

Community-Based Psychosocial Support Approaches

What are community-based support approaches in GBV interventions and why are they important?

All communities contain effective, naturally-occurring psychosocial supports and sources of coping and resilience. Community-based support approaches imply that interventions seek to build on local capacities, supporting resilience and strengthening the resources already present within the systems, services and individuals' part of a community. Provided they are part of a more strategic psychosocial and mental health approach with the aim of building on existing individual and community resources, capacities, and resilience, a vast number of interventions and activities can be labelled as community-based psychosocial support.¹

Community-based approaches within GBV interventions aim to:

- Strengthen existing supports and systems to reduce risks of exposure to GBV and prevent those already harmed from further violence and reduce stigma
- Make use of community knowledge and capacities to mitigate, prevent and respond to GBV
- Promote the resilience of survivors through survivor-centered approaches and the capacities of women and girls in the design, implementation and monitoring of services
- Support local organizations and capacities advocating for gender equality addressing the root causes of GBV
- Focus on mobilizing and training community-level volunteers and promoting peer support as well as prioritizing partnerships and capacity building efforts with community-based and civil society organizations
- Provide safe spaces for women and girls to engage in individual, peer and group activities that promote their emotional and social wellbeing as well as skills to support their engagement in the wider community.
- Improve humanitarian actors' knowledge, attitudes and skills related to gender equality and GBV through sensitization and training to expand the protective environment for survivors

Given that GBV occurs within the context of a specific society because of the normative role expectations associated with the male and female as well as

unequal power relationships between men and women community-based support approaches are pivotal to both support the resilience and psychosocial wellbeing of women and girls minimizing their exposure to violence as well as to create a safe and enabling environment for survivors of violence to heal, re-establish relationships, and re-integrate into their communities.

What are examples of community-based support approaches?

Safe Spaces: Women and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) are an essential entry point for women and girls to report protection concerns, express their needs, receive services, engage in empowerment activities, and connect with the wider community. Additionally, these safe spaces provide female GBV survivors with discrete and vital entry points to case management services, including access to life-saving medical, legal and protective services. WGSS provide the critical space where women and girls are free from harm and harassment, in creating opportunities for women and girls to exercise their rights, to promote their own safety, decision making and self-determination. Creating women-and-girl-only safe spaces ensures tangible outcomes for prevention and response to violence against women and girls.

Psychosocial Support Activities: Be they formal support groups or recreational activities they are designed and implemented based on women and girls' priorities and customized according to their specific needs and culturally and age appropriate. Recreational activities such as coffee/tea sessions, sewing and henna application are usually organized around a core psychosocial empowerment activity such as informal and formal life skills trainings that are context and age appropriate. These support the development of abilities for adaptive and positive behavior which enable women and adolescent girls to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Structured support groups focused on accomplishing a shared goal or learning a new skill can meet regularly and allow women and girls including survivors to develop friendships rooted in positive experiences. If these groups are organized at women's centers, or safe spaces run by GBV programs, it can be conveyed that survivors are always welcome and accepted in these activities, and all participants can agree to maintain confidentiality, if and when survivors choose to freely talk about their experiences.² Certain core psychosocial empowerment activities may require leadership by experienced psychosocial staff whereas recreational activities are led directly by women and girls from the community, with resources procured by the WGSS.

Skills Development and Livelihood Activities: Skill-based classes, formal vocational trainings and individual or communal income generation activities facilitate women's meaningful participation in public life, including job skills training that will enable women to access the job market and increase their resilience. While informal skill-based classes can be directly implemented and

overseen by the GBV team to ensure women can safely access use and control the assets they generate livelihood interventions comprised of formal vocational trainings and income generation schemes it is highly recommended to work in partnership with (or through referral to) women's livelihood and economic empowerment experts.

Information and Awareness Raising: These increase women's access to information and resources contributing to their cognitive empowerment. For example, other sectors may be invited to provide information on a range of issues, including water and sanitation or nutrition. Formal awareness-raising sessions and activities can serve as entry points for sharing information. Guided by specific key messages, facilitation of these sessions is underpinned by the exchange of information and strategies women and girls possess creating a dynamic, supportive and empowering forum. Topics may include available services and how to access them; risk identification and reduction strategies; sexual and reproductive health; women's rights; infant and young child feeding practices; positive coping strategies; life skills; and hygiene promotion.

Strengthened Survivor-Centered Systems: Training of core professional staff such as mental health, reproductive health and primary health care clinicians, police or lawyers in survivor-centered approaches strengthens community systems responsible for the safety and healing of survivors. Training of non-protection humanitarian staff in core concepts related to working with survivors of GBV and providing referrals to survivors who may disclose to them as a first point of entry expands the protective environment for survivors to access support services.

What are beneficial or harmful strategies or approaches?

- Activities should reflect the range of needs, experiences, ages, and comfort levels of the women and girls as well as organizational expertise and capacity.
- Facilitating community social support and self-help requires sensitivity and critical thinking. Communities often include diverse and competing sub-groups with different agendas and levels of power. While it is essential to avoid strengthening sub-groups while marginalizing others, in the context of GBV programming it is important to remember the foundational inequality already disadvantaging women and girls from men and boys and to actively promote the inclusion of women and girls who are usually invisible or left out.
- Prioritize the recruitment of female staff from the community with good social skills and invest in their capacity and professional development as a concrete demonstration of commitment towards community-based support approaches.

- All activities and services should be determined in consultation with women and girls so that the activities are responsive to their needs and are context and age appropriate and also consider the types of activities that women and girls participated in before their displacement or crisis.
- Creating a participatory environment is vital to ensure the objectives of community-based support psychosocial activities are relevant to all women and girls and that they feel free to contribute during facilitation sessions. Some participants may be more vocal than others and it is the facilitator's role to make sure everyone has an equal voice. Certain seating arrangements, such as circles instead of rows, can encourage to participate by allowing for more eye contact and creating a more relaxed atmosphere. While some facilitators who are used to conventional trainings may prefer lectures, it is important to facilitate games and activities included in each session. Games and activities provide an opportunity to interact freely and generate discussions more easily than conventional trainings.
- While activities should encourage and promote the sharing of knowledge and experiences of women and girls it is important to ensure that no woman or girl feels pressured to share as this can cause survivors potentially participating in the groups to feel negative emotions. This practice also raises concerns about confidentiality and would be inappropriate in many cultural and security contexts.³
- Language Matters. Facilitators' language matters, so it is important not to 'target' women and girls to give them 'messages,' but rather 'engage' women and girls to leave them with 'take home ideas' that they can continue to consider and think about after the session.
- Depending on the specificity of the service or activity it might be necessary to ensure that specialized staff deliver the sessions.



¹ IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, 2015.

² UNFPA, IMC, *Managing Gender-Based Violence Programmes in Emergencies*: GBV & Psychosocial support, slide 9.

³ UNFPA, IMC, *Managing Gender-Based Violence Programmes in Emergencies*: GBV & Psychosocial support, slide 9.