



Working with Refugees with Disabilities: Building peer networks among refugees & host community persons with disabilities Beirut, Lebanon

Case Study: Strengthening GBV Prevention & Response in Urban Contexts

Background

As part of a series of urban gender-based violence (GBV) pilot interventions the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) undertook throughout 2015 and 2016, the WRC partnered with a local organization called the Lebanese Association for Self-Advocacy (LASA) to strengthen protective peer networks for refugees with disabilities living in Beirut. LASA is an organization run by and for persons with intellectual disabilities; its members are dedicated to raising awareness on the rights of persons with disabilities in Lebanon, including the rights of Iraqi and Syrian refugees who are living in Beirut. Previous research has demonstrated that refugees with intellectual disabilities living in urban areas face added risks of violence, including GBV, due to the breakdown in protective peer networks, and exclusion activities which might confer access to age- and gender-appropriate information and education.¹

Sessions with Refugees with Disabilities

Throughout 2015 and 2016 LASA expanded their engagement with refugees with disabilities. Working in partnership with UNHCR Lebanon and Caritas, LASA conducted 14 sessions with 12 refugees with disabilities and their families living in Beirut. The sessions included the following topics:

Theme	Topics discussed
Introduction	What makes you sad? What makes you happy? What scares you? Decision-making and family discussion Mobility & independence

¹ Women's Refugee Commission & International Rescue Committee (2015) "I see that it is possible": Building capacity for disability inclusion in gender-based violence programming in humanitarian settings. Women's Refugee Commission (2016) Mean Streets: Identifying and Responding to Urban Refugees' Risks of Gender-Based Violence. Refugees with Disabilities.

My space	My self – my city – my home
My rights	Right to education Right to work Right to safety
My future	I want to live like this Raise your voice Make a plan

The activities and materials used during the sessions were fully developed and implemented by the LASA self-advocates (men and women with intellectual disabilities) with the support of LASA’s support staff. Self-advocates from LASA supported the refugees in visualizing and expressing their needs, understanding and hopes. Engaging parents throughout, the self-advocates supported family members to recognize the voice of individuals with disabilities, and that they have something to say about their situation. Furthermore, self-advocates present a positive example to parents and family members of the skills and capacities of persons with intellectual disabilities.

For more information, please see the video entitled *Meaningful Programs for Engaging Refugees with Disabilities in Lebanon*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYGNk1RuZ-o>

“Elham’s sister was never allowed her to go out of the house alone. After the work that was done with the group, it was reported that she is now going to the shop to buy something. Moreover she is visiting with neighbors independently.”

– LASA facilitator, relaying the experience of a refugee participant

Learning and Challenges

This pilot project has, however, demonstrated a number of challenges to effectively engaging and supporting local organizations in GBV prevention in urban refugee contexts. Most notably, local organizations of persons with disabilities may have limited knowledge and experience in GBV prevention, and therefore need support to fully reflect on and ensure protection mainstreaming across their work with refugees. They are also largely excluded from other human rights movements and humanitarian initiatives, which might help them to exchange on ideas and challenges. For this reason, the WRC has also supported LASA representatives to engage in the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, and linked them to opportunities for participation in the Association for Women in Development (AWID) Forum in Brazil. Lastly, despite their innovative and impactful work, grassroots groups, such as LASA, have few sustainable funding opportunities, and find it challenging to access funding through the humanitarian funding system.

Conclusion

Sessions have supported refugees with disabilities living in Beirut to reflect on safety issues, including how these might be different for women, men, girls and boys with disabilities, as well as how these might relate to nationality/country of origin. These sessions also helped to strengthen their protective peer networks in the community. Outcomes at individual levels have included increased awareness among families and care-givers on the protection concerns, as well as effective strategies for enhancing protection and mitigating risk. This has, in turn, increased independence for individuals who were previously kept inside their homes. Broader learning from WRC's partnership with LASA underscores the potential contributions of local organizations in strengthening the protection environment for urban refugees, including traditionally marginalized and "hidden" populations.

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