more outgoing, and stopped hiding my hand like I used to.**
>
> — Adila, program participant

At the close of the program, Adila teamed up with two classmates to establish an informal business. They decided to tackle common mobile phone challenges, like installing apps and managing Wi-Fi settings, for other women and girls in the community, in exchange for a nominal fee. The profits generated from their project will be committed to purchasing a smartphone for Adila.

Faizah's Story

Faizah, a mother residing in Abyan, faced significant challenges when it came to using a mobile phone, even a feature phone. The unease she experienced upon receiving calls from unknown numbers was overwhelming, resulting, at times, in debilitating anxiety. She relied on her son for assistance, but this reliance made her feel like a burden to those around her. For Faizah, any notification or incoming call triggered intense feelings of fear, which amplified her ever-present sense of over-dependence on her children for help, something that in her culture could exacerbate feelings of shame or embarrassment.

Initially skeptical about the digital literacy program, Faizah questioned how topics were taught to women and girls, fearing potential inappropriate content due to cultural and familial restrictions on "acceptable" activities. However, as the program unfolded, her reservations dissipated. She discovered that the program aimed to empower women through education, and aid in their safeguarding.

Faizah's most significant achievement, as a result of her participation, was changing her husband and son's perspectives on women and girls using phones. Rooted in cultural and religious traditions, their views shifted, leading to the normalization of mobile phone usage within their family. This transformation culminated in the decision to purchase a smartphone for her daughter.

The program's emphasis on education and personal development bolstered Faizah's self-confidence. She and her son initiated a small entrepreneurial project focused on selling internet cards. Initially, she faced challenges inserting these cards into the phone, but the structured training and collaboration within the program enabled her to accomplish this goal. She transitioned to becoming a business partner with her son in their internet network card selling project. Her involvement extended to introducing these cards to women and girls within their community. Encouraged by this progress, Faizah registered for a computer course to enhance her skills, reflecting her commitment to continuous improvement.

Graduates of the Digital Literacy Training.

Faizah and Adila's transformative journeys exemplify their resilience, personal growth, and determination.

The gender-sensitive and safety-prioritizing digital literacy training they underwent has far-reaching implications. Beyond acquiring essential digital skills, this training serves as a gateway to various other opportunities that necessitate familiarity with the digital landscape. By empowering Faizah, Adila, and their fellow participants with digital skills, it not only unlocks entrepreneurial prospects, or access to information services online but also initiates crucial conversations within households about acceptable activities for women and girls. In essence, this digital literacy training goes beyond teaching skills—it fosters empowerment.

Recommendations

Hosting the *Safe Space to Learn* curriculum within Women and Girls Safe Spaces creates a holistic and empowering learning environment for women and girls.
The WGSS played a pivotal role in the success of the *Safe Space to Learn* digital literacy program. These physical spaces provide a refuge where women and adolescent girls can escape harm and harassment. Beyond safety, WGSS serve as hubs for knowledge acquisition, skill development, and access to GBV response services. They foster mutual support and collective action within communities. For decades, GBV actors have utilized WGSS as entry points for women and adolescent girls to report protection concerns and voice their needs. The objectives of WGSS align seamlessly with those of the *Safe Space to Learn* curriculum. Given the prevailing harmful attitudes and perceptions about women and girls' technology use, implementing the *Safe Space to Learn* curriculum within WGSS is a recommended approach.

Connect participants to small business or livelihoods training opportunities.
Digital literacy serves as a foundation for various services and initiatives. Participants in the pilot program requested additional training on skills like mobile phone repair to start businesses. They highlighted that knowing how to fix their devices was essential for staying safe online. Typically, if a device breaks, they face the choice of expensive replacements or seeking help from a man at the market, granting him full access to their phones. Their request: train them in hardware repair, enhancing safety and livelihood prospects. Beyond mobile repair, digital literacy can also empower skills in design, photography, online learning, and e-commerce. Connections with long-standing programs like IRC's Learn to Earn should be explored.

Develop a monitoring tool to assess the impact of the training on feelings of empowerment.
Numerous participants spontaneously expressed feelings of empowerment and took proactive steps, such as teaching others in their community and launching businesses, leveraging their newfound digital skills. By quantifying this empowerment, we can inform program adjustments, ensuring a more effective and impactful approach.

Expand the training to include coverage of media literacy.
The current modules address acquiring online information skills and provide a brief overview of critical thinking related to information consumption. However, given the rise of mis/dis/malinformation globally, an additional module on media literacy could be highly beneficial to combat these persistent threats. This module could empower participants to critically engage with information they encounter online.

Explore the benefits of combining or sequencing digital literacy training with targeted social and behavior change communication campaigns.
Research shows there are harmful attitudes that impede women and girls' regular access to, experience with and confidence in using internet-enabled devices. There is evidence from Equal Access Initiative that complementary social norms messages about technology could enhance the impact of the program in terms of reach and community perceptions of "acceptable" behavior for women and girls, which could be a further protective factor that could enable greater equity in digital skills amongst men and women. In future iterations, social and behavior change communication campaigns should be explored to increase the reach of the program and community-level impacts.

The Safe Space to Learn curriculum is freely available to other organizations thanks to a Creative Commons license, and has been translated into several languages, including Arabic, Burmese, English, French, and Spanish. An operationalization guide is also available in English. An e-learning version of the curriculum is currently in development in partnership with UNICEF.

For more information, visit: https://gbvresponders.org/safety-and-empowerment-in-digital-spaces/

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