

WOMEN AND **GIRLS SAFE SPACES:**

A TOOLKIT FOR ADVANCING WOMEN'S AND GIRLS'
EMPOWERMENT IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS



Excerpts from WGSS Toolkit Chapter 2: Assessment

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Assessment activities should be conducted prior to establishing the WGSS. In humanitarian settings, affected communities are often recipients or beneficiaries of services and aid. It is important to keep in mind however, that women and adolescent girls should neither be considered just informants nor potential beneficiaries of the WGSS, but decision-makers who are integral to guiding the starting up of WGSS, and ensuring the space is established according to the [WGSS Core Concepts](#). To genuinely create a pathway for inclusive women and girl-led and owned spaces, WGSS interventions [should move away from the limiting concept of women and girls just as beneficiaries and clients of the WGSS](#) right from the very first steps of the start up phase.

For WGSS interventions [to be tailored to their context, women and girl-informed, inclusive and engaging of community members and key stakeholders](#), the right information must be gathered and analyzed as part of assessment activities. This analysis is key to define critical strategies to develop and plan for as part of programming design.

Three Key Questions

Overall, assessment activities should address three essential questions:

1. Is it plausible to establish some type of WGSS? The decision to establish a WGSS should be taken based on information collected first by speaking with the GBV sub-cluster / working group, other humanitarian organizations, national and local women's or GBV organizations, and government or local authorities to find out as much as possible about services – including existing WGSS services, whether **mobile or static**. Other information that should be gathered includes approximate disaggregated population figures, context dynamics and relevant contacts.

If the situational information gathered determines that an intervention is likely neither possible nor warranted, the engagement of women and adolescent girls, stakeholders and community members can be minimized to ensure no harm is done. Information gathering is also critical as an efficiency and coordination measure, so that for example, resources and efforts can be redirected if necessary, to another location which might be in need and/or under-served.

2. How might WGSS be established and supported in this context? Operational information? When the WGSS intervention is considered plausible, operational information should then be gathered to contextualize the needs of women and girls, identify key stakeholders in the community relevant to the WGSS intervention, as well as gaps in services and opportunities for collaboration with service providers. The analysis of this type of information collected will guide

the choice of **WGSS implementation approaches, modalities for delivery** and other components which need to be articulated in design activities.

3. Are women and girls informing and driving the process from the earliest stages? Through a multitude of consultations throughout the design phase, women and adolescent girls, first and foremost, must be engaged in figuring out the “who, what, where, when, why, how and with whom” of the WGSS, in order to uniquely tailor, ensure access and foster local ownership for the space at the onset of its design. Community members should also be engaged to gauge gender and community dynamics as well as other potential access influencers and barriers to women’s and girls’ participation. If any women, adolescent girls or other community members share concerns with the potential WGSS intervention, it is important to analyze these concerns as they will be important starting points to then design appropriate outreach, information dissemination and community buy-in strategies. Analysis and interpretation of the data must occur as it is being collected to inform real-time decisions, such as for example: whether assessment or consultations remain relevant; whether tools need to be adjusted to remain context-appropriate; whether any key informants or stakeholders were missed in earlier stages and now need to be included to ensure that women and girls are safely engaged in a beneficial way.

Key questions to be asked during group or individual interviews should be tailored accordingly in order to be safe and appropriate for every specific context, and for every specific target audience. Managers, coordinators or WGSS focal points have a final responsibility to plan and review the details of these assessment tools.

During the development of the toolkit, WGSS staff enquired about how to fund an assessment before securing funds. Each organization has different strategies to secure funds for assessments such as using private funds or asking for logistical support from other organizations already established in the area. Typically, if an assessment is to take place in an area where the organization is already operating through GBV programming, the existing staff are requested to lead and support the assessment. Just like for logistics support, this is usually the easiest way to proceed. In the case of a new emergency, donors are usually flexible and welcome the idea of funding assessments.

The following sections outline how WGSS assessments should be conducted using the three key strategies of the WGSS approach described in [Part 1: Core Concepts](#).

The three strategies require that the design and implementation of WGSS, are context-tailored; women and girl-led; and community-informed, in order to ensure that WGSS are safe, accessible and responsive to a range of women's and girls' needs.

2.2 WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TAILOR THE WGSS ASSESSMENT TO YOUR CONTEXT?

Key community stakeholders, community power dynamics, local and community governance structures, as well as social, gender, service delivery and environmental factors shape women's and girls' daily experiences and lives. They can also enable or hinder effective WGSS programming. For example, influential stakeholders can support or block an organization from securing a safe and accessible location for the WGSS. Community governance structures and the power dynamics among them might get in the way of an organization's ability to recruit WGSS staff representative of the diversity of women and girls in the community. Unequal gender norms might affect an organization's ability to ensure both adequate outreach to women and girls and their access to the WGSS. All of these can have a profound impact on the ability to establish a WGSS and deliver quality services to women and girls.

2.3 WHY DOES THE WGSS ASSESSMENT STEP NEED TO BE WOMEN AND GIRL-LED, EMPOWERING, INCLUSIVE AND SAFE?

Establishing trust and credibility

When setting up a WGSS, the assessment step is the organization's first opportunity to establish trust with women and girls and establish the WGSS' credibility. Ensuring that women and girls are engaged and consulted from the start of this process is therefore critical. Similarly, the assessment step is also the first opportunity to start supporting and promoting the empowerment and leadership of women and girls, which are both fundamental [objectives](#) and [approaches](#) in WGSS programming. The following are useful considerations:

- Establishing transparent and accountable relationships is crucial to encourage engagement and empowerment. Transparent conversations at this stage should not necessarily be conducted with the expectation that women and girls will entirely lead on decisions, but they are nevertheless important to demonstrate genuine intent to create pathways towards women's and girls' ownership of the WGSS.
- Consultations with women and adolescent girls should consist of a mutual flow of information. Assessment findings should not only be shared back with women and girls but the programmatic decisions deriving from the findings should be clearly explained so they understand how decisions are made and how their voices are being considered.

Inclusive of diverse women and girls

[Neither women nor adolescent girls are a homogeneous group.](#) Many women and girls experience increased risk based on intersecting systems of oppression and discrimination, including race, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, class, ethnicity

and religion. The intersecting inequalities faced by diverse women and girls further reduce their power, choice and protection from GBV, and increases their barriers to accessing services. Diverse women and girls are present in every humanitarian context. GBV actors should always assume diverse women and girls are present and exposed to GBV and take action to ensure GBV programming is inclusive and addresses their needs, barriers and risks. This includes consulting with diverse groups of women and girls during the assessment phase. Doing so supports the setup of a genuinely inclusive WGSS whereas considering it “extra or special effort” inevitably leads related actions to be understood as optional, and in turn, could lead to the exclusion of certain women and girls.

Minimizing safety risks

All safety considerations must be carefully examined before engaging women and girls. In some contexts, women speaking individually or in groups to outsiders may put them at risk. Diverse women and girls may fear participating in consultations alongside women and girls from dominant groups, while others may fear being openly identified as part of an identity group (e.g. LGBTI; sex workers). If benefits to participating outweigh risks, assessment teams should move forward with engaging these women and girls. However, if the opposite is true, then women’s and girls’ safety should be prioritized over their engagement in assessment activities.

Mainstreaming Inclusion and Diversity

Understanding the diverse needs and experiences of women and adolescent girls will require having separate consultations with different groups of women and girls. Barriers and enablers relative to specific consulted groups’ access to services, as well as factors increasing their vulnerability to risks in the assessment step will be critical to inform strategies and actions the WGSS programming must take to ensure it is inclusive, accessible and safe for diverse women and girls. The following should be considered during the assessment step:

- Adolescent girls have different needs and interests and WGSS staff should see the diversity of adolescent girls based on: their age, marital status, unaccompanied or separated status, HIV status, ethnicity, in/out of school and not working, pregnant or lactating, disability, mother or primary caregiver, sexual orientation, gender identity and experience of sexual exploitation.
- Many older women experience one or more types of physical, sexual, financial and psycho-logical violence, abuse and neglect. For older women survivors of sexual assault, the health consequences and resulting injuries are often more severe.⁴ Deeply-rooted prejudices about older women fuel ageism and perpetuate prevailing social norms that tolerate or even condone violence, abuse and neglect of them.⁵ Disability can be an added risk factor for older women, who may acquire an age-related disability; many of them associated with sight or hearing loss.
- Women and girls living with disabilities due to physical, mental, intellectual, vision and hearing impairments are not more vulnerable to violence because of their impairment, but rather because they are perceived as different, and/or have less power and status. They may be directly targeted because of this. Women and girls with disabilities of all

ages are subjected to violence and abuse at rates as high as 80% over the course of their lifetimes.

- Women and girls with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities face a complex range of risks and barriers based on patriarchal, homophobic and transphobic social norms, systemic inequality and violence. Lesbian, bisexual and transgender women and girls face increased risks of GBV, high levels of rejection by their family and community, and reduced social support networks and educational and economic opportunities.
- Unless WGSS are openly welcoming and inclusive, they will face similar barriers when accessing response services and may fear they are not welcome in such safe spaces. • 25% of the women interviewed for a GBV rapid assessment conducted for a 2016 regional study, indicated that their religious affiliation (and nationalities) negatively affected their access to services. WGSS activities may not be implemented in diverse languages and when one ethnicity or religious group dominates activities, other ethnic or religious groups may not feel welcome. Some safe space or GBV programming activities which incorporate religious or ethnic cultural activities or music, may exclude wider participation by diverse women and girls.

2.4 WHY SHOULD WGSS ASSESSMENTS CONSULT WITH THE COMMUNITY?

Community-based WGSS consultations can foster support for the WGSS intervention and its sustainability. Engaging in a process of direct consultation and dialogue with community members can help promote understanding and buy-in of the purpose of WGSS programming.

Consulting men and community leaders from the outset allows WGSS service providers and women and girls from the community to frame the WGSS intervention, and not the other way around. Across the board, a fair share of WGSS have been the target of rumours, and vulnerable to erroneous speculation about what happens inside the spaces or what women and girls learn to do there (e.g. how to disobey their husbands). Such messages when delivered by community members with power and influence (such as men and community leaders), while misinformed, can quickly spread and challenge the WGSS ability to provide services and safe access to women and girls.

Women and girls should guide how WGSS service providers engage with men according to community gender dynamics and inform how the WGSS can support women and girls accordingly. Community engagement strategies can then be developed in the Start Up phase to ensure women and girls can safely participate in and access WGSS activities and services. While changing community norms may not be part of WGSS specific interventions, men and community members will receive regular messages about the importance of the WGSS and the scope of the WGSS services – this can be helpful to promote safe participation in the WGSS for women and girls.

Excerpts from WGSS Toolkit Chapter 6: Implementation

Introduction

Agency (the ability of women and girls to consider options and meaningfully choose between them), and the space for seizing opportunity (the context that influences women's ability to transform choice into action), both influence the degree of an individual's empowerment. WGSS implementation aims to increase women's and girl's degree of empowerment in humanitarian settings by both creating the space for opportunity and supporting women's and girls' ability to make effective choices in their lives.

First and foremost, this means breaking down existing barriers between service providers and beneficiaries by ensuring implementation informs, consults, involves, collaborates and empowers women and girls as **co-creators** of the WGSS program. It is the **collective process** – between women and girls who, daily, choose to gather and contribute whether as beneficiaries, members, facilitators, mentors, service providers, agents of change or in any other capacity – which creates the relevant space for women's and girl's empowerment.

The guidance and tools associated with implementation in this toolkit outline the strategies and approaches that can be used to design the implementation process, as well as track and measure rising degrees of empowerment among women and girls, without being too prescriptive so as to avoid compromising the transformative potential of WGSS.

Dimensions of empowerment supported by WGSS activities

WGSS programming explicitly works toward multiple dimensions of empowerment:

1. Personal empowerment refers to the concept of power within: encompasses activities which develop women's and girls' self-confidence, self-awareness, self-respect, ability to assert their rights and make choices. In some programs, personal empowerment embraces a component of **economic empowerment**, in which income-generation activities are specifically designed to increase women's and girls' access to and control over the use of resources, and reduce their dependence and vulnerability to exploitative and abusive situations.

2. Cognitive empowerment refers to the idiom 'knowledge is power': encompasses activities and opportunities which allow women and girls to gain new skills and knowledge so they can make choices and take control of their lives. Cognitive empowerment includes a component of **understanding rights** focused on women's and girls' awareness of and understanding of their rights, services available, how to access them and how to report complaints and safety concerns.

3. Psychosocial empowerment: includes activities and services which recognize women's and girls' strengths. These support women's and girls' freedom of expression, ability to cope positively with stress, and mutual support through **strengthened social networks**.

4. Socio-civic empowerment: encompasses activities and services to enhance women's and girls' participation in public life, as well as opportunities to mobilize and organize for social change.

Tool 30a: WGSS Member Survey (Baseline); Tool 30b: WGSS Member Survey (Follow-up) and **Tool 30c: WGSS Member Survey Participant List** measure outcomes related to empowerment, knowledge of services, and social networks among women and girls. Data is collected from a sample of participants when they first come to the WGSS (registration) and again 3 months later.

Connecting activities, objectives and types of empowerment

The list below illustrates the link between the WGSS objectives, core activities in which WGSS or community members participate, and the types of empowerment that all these work towards and support. While the activities/services mentioned are those usually delivered in WGSS, they are not intended to be a standard set of activities and services (e.g. see Objective 4 below – case management services may or may not be available in a particular WGSS); and only a few may be delivered out of the whole list.

OBJECTIVE 1: WGSS facilitate access for all women and girls to knowledge, skills and a range of relevant services.

Illustrative WGSS activities that support achievement of this objective include:

- ★ Orientation for new members
- ★ Information dissemination on available services
- ★ Referrals to other humanitarian services (for all women and girls, not specific to survivors)
- ★ Periodic service mapping
- ★ Hosted information sessions from other service providers (e.g. legal, nutrition or sexual reproductive health service providers)
- ★ Life skills sessions for groups of adolescent girls
- ★ Skills-building groups or hosted skills training (e.g. vocational or livelihood service providers)

Supports: personal, cognitive, psychosocial empowerment

OBJECTIVE 2: WGSS support women's and girls' psychosocial well-being and creation of social networks.

Illustrative WGSS activities that support achievement of this objective include:

- ★ Arts-based activities (e.g. music, dancing, theatre, drawing)
- ★ Exercise and sport (e.g. yoga, volleyball, football)
- ★ Leisure and relaxation activities (e.g. coffee or tea ceremonies, meditation, storytelling, movies)
- ★ Craft-making (e.g. soap making, tailoring, beading, basket making)
- ★ Community development initiatives (e.g. gardening, rehabilitation of community spaces)
- ★ Positive support groups (young mother support groups, community development groups)
- ★ Communal income-generating activities to support the WGSS

Supports: personal, psychosocial, socio-civic empowerment

OBJECTIVE 3: WGSS serve as a place where women and girls can organize and access information to reduce risk of violence.

Illustrative WGSS activities that support achievement of this objective include:

- ★ Facilitated discussions to understand concerns and safety risks
- ★ Awareness sessions on risks to GBV, including SEA, and available response services
- ★ Awareness sessions on feedback and reporting mechanisms
- ★ Community mapping and safety planning exercises including safety audits
- ★ Hosted information sessions from safety/security actors (e.g. peacekeepers, police, community watch groups)
- ★ Direct or hosted distribution of dignity kits, cash, or voucher assistance

Supports: personal, psychosocial, socio-civic empowerment

OBJECTIVE 4: WGSS serve as a key entry point for specialized services for GBV survivors.

Illustrative WGSS activities that support achievement of this objective include:

- ★ Information dissemination on available GBV response services
- ★ Safe referral to GBV response services or any other relevant service
- ★ Basic response to survivors who report incidents of GBV
- ★ Provision of GBV case management services and individualized psychosocial support services for survivors of GBV
- ★ Confidential integration of survivors into WGSS group activities

Supports: personal, cognitive, psychosocial empowerment

OBJECTIVE 5: WGSS provide a place where women and girls are safe and encouraged to use their voice and collectively raise attention to their rights and needs.

Illustrative WGSS activities that support achievement of this objective include:

- ★ Facilitated discussions (FGDs or meetings) to understand women's and girls' perspectives and needs
- ★ Women's forum meetings and advocacy planning
- ★ Mentorship, peer facilitation, and side-by-side support from active members
- ★ Meetings of women and girl-led initiatives (e.g. associations, savings and loans groups)
- ★ Leadership and advocacy training

Supports: personal, cognitive, psychosocial and socio-civic empowerment

Increasing opportunities for participation through balancing group activities

WGSS implementation is largely centered around group activities which help validate members' individual experiences, while also serving as a catalyst to grow and amplify individual knowledge,

skills and assets to contribute towards a stronger collective experience. While the WGSS can host a range of services from non-specialized to more specialized group psychosocial support interventions, **those which are directly implemented by WGSS staff are typically community-based psychosocial support activities.**

In general, group activities in WGSS can be categorized into **three types of structures:** ¹

- **Curriculum-based activities.** These include a set of topics arranged in pre-determined order of presentation over several sessions, and may be complemented with activities, worksheets, etc. They generally include the same members from start to finish. Especially when WGSS are first established, at the onset of emergencies or in situations of active displacement, curriculum-based activities tend to be few. They tend to increase over time as situations stabilize.
- **Topic-focused activities:** These are less structured than curriculum-based activities but still include specific topic areas. Topics can be rotated based on interest and group members may come and go over time (e.g. a sewing group that discusses common camp issues women face and ways they would like to see them addressed). Such activities tend to remain fairly consistent throughout the lifespan of the WGSS, partially due to the 'sense of balance' they offer in creating an environment which remains fluid, but also allows for relationships and shared experiences to be built and strengthened.
- **Open Forums:** These activities have no pre-arranged agenda and group members can drop in for one or multiple sessions. Discussions are based on group interest at each meeting. (e.g. a henna group with no set discussion where women can attend as often or as little as they like). These are often the bulk of activities offered especially in the earlier stages of an emergency.

Open-structure activities are essential because they are the foundation for creating a welcoming environment that is open to any woman or girl in the community and that does not require strict attendance. Such activities also offer an important means of support for members while they wait to participate in more specialized and focused group interventions. In addition, these activities offer a greater number of opportunities for women and girls to directly lead activities and share their knowledge with others.

Group facilitation

At the same time, because the open-forum structure is informal and 'drop-in', it can often be challenging for facilitators and participants to create an environment which is conducive to building trust and relationships. [Facilitating groups \(see Annex 6.2: Facilitator Dos\)](#) is a balancing act especially for information, awareness and/or recreational activities.

The table below shows the ideal relationship between participants in group activities² and

¹ International Rescue Committee. (Expected to be published in 2020) Women Rise: A Group Psychosocial Support Resource Package

² The activities mentioned in the table fall into the three types of group activity structures described above.

facilitators, bearing in mind that the number of available staff and size of the group may vary according to context (e.g. familiarity with the topic, level of education, size of the WGSS).³

| Group Activity | Ideal number of participants | Minimum number of facilitator |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Orientation for new members | 15/20 | 1 staff (accompanied by at least one WGSS member) |
| 2. Information dissemination on available services | 30 | In the WGSS: 1 staff In the community: 2 staff |
| 3. Hosted information sessions from other service providers (e.g. legal, nutrition or sexual reproductive health service providers) | 30 | In the WGSS: 1 hosted staff + 1 WGSS staff available for support In the community: 1 hosted staff + 1 WGSS staff available for support |
| 4. Life skills sessions for groups of adolescent girls | 20 | 1 staff |
| 5. Skill-building groups or hosted skills training (e.g. vocational or livelihood activities.) | 20 (it may vary based on the specificities of the activity) | 1 staff- (it may vary based on the specificities of the activity) |
| 6. Recreational activities | 20/25 ⁴ | Women and girl-led activity 1 staff to support |
| 7. Community development initiatives (e.g. gardening, rehabilitation of community spaces...) | It may vary based on the specificities of the activity | Women and girl-led activity 1 staff to support |
| 8. Positive support groups (young mother support, community development...) | 15/20 | 1 staff |
| 9. Communal income-generating activities to support the WGSS | Members related to other activities | Women and girl-led activity 1 staff to support |
| 10. Facilitated discussions to understand concerns and safety risks | 15 | 1 staff 1 note taker |
| 11. Awareness sessions on risks of GBV, including SEA, and available response services | 30 | In the WGSS: 1 staff In the community: 2 staff |

³ Figures appearing in the table come from the WGSS formative research data analysis carried out in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Lebanon and Thailand during the development of this toolkit. Key informants include WGSS frontline staff, GBV senior managers, GBV WG coordinators, and technical advisors.

⁴ Most of the time, recreational activities are open-structure, however, activity groups with over 20/25 people can be difficult to manage and the benefit of the activity may be diluted.

| | | |
|--|-----------------|---|
| 12.Awareness sessions on feedback and reporting mechanisms | 30 | In the WGSS: 1 staff In the community: 2 staff |
| 13.Community mapping and safety planning exercises | 10/12 | 2 staff |
| 14.Hosted information sessions from safety/security actors (e.g. peacekeepers, police, community watch groups) | 30 | In the WGSS: 1 WGSS staff + 1 security staff In the community: 1 WGSS staff + 1 security staff |
| 15.Facilitated discussions (FGDs or WGSS meetings) to understand women's and girls' perspectives and needs | 10 | 1 staff 1 note taker |
| 16.Women's forum meetings and advocacy planning | 20 ⁵ | 1 staff to support |
| 17.Leadership and advocacy training | 15/20 | 1 staff (accompanied by at least one WGSS member) |

⁵ This is a generic estimate; the size of the groups should be decided at the field level depending on context. In some circumstances, women's forums can be an open-structure activity.