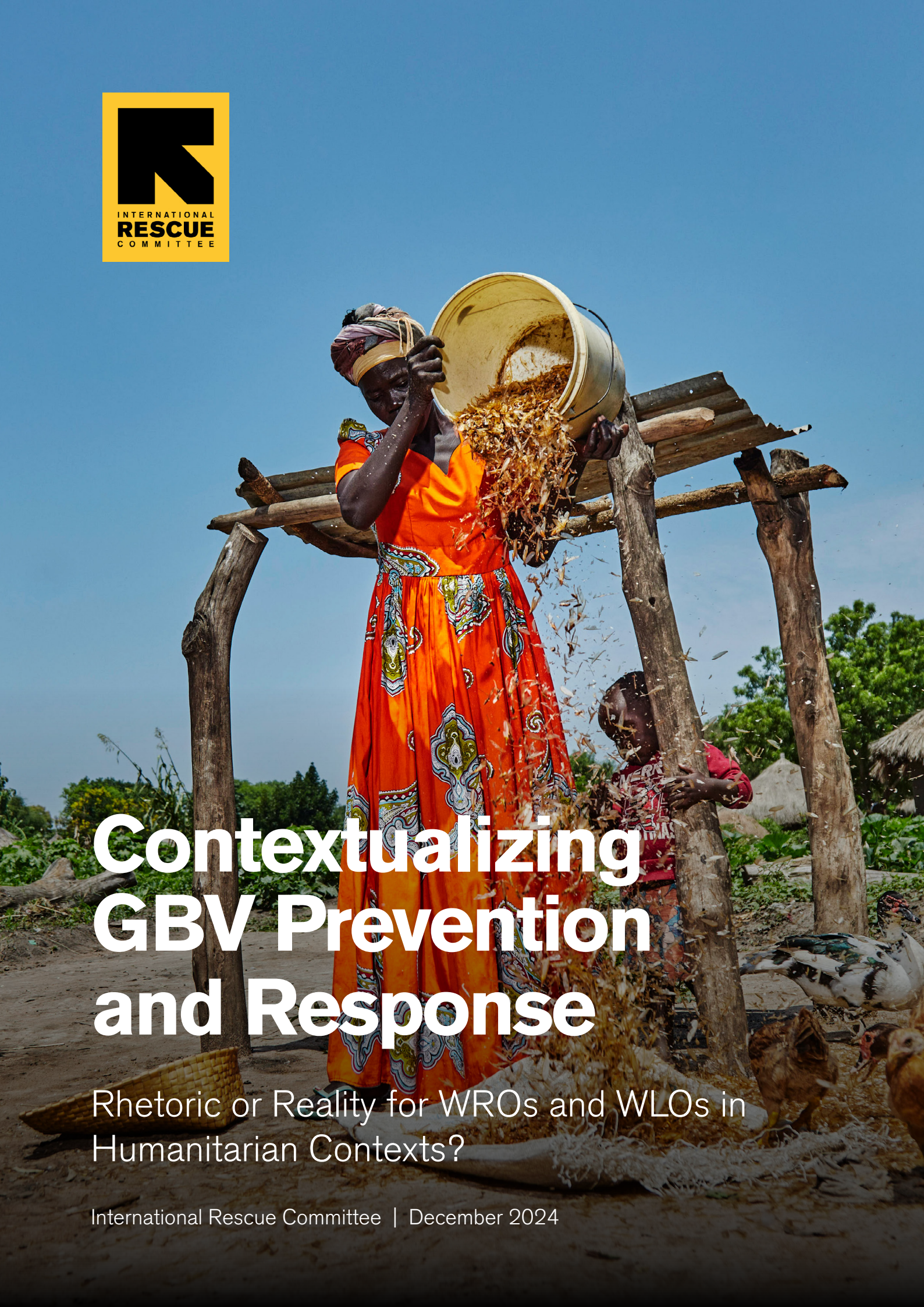




Contextualizing GBV Prevention and Response

Rhetoric or Reality for WROs and WLOs in
Humanitarian Contexts?

International Rescue Committee | December 2024

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Daniel Ssemogerere
for the IRC

Back cover photo by
Maheder Haileselassie



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Executive summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a significant global issue; one in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence, primarily at the hands of an intimate partner.¹ Despite the existence of global standards and guidelines for GBV prevention and response and rhetorical prioritization across governments and humanitarian agencies, this statistic underscores the ongoing challenges in addressing this pervasive issue. In humanitarian crises, the risk of GBV increases astronomically.² With humanitarian crises increasing in intensity, frequency and longevity, continued and enhanced efforts to prevent and respond to GBV are needed.

At the same time, the humanitarian system, including donors, has emphasized the need to “localize” humanitarian response, as well as ensure that global frameworks are applicable to local contexts so as to ensure adequate support for survivors.

Despite this rhetorical emphasis, analysis from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Guatemala and Jordan found that when contextualization is not adequately supported, stakeholder groups will often engage in a cycle of blame-shifting, identifying each other as being at the core of the challenge. For instance, donors report that international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) often fail to provide sufficient capacity-building support to local partners, which limits those partners' ability to manage funding independently. They also point out that INGOs frequently request deliverables based on global standards that may not be well-suited to local contexts. On the other hand, INGOs argue that donors do not provide need-based funding and often require local partners to have more capacity before they can effectively manage funds. Local organizations, for their part, feel marginalized, with women-led organizations (WLOs) and women's rights organizations (WROs) stating that INGOs limit the WLOs' and WROs' involvement due to a fear of losing control. They also express frustration with donors for not responding to their context-specific needs.

The analysis found that there are also deeply felt challenges in the actual contextualization of GBV programming. Cultural and social barriers, such

¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women>

² <https://www.rescue.org/article/what-gender-based-violence-and-how-do-we-prevent-it>



as patriarchal norms in Guatemala and stigma surrounding shelters in Jordan, prevent many women from accessing services. In DRC, logistical and financial constraints, including inadequate transportation and infrastructure, limit access to critical services. Furthermore, the reliance on short-term, restricted funding and the lack of direct funding to local organizations hamper the sustainability and scalability of successful programs.

Within all of this, clients identified that a significant challenge is that many services are delivered to clients without recognizing GBV is impacted by and impacts other issues, often leading to unintentional harm and making clients feel unheard. This lack of an integrated approach can undermine survivor-centered care, particularly when interventions fail to consider the interconnected nature of GBV with other social, economic and health-related factors.

The report offers several recommendations to address these challenges. Some of them—such as increasing direct and flexible funding to WLOs and WROs and improving coordination and collaboration—have long been made as ways to achieve localization goals, increase GBV prioritization across the sector, achieve gender equality goals and de-colonize humanitarian aid. However often repeated, these recommendations

are critical and also apply to ensuring contextualized and quality programming.

Other recommendations include:

- » **Enhance participatory feedback mechanisms and act on feedback.** Many GBV programs have feedback mechanisms, but the challenge is ensuring feedback leads to action. WLOs and WROs and clients provide valuable insights, yet often see little tangible change as a result.
- » **Build local capacity for long-term sustainability.** WLOs and WROs are vital in contextualizing GBV programs but often face challenges with resources, training and autonomy. Capacity building is essential to equip them with skills in program design, financial management, advocacy, leadership and community engagement, ensuring alignment with global standards and responsiveness to local needs. This support will enhance their ability to engage in policymaking and contextualize programs to better meet client needs.

These insights highlight the need for a more effective approach to contextualizing GBV programs, especially in terms of funding, cultural adaptation and coordination.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are based on analysis of the evidence generated for this report.

1 Increase direct and flexible funding

Donors should prioritize direct funding to WLOs and WROs, ensuring they have the resources to independently manage and contextualize GBV programs. Funding mechanisms should also allow for flexibility during project implementation, enabling local organizations to adapt their programs in response to evolving needs and real-time feedback from the communities they serve. Multi-year funding agreements would provide the stability needed for organizations to plan and scale sustainable interventions.

2 Improve coordination and collaboration

Strengthening coordination among donors, INGOs, WLOs and WROs is crucial for aligning GBV programs with local priorities and effectively addressing the needs of survivors. Donors emphasized the importance of fostering collaboration through inclusive coordination mechanisms, such as regular cluster meetings or advisory groups, where local actors have a meaningful voice in decision-making processes.

One donor noted,

“It is imperative to hold partners accountable for delivering results in collaboration with their local counterparts, ensuring alignment with local priorities.”

This highlights the need for INGOs to actively involve WLOs and WROs in planning and implementing GBV interventions, rather than treating them as passive subgrantees.

A WLO and WRO representative shared a concern during an interview:

“Except for the INGO leading the grant, we rarely meet the donor. Most of the time, everyone assumes that the INGO is the donor, but that’s not the case.”

This highlights the disconnect between local organizations and donors, which can limit the effectiveness of contextualized interventions.

By creating dedicated platforms for knowledge exchange and joint planning, donors, INGOs and local organizations can share the best practices, reduce duplication of efforts and improve the contextual relevance of GBV programming. Such collaboration ensures a unified and survivor-centered response across all levels of implementation.

3

Enhance participatory feedback mechanisms and act on feedback

While feedback mechanisms are already in place across many GBV programs, the challenge lies in ensuring that feedback is not only collected but also acted upon. WLOs, WROs and clients often share valuable insights about the challenges and needs within their contexts, yet many report that their feedback does not translate into tangible changes.

One WLO representative noted,

“Feedback is collected, but it rarely leads to changes we can see.”

This disconnect undermines trust and limits the potential for GBV programs to adapt effectively to local realities.

One client underscored the importance of taking a holistic view when meeting needs, colorfully recognizing during an FGD that while it is important to have access to a toilet, that is only useful if there's enough food to create the need to use the toilet.

This reflects the urgent need to integrate food security measures within GBV interventions to ensure participants' well-being and dignity.

Similarly, another participant emphasized the importance of sequencing support effectively, remarking,

“First soap, then shower.”

This analogy underscores the necessity of prioritizing essential items like hygiene supplies before investing in broader infrastructure improvements.

To address this, donors and INGOs must create action-oriented feedback loops. WLOs, WROs and clients must receive clear communication about how their feedback has influenced program decisions. Regular updates and tangible adjustments based on community input should be built into program implementation cycles.

Additionally, donors and INGOs should allocate resources to strengthen the capacity of WLOs and WROs to collect, analyze and respond to feedback. This includes training on how to integrate feedback into program design and implementation effectively. Donors and INGOs should establish transparent accountability frameworks with which they can demonstrate how feedback has informed their decisions and program adaptations.

By actively listening to feedback and taking deliberate action, stakeholders can ensure GBV programming is not only survivor centered but also dynamic and responsive to the needs of the communities it aims to serve.

4

Build local capacity for long-term sustainability

WLOs and WROs play a pivotal role in contextualizing GBV programs, yet they often lack the resources, training and autonomy needed to implement sustainable and effective interventions. Donors should fund INGO efforts to equip these organizations with the skills and tools required to independently lead GBV programming.

One donor emphasized this gap, stating,

“It shouldn’t be the case that INGOs keep mentioning they have local partners in their subgrants, but after years, the subgrantee is not yet able to apply for funding independently.”

This observation underscores the need for capacity-building initiatives that go beyond short-term technical assistance to foster sustainable growth and self-reliance among local organizations.

A critical issue raised by WLOs and WROs is the lack of empowerment and space provided by INGOs. As one WLO representative pointed out,

“INGOs are afraid of us taking their place, therefore they are not giving us space.”

This sentiment reflects the underlying tension between INGOs and local actors, where INGOs may hesitate to allow local organizations to take on leadership roles out of fear of losing control.

Key areas for capacity building include:

- » Strengthening the ability of WLOs and WROs to design and manage programs that align with both global standards and local realities
- » Providing training in financial management to ensure compliance with donor requirements
- » Developing advocacy and leadership skills to enable effective engagement with coordination mechanisms and policymaking processes.

Additionally, support for community-engagement strategies can enhance the ability of local organizations to gather feedback and adapt interventions to better meet the needs of clients.

Definition of key terms

In this report, the following definitions apply:

ADAPTATION

Modifying existing content to fit a new audience or purpose.

BARRIERS

The obstacles faced by WLOs and WROs in contextualizing and implementing GBV programs effectively. These include cultural resistance, funding limitations and misalignment between donor priorities and local needs. Barriers also stem from coordination issues, such as the lack of direct funding to local organizations, and the difficulty in ensuring that international donors understand the local context. Additionally, some WLOs and WROs face barriers like displacement, security risks and insufficient local capacity to take full ownership of contextualized programs.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

The process of simultaneously:

- » Assessing the extent to which GBV programming components are being implemented according to a *GBV Minimum Standard* in a particular context
- » Identifying which Key Actions and/or additional actions must be prioritized, initiated, adapted, sustained, strengthened or better coordinated to achieve the minimum standard in a particular context.

Contextualization may also include identifying appropriate partners, including women's organizations, with whom to coordinate to achieve the Minimum Standard.³ These actions help humanitarians to understand the needs of specific clients and create content that resonates with those clients.

DONORS

Organizations or individuals who provide financial support to WLOs, WROs and other entities implementing GBV programs. Donors play a critical role in shaping the scope, scale and focus of contextualized interventions based on their funding priorities.

FUNDING

Financial resources provided by donors, INGOs or other entities to support the implementation of GBV programs. Adequate and sustainable funding is critical for ensuring the success and sustainability of contextualized interventions.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

Any harmful act that is directed at an individual based on their gender, including physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence. GBV is rooted in unequal power dynamics and gender-based discrimination and can occur in many settings, including family, community and workplace environments.

INTERNATIONAL NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (INGOs)

Nonprofit organizations operating across national boundaries that provide humanitarian aid and development programs, including GBV prevention and response initiatives. They often partner with local organizations to implement contextualized programs in crisis-affected areas.

LOCALIZATION

Empowering local responders in affected countries to lead and deliver humanitarian aid. It aims at strengthening the capacity and resources of local organizations to respond to crises and promote long-term sustainability. It recognizes the importance of local knowledge and cultural understanding in providing effective and culturally appropriate aid. By empowering local actors, localization aims to improve the relevance, efficiency and impact of humanitarian interventions.⁴

Localization should not be interpreted as translating and adapting content for a specific region or language, like converting a website from English to Spanish for a Latin American audience.

SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACH

A key principle in GBV programming that prioritizes the needs, dignity and autonomy of survivors in the design and delivery of services. This approach ensures that survivors are not re-traumatized, and that their voices and choices are at the core of any intervention or support.

WOMEN-LED ORGANIZATIONS (WLOs)

NGOs primarily led by women that advocate for and implement programs to address issues affecting women, including GBV prevention and response. These organizations often have a deep understanding of the local context and are key to the contextualization of interventions.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS (WROs)

Organizations dedicated to promoting the rights of women, including their protection from gender-based violence. WROs play a crucial role in contextualizing GBV programs by ensuring that interventions are aligned with both local needs and international standards.

3 https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2021-01/FGMS_Contextualization%20Tool_EN_Final.pdf

4 https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/localisation_en

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) has been a lifesaving intervention in humanitarian response for over a decade. This report examines whether humanitarian GBV services are accessible, relevant and effective for local populations. The goal of the report is to gain a clear picture of how contextualization practices are implemented and the results they achieve for clients and communities. It examines how women-led organizations (WLOs) and women's rights organizations (WROs) contextualize global GBV guidelines to meet local needs, cultural norms, legal frameworks and geography. Additionally, the report explores whether these organizations receive adequate funding for their efforts and whether the available funding is sufficient to implement these adaptations effectively.

The report explores how organizations adopt global guidelines to meet local needs, cultural norms, legal frameworks and geographical realities in each region. It's based on key informant interviews with donors, local and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international NGOs (INGOs), and a desk review of available global, and where applicable, country and regional publications.

Insights from focus group discussions with clients—both survivors and those at risk of GBV—assessed if clients are supported in a way that is not only culturally sensitive but also aligned with their needs, fostering a safe environment for them to access care and support.

Each stakeholder type provided information to tell the story of if and how GBV responses are contextualized. The findings provide insight into how humanitarian organizations can, collectively and individually, achieve contextualized GBV interventions. For instance, client feedback from the focus groups highlights their level of involvement in the contextualization process and how their experiences with GBV services reflect the effectiveness of these locally adapted interventions.

The interviews with INGOs explore how they define and prioritize contextualization in their GBV programs, particularly in terms of fundraising decisions and their involvement of local partners, including WLOs and WROs, in the contextualization process. Donors shared insights into the aspects of contextualization they prioritize for funding and how they assess the need for contextualization.

The methodology for gathering and analyzing evidence is described in Appendix 1.



Photo by Daniel Ssemogerere for the IRC

The *GBV Minimum Standards*⁵ provide guidance on GBV prevention and response efforts across all humanitarian interventions. Their application requires careful contextualization to local needs, cultural norms, legal frameworks and geography.

The *GBV Minimum Standards Contextualization Tool* highlights that effective GBV programming depends on tailoring interventions to local realities without compromising global principles. Contextualization improves program efficacy by addressing gaps in resources, cultural barriers and survivor-specific needs, ensuring services are both accessible and impactful.

Evidence suggests that contextualized approaches foster collaboration and sustainability, leading to better survivor outcomes.⁶ Similarly, the *IASC Guidelines for Integrating GBV Interventions in Humanitarian Action* stress that contextualization is critical for reducing risks and enhancing resilience in diverse humanitarian settings. Those guidelines advocate for contextualizing global frameworks to local contexts and for addressing resource gaps, cultural barriers and survivor-specific needs to improve program relevance and accessibility.⁷

These and other policies, including from UNHCR⁸ and UNICEF,⁹ demonstrate that locally adapted approaches are essential for fostering collaboration, improving sustainability and ensuring better outcomes for survivors. By aligning interventions with community-specific needs and leveraging local capacities, stakeholders can build responsive and impactful GBV programming.

Understanding current practices, assessing the methods employed by local organizations, and evaluating the effectiveness of these contextualization efforts are vital to shaping future interventions. The following sections will examine the intricacies of GBV program contextualization, starting with an in-depth assessment of current practices and strategies used by WLOs and WROs. We will also explore emerging trends, the challenges faced in implementation, and key lessons learned to offer a comprehensive view of the complexities and solutions in GBV program development. This foundational analysis will be followed by a thorough discussion on funding constraints and recommendations for enhancing resource allocation, which are crucial for overcoming the identified barriers.

5 https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/19-200_Minimun_Standards_Report_ENGLISH-Nov.FINAL_.pdf

6 https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2021-01/FGMS_Contextualization%20Tool_EN_Final.pdf

7 https://wrđ.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/GBV-Implementation-Strategy-Guide-2015_0.pdf

8 <https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-policy-prevention-risk-mitigation-and-response-gender-based-violence-2020>

9 [aa9276_82ef51da8eea4a05906f185d5b977a50.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-policy-prevention-risk-mitigation-and-response-gender-based-violence-2020)



1

SECTION 1

Contextualization in GBV programs

Contextualization of GBV programs ensures that they adhere to established global standards and guidelines while being adapted to fit the unique realities of local contexts. It considers the cultural norms, legal frameworks, community needs and geography of the region where the program is being implemented. Rather than altering global standards, contextualization focuses on implementing these standards in ways that are relevant, practical and impactful in different local settings. Collaboration with WLOs and WROs is essential, as these organizations bring a deep understanding of local realities and ensure that programs resonate with the communities they serve.

Contextualization ensures that GBV programs are survivor-centered and align with the unique challenges of each region. It promotes:

- » Cultural relevance, by reflecting the cultural practices and beliefs of communities while challenging harmful norms
- » Community acceptance, because contextualized programs are more likely to gain the trust and support of local communities, increasing participation and impact
- » Holistic survivor support, whereby survivors can access services that meet their social, psychological and legal needs in a culturally sensitive manner.

EXAMPLES OF CONTEXTUALIZATION IN PRACTICE

An overview of contextualization practices in DRC, Guatemala and Jordan follows. More comprehensive descriptions are in Appendix 2.



**DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC OF
CONGO**

Contextualization in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) involves integrating livelihood programs with GBV services to address the economic vulnerabilities that exacerbate survivors' risks. For instance, training clients in soap making, tailoring or charcoal production not only provides them with a source of income but also reduces their reliance on harmful coping mechanisms, like survival sex. In areas with limited infrastructure, these programs are delivered in community-friendly locations that ensure accessibility and safety. This dual approach addresses both the immediate needs of clients and the structural factors that perpetuate GBV risks.



GUATEMALA

In Guatemala, contextualization focuses on reaching Indigenous women, many of whom face additional barriers, such as language differences and low literacy levels. By translating materials into local Indigenous languages, such as Mam or K'iche' (Quiché) and using visual aids or storytelling, programs make critical GBV information accessible to all. Additionally, outreach efforts align with community preferences, such as hosting sessions in trusted community spaces or integrating childcare services, to encourage participation by women with caregiving responsibilities.



JORDAN

In Jordan, where public shelters for clients are often culturally stigmatized, contextualization includes developing alternative models of service delivery. For example, mobile GBV services allow clients to access support discreetly, while safe spaces within community centers provide a trusted and culturally acceptable environment. Community engagement initiatives also prioritize working with men and boys to challenge harmful norms and promote gender equality, which is a critical step in fostering long-term social change in conservative settings.

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT PRACTICES OF GBV PROGRAM CONTEXTUALIZATION

Current GBV programming practices vary across regions, influenced by local contexts, cultural norms and available resources. WLOs and WROs are at the forefront of contextualizing global GBV standards to these unique settings, often navigating complex social, economic and political landscapes. Across all assessed contexts, local community engagement has been central to ensuring that GBV programs are accepted and relevant to the people they serve. WROs and WLOs reported that the adaptation of services to meet the needs of marginalized groups, such as Indigenous populations in Guatemala and refugees in Jordan, remains a top priority. Finally, capacity building for local organizations continues to be a significant focus, especially in the context of limited funding and operational challenges.



In DRC, WLOs have integrated livelihood support with GBV programs, offering clients opportunities to gain skills such as soap making and charcoal production. This approach not only addresses economic vulnerabilities but also empowers clients to become financially independent, thus reducing their reliance on harmful coping strategies like survival sex. The integration of livelihoods and GBV services also helps strengthen the community resilience. However, security challenges and funding gaps continue to pose obstacles to expanding these programs into more conflict-affected and remote areas.



In Guatemala, WLOs and WROs have contextualized GBV programs to meet the needs of Indigenous communities, especially in rural areas. Local WLOs work closely with community leaders to ensure the programs are understood and accepted, often translating materials into Indigenous languages such as Mam and K'iche'. They also use visual tools and storytelling to engage low-literacy populations. However, a critical barrier remains in securing sufficient funding to scale these efforts across remote regions. These adaptations focus on improving accessibility and ensuring that clients feel comfortable seeking help.



In Jordan, the adaptation of GBV services has addressed local social norms that discourage clients from seeking help, particularly in more conservative areas. The mobile GBV units are one example of an innovative solution to this challenge, providing services in a discreet and culturally sensitive manner. Community-based safe spaces also provide an alternative to public shelters, where stigma can be a significant barrier. However, the scarcity of sustainable funding restricts the ability to scale these models across the country. Engaging men and boys in gender-norm transformation is critical to addressing gender inequality and preventing future violence.

APPROACHES USED BY WLOs AND WROs FOR CONTEXTUALIZING GBV PROGRAMS

WLOs and WROs report using a number of innovative approaches to contextualize and implement GBV programs. They all bridge the gap between global standards and local realities, ensuring that interventions are effective, sustainable and survivor centered. Understanding these approaches provides valuable insight into how WLOs and WROs meet local needs while advocating for systemic change. These approaches not only enhance program relevance but also strengthen local ownership and accountability.

COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES

WLOs and WROs prioritize engaging local communities to ensure that GBV programs are tailored to the specific needs and realities of the people they serve. By working with local leaders, community-based organizations and survivors, they ensure the programs are both culturally relevant and widely accepted.

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR LOCAL OWNERSHIP

It is critical to build the capacity of local actors, ensuring sustainability and local leadership. WLOs and WROs provide training and resources to local organizations, empowering them to manage GBV programs independently, reducing reliance on external funding.

SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACHES

Programs designed with the needs and preferences of survivors at the center ensure more effective interventions. WLOs and WROs listen to survivors and incorporate their feedback into program development, providing tailored psychosocial support, legal aid and economic empowerment.

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION IN SERVICE DELIVERY

WLOs and WROs leverage technology to reach hard-to-reach communities and expand their service delivery models. Mobile platforms, telemedicine and digital outreach have become critical in ensuring that clients can access care, especially in areas with limited infrastructure.

ADVOCACY FOR POLICY AND LEGAL REFORM

WLOs and WROs engage in advocacy to influence local and national policies around GBV, ensuring legal frameworks are not only inclusive but also enforced effectively. They work with governments and international bodies to advocate for the protection of clients and the prosecution of perpetrators.



For example, in Jordan, WROs advocate for stronger laws around sexual harassment and GBV, pushing for policy reforms that provide better protection and support for survivors.

COLLABORATION AND NETWORKING

Collaboration between local and international organizations is vital for sharing resources, knowledge and expertise. WLOs and WROs foster partnerships that enhance the scale and effectiveness of GBV programs.

TRENDS IN APPROACHES TO CONTEXTUALIZATION OF GBV PROGRAMS

Approaches to contextualizing GBV programs vary among different stakeholders, reflecting their unique priorities, operational roles and resources.

DONORS CURRENTLY FOCUS ON MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

Donors report that they prioritize funding proposals that demonstrate clear, measurable outcomes aligned with global priorities. However, they often lack structured methods to assess the extent to which proposals incorporate contextualization beyond general alignment with global standards.

For example, one of the donors highlighted the importance of addressing local realities, such as gender dynamics, in program proposals but admitted that their organization's evaluation frameworks primarily focus on measurable deliverables, like number of clients reached, rather than assessing the quality of contextual adaptations.

This is compounded by the fact that donors, while recognizing the importance of tailoring GBV programs to local realities, report that funding constraints often limit organizations' ability to fully contextualize. Some donors cited challenges in striking a balance between maintaining rigorous accountability mechanisms and providing the flexibility needed for local adaptation.

INGOs MAKE SMALL ADJUSTMENTS BUT SELDOM CONTEXTUALIZE FULLY

INGOs often act as intermediaries, implementing GBV programs on behalf of donors and collaborating with local partners. Their contextualization efforts reflect both the strengths and limitations of working across diverse contexts.

INGOs adopt standardized frameworks to ensure consistency across multiple regions. These frameworks are often adjusted at the activity level rather than being entirely restructured to fit the local context. This ensures alignment with donor priorities but can reduce the depth of contextualization.

For example, in Jordan, some INGOs have adjusted their service delivery to include mobile units, enabling discreet access to GBV services in conservative areas. However, the underlying program structures often remain similar across regions, which limits their responsiveness to unique local challenges.

Despite efforts to engage local partners, many INGOs report challenges in fully integrating local feedback due to short funding cycles and donor-imposed priorities. In Guatemala, INGOs report that the lack of flexibility in donor funding hindered their ability to effectively adapt programs to Indigenous women's needs. WLOs and WROs are deeply embedded in their communities, positioning them to effectively contextualize GBV programs. However, they report that their efforts are often constrained by resource limitations and a lack of decision-making power in collaborations with larger organizations.

WLOs AND WROs ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITIES BUT FACE FUNDING BARRIERS

WLOs and WROs emphasize community engagement as a central element of contextualization. This includes involving clients and community leaders in program design and using culturally relevant tools to deliver services. For instance, in Guatemala, WLOs developed visual storytelling techniques to engage Indigenous women with low literacy levels, making program materials accessible and culturally appropriate.

Despite their local expertise, WLOs and WROs remain heavily dependent on external funding, which is often short-term and restricted. This limits their ability to contextualize programs or scale up effective models. For instance, in DRC, some WLOs reported difficulty securing funds to expand successful livelihood integration programs that address survivors' economic vulnerabilities.

WLOs and WROs increasingly advocate for trauma-informed care and survivor-centered programming, which focus on addressing survivors' immediate needs while respecting their autonomy. For instance, in Jordan, WLOs have emphasized the importance of tailored psychosocial support, ensuring that clients receive care aligned with their specific needs and cultural sensitivities.



EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION OF GBV PROGRAMS

Evaluating the effectiveness of contextualized GBV programs is essential to understanding whether they meet clients' needs and address the challenges of specific contexts. It is critical to assess not only the impact of programs but also their relevance and effectiveness in providing accessible and appropriate support for clients in diverse contexts. This evaluation process often relies on community feedback, pre- and post-evaluations and behavioral indicators, though there are significant challenges in measuring long-term success and identifying areas for continued improvement.

However, effectiveness is evaluated differently by different stakeholders.

For instance, donors often emphasize measurable outputs, such as the number of survivors served or the availability of services, to assess the impact of their funding. However, the reliance on quantitative metrics can limit understanding of the deeper effects of contextualization efforts. Some donors expressed a desire for qualitative data, including insights into changes in community attitudes, survivor empowerment and shifts in gender norms. Despite this, feedback mechanisms like focus group discussions and community surveys are underutilized for assessing the qualitative impacts of GBV programming.

INGOs noted that they use tools like protection analysis, focus groups discussions and surveys to evaluate contextualized programs. However, they also noted that their evaluations are frequently hindered by short funding cycles, which leave little room for long-term impact assessments. For example, in Guatemala, INGOs reported challenges in tracking the long-term effectiveness of culturally adapted materials due to the lack of dedicated resources for monitoring and evaluation.

WLOs and WROs reported a heavy focus on community-driven evaluations, where survivors' voices play a crucial role in assessing program effectiveness. In DRC, WLOs used survivor feedback to adjust livelihood programs and ensure they met the economic needs of survivors. However, they noted challenges in scaling these evaluation systems due to limited financial resources for sustained data collection.



INTEGRATED PROGRAMMING WORKED WELL IN DRC

In DRC, integrating livelihood support into GBV programs has addressed both the economic and psychosocial needs of clients. WLOs have reported success in helping clients gain economic independence, yet scalability and long-term sustainability remain challenges due to financial constraints and security risks. Donors acknowledged the success of this approach that helps clients regain independence and reduce reliance on harmful coping mechanisms like survival sex. However, they noted the need for more robust evaluations to demonstrate its long-term impact.



CULTURALLY TAILORED MATERIALS INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY TO SERVICES IN GUATEMALA

WLOs and INGOs developed visual tools and translated program content into Indigenous languages to ensure that GBV services are accessible to low-literacy populations. This has significantly improved awareness and uptake of services in Indigenous communities. However, WLOs highlighted the need for sustained funding to expand these culturally sensitive materials beyond the pilot phase.



MOBILE SERVICES SUPPORTED RURAL WOMEN IN JORDAN

Mobile services have been instrumental in reaching women in rural areas, where accessing traditional shelters is stigmatized. These services provide legal aid, psychosocial support and health care, ensuring that clients can access care discreetly. However, both WLOs and donors expressed concerns about the cost-effectiveness of scaling these services nationwide.

2

SECTION 2

Funding and resource allocation

Adequate funding and equitable resource allocation are critical for the success of contextualized GBV programs. Funding for contextualization of GBV programs has traditionally been driven by international donors, with a focus on ensuring accountability and achieving measurable results. However, the extent to which funding supports contextualization efforts remains a key concern.

Donors reflected their emphasis on funding programs that align with strategic priorities and measurable outcomes. While donors recognize the importance of addressing local needs, funding pathways often prioritize working through established international or national partners, with limited direct support to WLOs and WROs. Challenges in accountability and

capacity building were noted as barriers to scaling direct funding to local organizations. One of the key informants expressed doubts about the capacity of WLOs and WROs to manage funding. They also mentioned experience when local organizations were not honest in their financial reporting.

WLOs and WROs highlighted the insufficient direct funding allocated to local organizations, particularly those led by women. In Guatemala, WLOs noted that their reliance on international intermediaries limits their ability to secure adequate financial resources for contextualized interventions. In DRC, WLOs reported that donors often impose restrictions on how funds can be used, hindering their ability to adapt programs in response to local realities.

FUNDING RESTRICTIONS PREVENT CONTEXTUALIZATION OF GBV PROGRAMS

Despite the known importance and stated prioritization of contextualization for program efficacy, stakeholders identified several restrictions to securing and allocating resources effectively. These restrictions, which are well-known to the humanitarian sector, affect the availability of resources to contextualize responses. They include:

FUNDING MECHANISMS ARE TOO RIGID

Inflexibility in donor funding is a recurring issue. For instance, WLOs and WROs in Jordan and DRC shared that donor requirements often focus on standardized outputs, leaving little room for program adaptation based on real-time community feedback.

FUNDING CYCLES ARE TOO SHORT

Funding for GBV programs is typically provided on a short-term basis, making it difficult to plan and implement long-term, sustainable contextualized solutions. WLOs and WROs in DRC highlight that the pressure to meet short-term goals often diverts attention from addressing root causes of GBV through tailored interventions.

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS RECEIVE INSUFFICIENT CORE FUNDING

WLOs and WROs rarely receive core funding, which is essential for building organizational capacity and ensuring the sustainability of contextualized programs. In Guatemala, local organizations reported that the lack of core funding limits their ability to engage in advocacy or expand their services.

Photo by Adrienne Surprenant



3

SECTION 3

Barriers to contextualization

Despite the clear need for contextualization in GBV programming, various barriers hinder its effective implementation. These arise from cultural norms, funding limitations, logistical constraints and the need for better coordination between local and international actors. For WLOs and WROs, the barriers to contextualization are often compounded by resource shortages, rigid donor frameworks and the evolving needs of survivors, particularly in complex humanitarian or conflict settings. This section explores these barriers and how they affect efforts by WLOs, WROs, INGOs and donors to address GBV effectively and contextually.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL BARRIERS

Various cultural and social barriers affect access to services and the acceptance of GBV programs. These can significantly hinder the effectiveness of contextualized GBV interventions.

For example in Jordan, WLOs reported that conservative cultural norms often prevent women from accessing traditional shelters. Social stigma attached to clients seeking help exacerbates the issue. To address this, WLOs have shifted toward mobile units that offer services discreetly within communities, but challenges remain in reaching the most marginalized groups who may not have access to mobile services.

In Guatemala, Indigenous women face unique cultural barriers that hinder access to GBV services, especially in remote areas. While WLOs have adapted programs to be culturally sensitive and use visual tools, the deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes within some communities continue to restrict women's participation in GBV programming.



FUNDING AND RESOURCE BARRIERS

Limited funding and resources remain significant barriers for WLOs and WROs, especially in contextualizing GBV programs to local needs. While donors emphasize the importance of accountability and measurable outputs, the lack of flexible, long-term funding often prevents contextualization efforts from reaching their potential.

Donors acknowledged a lack of direct funding to local WLOs and WROs. Instead, funding often passes through INGOs or national organizations, which limits the ability of WLOs to directly control funding and contextualize programs in a way that fits local needs.

In DRC, agreed that they often lack direct funding, which not only increases the time it takes for money to reach local actors, but also creates a barrier to local autonomy. In Guatemala, WLOs reported that project-based funding often restricts their ability to build long-term, sustainable programs tailored to the unique needs of survivors.

Clients themselves even noted that resource inadequacies often limit the perceived benefits of participation. As one participant expressed,

“The benefit is less, and when we go home, it’s with an empty hand.”

This highlights the need for increased resource allocation to ensure participants feel tangible and lasting impacts from the programs.

LOGISTICAL AND OPERATIONAL BARRIERS

Implementing contextualized GBV programs requires adaptation to the specific logistics and operational barriers of each region. In conflict zones, remote areas and areas with limited infrastructure, logistical barriers become even more pronounced.

For example, in DRC, the security situation and displacement of communities present significant barriers to delivering services. WLOs mentioned that while they have adapted their services to meet the needs of survivors, issues like limited transportation and inadequate infrastructure restrict access to safe spaces and livelihood programs. Despite this, WLOs continue to provide services but report that their capacity to scale is often hindered by a lack of resources.

In Jordan, despite the adaptation of mobile services, the geographical distance and inaccessibility of some rural areas continue to limit the reach of these services. WLOs face challenges in coordinating with local governments to ensure that safe spaces are set up in remote areas where migrant women may be particularly vulnerable.

INSTITUTIONAL AND COORDINATION BARRIERS

Effective contextualization requires cooperation and collaboration among local actors, INGOs, WLOs and WROs and donors. Insights from interviews and discussion groups highlighted that institutional and coordination challenges frequently hinder effective program delivery. For example, key informants from WLOs and WROs noted that limited inclusion in decision-making processes and a lack of direct communication with donors often reduce their ability to tailor GBV programs to local needs. Similarly, focus group participants shared concerns about fragmented service delivery. They emphasized that better collaboration between stakeholders could enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of programs.

Many INGOs mentioned that coordination between local and international actors is often hampered by institutional silos. For example, in Guatemala, INGOs and WLOs noted difficulties in aligning their objectives due to differing priorities or funding constraints. This lack of alignment can delay contextualization efforts and result in a fragmented response to GBV.

WLOs in Jordan reported a similar issue, where coordination between local and international partners is sometimes problematic, especially in sharing best practices and resources. Local partners often felt sidelined in decision-making processes, which impacted their ability to provide context-specific solutions.

Donors emphasized the critical role of effective coordination with local partners in improving the alignment of GBV programs with local priorities. They highlighted the importance of involving local actors in coordination clusters to ensure that interventions are contextually relevant and survivor centered. Additionally, donors called for enhanced collaboration between themselves, local organizations and implementing partners to streamline efforts and prevent duplication. Donors believe that by improving knowledge-sharing mechanisms and fostering partnerships, GBV interventions can incorporate lessons learned and best practices, making the interventions more impactful and efficient. Lasting impacts from the programs.

Photo by Ojong Spencer



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SECTION 4 Conclusion

Contextualization is essential for ensuring that GBV programs are effective, relevant and sustainable in addressing the unique needs of clients in diverse settings. While global standards for GBV prevention and response provide valuable guidance, the effective implementation of these frameworks requires significant adaptation to local cultural, social and legal realities. Local organizations, especially WLOs and WROs, play a critical role in the contextualization process, but they face significant funding, capacity and coordination barriers. Donors are increasingly recognizing the importance of contextualization, but existing funding mechanisms remain rigid, often prioritizing short-term outputs over the long-term flexibility required for contextual adaptations.

The findings have important implications for both practice and policy:

FOR PRACTITIONERS, contextualization must be integrated into the design, implementation and evaluation of GBV programs. Local actors, including WLOs and WROs, should be given greater control over program design and resource allocation, with flexible funding that enables them to respond to emerging needs.

FOR POLICY MAKERS, governments and international organizations should prioritize long-term and flexible funding for local organizations, with a focus on capacity building to ensure that local actors can lead contextualized interventions. Additionally, new policies should recognize the need for adaptability in GBV programming, ensuring that global standards can be implemented effectively in different cultural and legal contexts.

IN PRACTICE, donors, INGOs and local organizations should strengthen feedback mechanisms to ensure that programs remain responsive to client's needs. Donors and implementers must work closely with local stakeholders to ensure contextual relevance and cultural sensitivity.



APPENDIX 1

Methodology

Research was conducted in three countries—the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guatemala and Jordan—to capture regional diversity and examine contextualization efforts across varied geographic, social and humanitarian settings.

Our mixed-methods approach used primary and secondary data obtained from desk study, key informant interviews and focus groups discussions. This enabled a robust evaluation of trends, challenges and opportunities in contextualizing GBV programming.

This methodology ensures that the findings and recommendations presented in this report are evidence-based, comprehensive and reflective of diverse stakeholder perspectives. The multi-layered approach highlights the importance of contextualized GBV programming while addressing systemic barriers and opportunities for improvement.

DESK STUDY

A desk study reviewed existing literature, reports and secondary data from key organizations, including UN Women, WHO, Human Rights Watch, ReliefWeb, UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC. The review identified the best practices and principles for effectively contextualizing GBV programming. It includes an analysis of global guidelines and frameworks such as the *GBV Minimum Standards Contextualization Tool*, the *IASC GBV Guidelines* and policies from UNHCR and UNICEF, which emphasize the importance of contextualizing interventions to the unique needs of local communities.

The desk study identified key themes in effective GBV programming, such as contextualization, local ownership, survivor-centered approaches, multi-stakeholder collaboration and the need for flexible, long-term funding. It found that GBV interventions must be tailored to specific contexts, considering factors like cultural practices, gender norms and the unique needs of diverse populations, such as displaced persons and vulnerable women and girls.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 key informants, including donors, INGOs and WLOs and WROs across the three countries. These interviews explored:

- » Donors' priorities and challenges in funding contextualized GBV programming
- » The role of INGOs in contextualizing global GBV frameworks and supporting local organizations
- » WLO and WRO experiences in contextualizing GBV programs, with a focus on funding and technical assistance.

The interviews provided insight into institutional dynamics, such as the challenges faced by WLOs and WROs in securing adequate funding and the barriers to fully contextualizing GBV programs. They also revealed the varying levels of support for WLOs and WROs in contextualizing global standards to their unique contexts.



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

A total of 28 focus group discussions were conducted with clients of GBV programs, encompassing diverse demographic groups across DRC, Guatemala and Jordan. Each discussion included approximately 10 participants from host communities and internally displaced people settings. The aim of the discussions was to:

- » Assess the relevance and effectiveness of GBV programs from a survivor perspective
- » Identify barriers to accessing services and suggestions for improvement
- » Understand how well culturally adapted materials and services addressed local challenges.

The group discussions highlighted the importance of tailoring GBV programs to the specific needs of clients, with participants noting the impact of barriers such as stigma, limited access to resources and inadequately localized materials.

SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The study's sampling strategy ensured representativeness across geographic and social contexts. DRC was included for its conflict-affected settings, Guatemala for its focus on Indigenous and rural communities, and Jordan for its large refugee population. This diversity allowed the research to examine variations in contextualization practices and identify unique challenges across regions.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear communication about their rights to withdraw from the study at any time. Special attention was given to safeguarding the safety and privacy of participants, particularly survivors of GBV.

APPENDIX 2

Clients speak

DRC IN FOCUS

Clients are critical of the way GBV prevention and response programming is contextualized, even though accountability to affected populations (AAP) continues to be a rallying call across humanitarian response.

In DRC, **over 46,000 cases of sexual violence were reported** in North and South Kivu and Ituri provinces alone between January and August, 2023.¹⁰ Women and girls were invited to take part in focus groups discussions on if and how GBV programming had been contextualized to meet their needs. The highlights of the focus groups discussions are described below:



INVOLVEMENT IN CONTEXTUALIZATION

Girls in the host community reported success and greater participation in GBV programs, particularly the poultry project and barbershop initiatives. These projects provided income opportunities and helped the girls develop practical skills. Through the poultry farming project, many girls were able to generate income and gain economic independence, which had a positive impact on their self-esteem. Similarly, the barbershop project offered a chance to run a small business, further empowering them and providing a sense of ownership.

In contrast, girls living in the camps felt neglected and disempowered. Despite participating in sensitization programs like Girl Shine and Safe at Home, they felt that their needs were not adequately addressed. Programs in the camps were few and often ignored girls' specific challenges. The girls also expressed frustration with the camp chief's control over access to resources and services, where favoritism played a role in determining who received aid. This system led to feelings of marginalization and disempowerment.

BARRIERS

Safety concerns and limited support

The girls in the host community benefited from more comprehensive programming that included economic empowerment and GBV awareness. However, they noted that cultural sensitivity and the integration of local feedback were crucial for the success of these initiatives.

Girls in the camps faced severe security risks, especially when collecting firewood. Many expressed frustrations with the bean distribution by humanitarian organizations, which required them to go into the forest to collect firewood for cooking. These trips often exposed them to GBV, including rape and harassment, particularly when they were forced to travel alone. One girl explained:

"We had to walk long distances, sometimes for days, just to collect firewood to cook the beans we were given. We were alone in the jungle and at risk of being attacked or raped."

¹⁰ <https://www.wfp.org/stories/eastern-drc-women-and-girls-pay-high-price-ongoing-conflict>

BARRIERS

Unmet needs

While girls in the host community received income-generating opportunities (such as poultry and barbershop), those in the camps had few opportunities for economic empowerment. Many girls expressed a desire for more tailored programs that could provide them with business skills, entrepreneurship and financial resources.

A critical gap identified by girls in both the host community and the camps was the lack of mental health services. Many of the girls struggled with emotional trauma and psychosocial stress, particularly due to GBV, but the available programs did not sufficiently address their mental health needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- » Increased focus on safe spaces and infrastructure, such as better lighting, secure areas for girls and safe transportation to access resources.
- » Girls in both the host community and camps emphasized the need for more culturally sensitive and contextually relevant programs. In the host community, programs align with local values and traditions, but this was not always the case in the camps, where there were language barriers and cultural misunderstandings. Girls suggested that programs should be adapted to meet the unique challenges they faced, including mental health support and more targeted economic opportunities.
- » A recurring recommendation from girls was to include fathers in family-based programming. While mothers often attended sessions, fathers were less involved, despite the significant role they could play in creating a supportive environment for girls. This lack of family involvement—especially from male family members—was noted as a barrier to effective support for girls' safety and well-being.

Photo by Daniel Ssemogerere for the IRC



Guatemala has one of the highest rate of femicide in the world. As for 2022, the Statistical Portal of the Women Observatory reported **534 femicides** and by March 2023 there are 69 femicides reported¹¹. Focus groups discussions were conducted with Indigenous women and other marginalized groups to understand how GBV programs had been adapted to meet their needs. The important highlights from the focus groups discussions are described below:



INVOLVEMENT IN CONTEXTUALIZATION

The programs provided women with essential knowledge about their rights and the types of violence they may face. Participants emphasized the program's focus on creating a safe space for women and contextualizing the content to their needs (for example, language, group dynamics). Many participants shared that the programs helped them understand their rights and how to stand up against violence in their communities.

Involving participants in the adaptation process was essential in ensuring the program's accessibility.

Participants were actively involved in proposing changes to the program to make it more accessible. They suggested changes to scheduling, locations and activities that would ensure that more women could participate.

Many women expressed that the program addressed both their emotional and practical needs. Examples include receiving legal and psychological support and gaining the confidence to stand up for their rights.

Women reported that the facilitator was approachable and receptive to their feedback. They communicated their needs directly to the facilitator and made suggestions for further program improvement.

BARRIERS

Some barriers to participation included time constraints due to household responsibilities and economic challenges, especially with transportation. Additionally, some women faced resistance from family members regarding their participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- » Suggestions included the need for economic support for transportation and incentives for participation, the creation of more accessible meeting points, and further training in empowerment skills.
- » Participants emphasized the importance of making programs more flexible and culturally relevant. They also expressed a need for more technical skills training and resources to ensure greater participation.
- » The participants highlighted the importance of culturally appropriate and flexible delivery methods to ensure successful engagement.

¹¹ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/91b0eadb-e919-411c-8d19-329a8f17a325/content>



In Jordan, **21% of women report experiencing physical and/or sexual violence** by an intimate partner in their lifetime¹². Focus groups discussions evaluated how well GBV services meet the needs of diverse populations, including Syrian refugees and host communities. The highlights of the focus groups discussions are described below:

INVOLVEMENT IN CONTEXTUALIZATION

Girls in Jordan expressed a strong desire for more interactive sessions in GBV programs. They suggested incorporating more role-play and theater into discussions around harassment and violence. These activities helped them engage deeply with sensitive topics and better understand their rights and GBV.

A consistent challenge for the girls in Jordan was the timing of sessions. Many girls found it difficult to participate due to overlapping school schedules and exam periods. They suggested offering flexible timings or holding weekend sessions to accommodate their education schedules.

The girls also raised the importance of including fathers in GBV programs. Although mothers were often involved, many girls felt that fathers' participation was essential in breaking down gender norms and creating inclusive family dynamics. However, male family members, especially fathers, often resisted attending such programs due to cultural sensitivities.

BARRIERS

In Jordan, many cultural sensitivities made it difficult for girls to talk openly about issues like cybercrime, sexual harassment and menstruation. The taboos around these topics meant that many girls felt disconnected from the sessions or were reluctant to speak up in a group setting.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- » Girls in Jordan requested more interactive formats, such as role-plays and discussions that engage participants in real-life scenarios. They also suggested that sessions be scheduled flexibly to fit into their busy school calendars.
- » The girls recommended more inclusive family sessions, particularly with the fathers in attendance, to promote gender equality and better understanding of GBV issues within the household.

¹² <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/SR256/SR256.pdf>



**Contextualizing GBV Prevention
and Response: Rhetoric or
Reality for WROs and WLOs in
Humanitarian Contexts?**

*International Rescue Committee
December 2024*