



LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: ONLINE NETWORKING IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT

Lessons Learned from the Webinar Series on Disability Inclusion in Gender and GBV Humanitarian Interventions

Global guidance recognizes the importance of engaging organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) in the design, implementation, and evaluation of humanitarian responses. Such guidance also calls for understanding intersectionality—how gender, age, location, and type of disability may affect risk, as well as access to power, resources, and opportunities—and promoting the participation of underrepresented groups of persons with disabilities, such as women and girls with disabilities.^{1,2} As governments around the world put in place strategies to contain, delay, or mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus, there is an increasing reliance on remote and online modalities for consultation and engagement with stakeholders, including organizations of women and girls with disabilities.

From July to September 2020, the Women's Refugee Commission, South Asian Disability Forum, the Network of African Women with Disabilities, and UN partners,³ with support from the Australian government, conducted a series of webinars on the IASC [Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action](#) for gender and gender-based violence (GBV) actors in Africa and Asia. The webinar series sought to bring together humanitarian actors and women-led OPDs to introduce the IASC Disability Guidelines, including recommended actions for disability inclusion in gender equality and GBV programs and activities; share examples of disability inclusion in gender equality and GBV activities from across each region; and facilitate collaborations between stakeholders on the implementation of the IASC Disability Guidelines.

This paper describes the strategies employed, ongoing gaps faced, and recommendations for engaging women with disabilities in all their diversity in online networking for inclusive humanitarian action.

Strategies for Meaningful Engagement

Operational support to OPD partners

Pre-existing networks of women with disabilities—namely the Network of African Women with Disabilities and South Asian Disability Forum—identified and supported women with disabilities from across each region to engage in the online webinars. Many women-led OPDs face a vicious cycle of lack of funding and therefore lack the organizational capacity to engage their membership in regional humanitarian networking

- 1 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Key Messages COVID-19 Response: Applying the IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action* (Geneva, 2020). <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-task-team-inclusion-persons-disabilities-humanitarian-action/iasc-key-messages-applying-iasc-guidelines-disability-covid-19-response>.
- 2 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Guidelines: Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action* (Geneva, 2020).
- 3 The webinars for gender and GBV actors in Africa were conducted in partnership with UN Women, UNHCR, and UNFPA East & Southern Africa Regional Office. The webinars for gender and GBV actors in Asia were conducted in partnership with the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (co-chaired by OCHA and UN Women) and the GBV Area of Responsibility (chaired by UNFPA).

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and collaboration.⁴ As such, it was essential to provide funding for operational support, including staffing, communication, and office expenses, in order for OPD partners to participate in the webinar series.

Mapping online capacity of members

OPD partners conducted a mapping of their members to identify potential barriers to women with disabilities from different countries and contexts participating in the webinar series and the appropriate support needed to address these barriers. Many women with disabilities who engaged in the webinar series, particularly those from crisis-affected countries, lacked reliable internet connections at their homes and the financial resources to purchase the mobile data required to join the webinar series. Some were also not familiar with the online platforms, and as such lacked the digital literacy to navigate links and controls within the platform. To address these gaps, OPD partners in Africa transferred funds to individual members so they would have the financial resources to purchase internet and mobile data, and test meetings were conducted to familiarize participants with the online platform in advance of the webinars. OPD partners in Asia also recruited a staff member to provide IT support to members prior to and during the webinar series.

Reasonable accommodations

In addition to the financial support provided to individuals, other reasonable accommodations were made. Local sign language interpreters were recruited—selected by participants in question to ensure optimal communication—with appropriate financial resources also provided for interpreters' access to internet and mobile data. Closed captioning was provided throughout the webinar series and PowerPoint presentations were shared in advance, with descriptors for images and photos where needed.

Ongoing Challenges

Despite these efforts to reach and include women with disabilities from a diverse range of countries and contexts, some challenges persisted that disproportionately affected those from resource-limited settings and lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Administrative and logistical challenges

Estimating the amount of funds required, particularly for those relying on prepaid mobile data, was difficult and there were examples of women running out of credit during the webinar. Transferring small sums of money to individuals in different countries was also administratively challenging and resource intensive. Variable bank fees between countries and time frames for funds to reach individual bank accounts presented added challenges for OPD partners.

Finally, the COVID-19 context presented some additional logistical challenges, such as the disruption of personal assistant services that would normally have been available to support women with disabilities while they are participating in the webinar. In some contexts, women still had to physically go into a bank to withdraw the money and then visit a shop to purchase credit—which also presents added logistical challenges and risks in the COVID-19 context.

4 Women's Refugee Commission, *Working to Improve Our Own Futures: Inclusion of Women and Girls with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action* (New York, 2016). www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/networks-women-disabilities.

Digital divide

Research indicates that there is still a substantial “digital divide,”⁵ with people from remote and rural areas and lower socio-economic backgrounds lacking access to the infrastructure, devices, and financial resources necessary to meaningfully engage in online and mobile modalities.^{6,7} Furthermore, there is evidence that women and girls, older people, refugees, and persons with disabilities face additional barriers relating to affordability and accessibility of technology, as well as gaps in technological experience, skills, and literacy.⁸ This presented a substantial barrier to the meaningful engagement of women with disabilities from lower-income and crisis-affected countries in the webinar series. For example, some women who are blind did not have access to and/or were not familiar with the latest screen-reader technology.

Recommendations

Understand power hierarchies through intersectional analysis

Humanitarian actors must consider how pre-existing structural and systemic inequalities will affect who does and does not get a say in decision-making,⁹ especially as consultation methods are adapted to the COVID-19 context. The shift to remote and online modalities for engagement with stakeholders in humanitarian action is going to leave behind women and girls with disabilities, particularly those from resource-limited settings and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. An intersectional analysis of such activities can help the humanitarian actors to reflect on and acknowledge these power hierarchies, informing longer-term policies and actions to address such inequality.¹⁰

Provide sustainable financial support to women-led organizations of persons with disabilities

Working in solidarity with women-led OPDs, the humanitarian community can support more resilient, equal, and inclusive societies, long beyond this crisis.¹¹ It is critical to provide more consistent and sustainable funding to women-led OPDs, particularly those from crisis-affected and resource-limited countries. This needs to continue beyond the COVID-19 crisis, enabling them to participate on an equal basis with other civil society organizations in remote and online coordination, planning, and implementation of humanitarian and development programs. More specifically:

- Donor governments and other funders should set targets and monitor funding to women-led OPDs through both their development and humanitarian programs.
- Humanitarian actors should partner with women-led OPDs to become autonomous entities with capacity to coordinate activities at local, national, regional, and international levels, ensuring that operational costs, as well as activities with affected populations, are adequately funded.

5 The term “digital divide” refers to gaps in access to computers, the internet, mobile phones and other information and communication technologies.

6 International Labour Office, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020: Technology and the Future of Jobs* (Geneva, 2020).

7 A.H.A. Watson & K.R. Park, “The digital divide between and within countries”, *Devpolicy Blog*, weblog post, August 13, 2019. <https://devpolicy.org/the-digital-divide-between-and-within-countries-20190813>.

8 J. Casswell, *The Digital lives of Refugees: How Displaced Populations Use Mobile Phones and What Gets in the Way* (London, GSMA, 2019). www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/the-digital-lives-of-refugees.

9 Michelle Lokot & Yeva Avakyan, “Intersectionality as a lens to the COVID-19 pandemic: implications for sexual and reproductive health in development and humanitarian contexts,” *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 28, no. 1 (June 2020). www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/26410397.2020.1764748.

10 Ibid.

11 Emma Pearce, *Disability Considerations in GBV Programming in the COVID-19 Pandemic* (London, GBV AoR Helpdesk, 2020).

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- Disability and women’s rights organizations should prioritize women-led OPDs from crisis-affected countries for organizational capacity-building programs.¹² Capacity-building initiatives should support women-led OPDs to mobilize resources and access appropriate technical expertise. This is particularly important given the COVID-19 context with increasing scarcity of resources, the economic recession, and reliance on structural adjustment programs in many countries.

Promote equitable digital inclusion

Prior to COVID-19, there was already a shift toward digital technologies and mobile service delivery in many humanitarian contexts. However, access to digital technologies is not evenly distributed, with people from wealthier and urban backgrounds having greater access to and expertise in the use of such modalities.^{13,14} The humanitarian sector should invest more time and resources to ensuring that the “digital ecosystem” in conflict-affected and resource-limited settings develops in a way that promotes inclusion and equity for women, refugees, and persons with disabilities, among other groups.¹⁵ In this regard, UNHCR’s Innovation Service and its implementing partners are commended for “specifically and intentionally” considering equity and inclusion within the scope of the Digital Access, Inclusion, and Participation Program,¹⁶ which will provide valuable lessons for future crises.

There has never been a more important time to strengthen the collaboration, coordination, and coherence among humanitarian and development actors, the private and public sectors to research forward-thinking approaches to improving the availability, affordability, and usability of digital technology in resource-limited settings.

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12 Women’s Refugee Commission, “*Working to Improve Our Own Futures*.”

13 J. Casswell, *The Digital lives of Refugees*.

14 Barnaby Willitts-King, John Bryant, & Kerrie Holloway, *The Humanitarian “Digital Divide”* (London, Humanitarian Policy Group - Overseas Development Institute, 2019). www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/digital_divide_lit_review_web_0.pdf.

15 J. Casswell, *The Digital lives of Refugees*.

16 www.unhcr.org/innovation/digital-inclusion/.

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